

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

2010 Lulu Paperback Edition

Sacculus © 2009 by Petr Hudecek (Czech Republic)

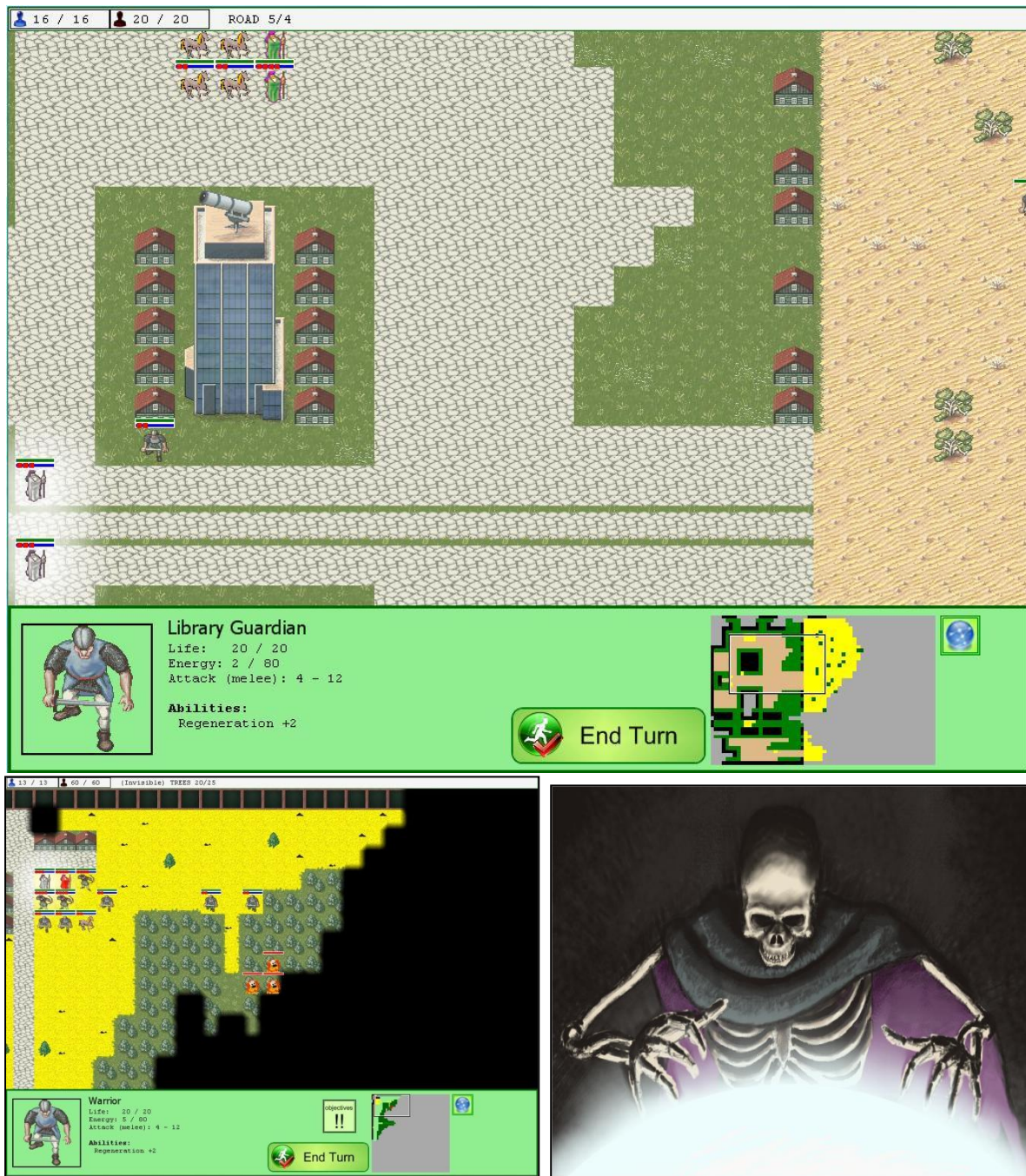
Cover © 2009 by Kevin Higgins (Ireland)

Some rights reserved. This book can be redistributed in electronic form, paperback form, or otherwise, provided that it is redistributed in its original form without modifications.

Self-published using Lulu.com services in paperback edition in March 2010 by Petr Hudecek.

Printed in the European Union.

Search "*Sacculus The Wargame*" or "*Sacculus The Book*" on the internet to find out more about the world of Sacculus.



The PC game:

As this book is world-centered, it provides more than enough material to make a PC game out of it. Since I'm better at programming than at writing, I made the game myself. The game will be available on the internet. Search "*Sacculus The Wargame*" and perhaps you'll find some links.

Donation

(handwritten)

PRELUDE: THE THEFT OF SACCULUS O'GREAT

**"ONE DAY, THE SPHERES WILL BE STOLEN.
THAT DAY WILL PROSPERITY PLUMMET,
THAT DAY SECURITY WILL FALL,
AND THEN, PEOPLE WILL BE NO MORE."**

Extract from the Ancient Prophecy, author unknown

It was a misty, rainy day, full of sadness. Heavy rain drops were falling to crash into the stones forming human-made roads underneath. Nothing of that, however, could be seen on the pinnacle of Never-ending Mountain.

There, high over the level of clouds, the sun was shining with nothing to cover it. A flag in red and green colors could be seen on the top of the hill. It was the sign of *The Ferocious*, a group or a clan of wizards who strongly believed in superior standing of men (and wizards most of all) over the nature.

The placement of the flag had been a famous act, talked about all over the land. For only the most courageous and daring could hope to beat this giant of a mountain.

But that was not the most beautiful thing on the pinnacle. Around the top was revolving Sacculus O'Great, a constellation of 39 spheres of three different colors, each with a diameter of two meters. Some of them were flying even under the clouds with an immense velocity, though on this rainy day, they could not possibly be seen.

The pinnacle was deserted now. Although something was wrong. The wind's speed was increasing in one particular direction. Soon it overcame the speed of a hurricane and all the spheres followed it. Within several minutes, all thirty-nine spheres left the Mountain, drawn by the force of the wind. Then, as if by magic, the wind stopped.

But Never-ending Mountain just lost one of the most mysterious mysteries of the world - Sacculus O'Great.

CHAPTER 1: THE INTERRUPTION

An old man, with a grown full beard, was standing before his house made of wood and scanned the horizon, looking for someone, or something. Illuminated only by a weak moonlight, the man looked powerful, though broken in some way, like if the life lost all meaning to him.

Finally, a lone figure appeared from behind a hill on the horizon. It was only a silhouette, though it moved unusually fast. Soon it was so near the man's house, that he could recognize a close friend in the silhouette.

"Still too lazy to walk, eh?" chuckled the old man. The newcomer smiled in reply: "Why shouldn't one use the advantages of his profession, Sall? Especially if your paths here are so free of irregularities."

Both Sall and the newcomer, Morr, were mages or wizards, though Sall a retired one now. Being a magician was an extremely rare gift and a dangerous one, too. Lords of towns in the entire west of the Kingdom burned them alive, because they feared them and considered them not clean - touched.

Sall, his age nearing eighty, looked unusually well preserved for his age and ordinary men would confound him for a man in his fifties, sixties tops. One of the advantages of spellcasting. Still, he felt effect of the age. He was more easily tired and he was incapable of summoning large amounts of power. However, he still retained his wisdom and his knowledge.

What Morr just did was simple levitation. He did not walk, he was pushed by both wind and magical energy several inches over ground level.

"Right, Morr. Come in, please," said Sall and pointed to the door of his cabin, turning his back to the unwelcoming rain outside. The interior was cosy, with bright orange flames burning in the fireplace. Scrolls of different size, might and contents were pinned to the walls and laid on the shelves. In the middle of the room, there was a wooden table.

As the men sat on the chairs near the table, the table itself began to emit faint blue light, only sufficient to illuminate the papers on the table and the men. The light was probably caused by some magic Sall had cast years ago.

"Did you come to challenge me, Morr, in a game of Sacculus?"

"Indeed. On my journey beyond the Pass, I have collected many exotic cards. You won't stand a chance."

Sall was not surprised - in fact, he expected Morr to try to get some advantage over him in the game. Sall had a stronger deck of cards and was a

little more experienced player, and also acted as a judge in the regular annual Sacculus competition¹.

(--- The following text describes basic rules of the game of Sacculus. You may skip it if you wish. ---)

Sacculus is a magicians' card game. Players collect cards around the world, buy them, exchange them and then play with their decks of cards against each other. Every card has a special meaning and there are literally thousands of cards, though most of them got lost during centuries. New cards are discovered by archaeologists every year.

Every round of the game, each magician plays a card from his or her deck of cards. Then, both players guess either the color or the strength of their opponent's card. (There are three colors - red, blue and green and five strengths - one, two, three, four and five.) If the guess is correct, the guessed card doesn't work. Each player whose card is not guessed then applies its effect. Mostly, the effect states that the player should take some spheres from the central cloud to his reserve. Spheres are miniatures of those revolving in Sacculus O'Great.

The player who has at least 60 spheres in his reserve wins the game and is considered a superior strategist.

The origin of the cards is unknown. They all emit a faint magic energy signature and it's nearly impossible to fake them. On the bottom of every card, the name Troy is written in nice calligraphy.

(--- Here ends the basic description of the card game Sacculus. The story resumes. ---)

Morr reached into his pocket and took out a small black leather pouch. The surface of the table just below the pouch began to emit faint green light. Then, each player took his deck of cards, Sall from a shelf and Morr from his bag and put it on the table.

"LETTA, AZ SACCULUS, ELONIR GLOBO IN AZ AIRE."

pronounced carefully Morr a phrase in the Haedralines' language that literally translated into "Let, O'Sacculus², let go a cloud into the air." Responding to his words, vapor came out of the pouch and a formed a small, semi-transparent cloud about 3 inches over the table. Then, eight spheres of different colors emerged from the pouch and began to revolve very slowly around the central cloud. Each player drew six cards out of his deck.

¹ This refers to the *Sacculus World Championships* - an event where mages from all over the world gather together, secretly, and play the card game. The event is highly popular among spellcasters.

² When translating the Haedralines' language to English, as a convention, the prefix *O'* is added before nouns in vocative case.

Morr played a card face down in front of him and smiled. He was sure it was good to play *Spice Delivery*, a red card, now. Sall could hardly expect him to play this card with 5 out of 8 spheres in the cloud blue.

"Green, " said Sall, when he placed his card on his turn. "Blue, " replied Morr, hoping that Sall chose a red card. Then, they both turned up their cards and Morr's smile widened. His card worked and Sall's one was indeed blue.

"You have apparently learned a lot, Morr," nodded the old man. And they continued to play.

* * *

Several hours later, they still played the same game. They were both exceedingly good strategists and neither of them was good enough to prevail.

"I have fifty-eight points, Morr. Only two rest to win, while you still need twelve. I'm going to win."

The younger, Morr, had no longer a smile on his face. He knew as well he was losing and though his exotic cards helped him, it didn't suffice. "The battle is not yet over, old man. With a bit of luck, you will finally be defeated."

Sall chuckled and in that moment, the light table was emitting turned red, the cloud disappeared and Sacculus spheres fell down. Then, a ray of white light stroke from the center of tabletop straight to Sall's eyes. His smile froze. After a few seconds, the ray disappeared.

"What was that, Sall?"

"It was an alarm. I made a spell that would alert me whenever a person passes to close vicinity of my house. A stranger walks along the main road about 100 meters from us. The ray you saw projected his image to my eyes. He cloaked his heartbeat as well as all identification signs, so he's not doubt a skilled magician."

Then, he went to the second room of his house and brought an armed heavy crossbow and a light dagger was tied on his belt.

"You don't trust your magic powers, Sall?" asked Morr in a surprised voice.

"I'm an old man. Old men have trouble using magic. You'll find out yourself. And don't worry about my vulnerability. I have an invisible power shield protecting me. No arrow could hit me now. He's coming. Watch out!"

They both looked at the door, in battle stances. Then, somebody knocked on the door. "**AZ PORTAS, LETTA** (O'Door, open!)" whispered Morr and the doors rapidly opened to the inside. Master Dronin, Sall's teacher and mentor, a very old man, stood on the doorstep.

"Oh, you scared us, Master," greeted him Sall and kneeled in a customary greeting that showed respect and lower status, then stood up again.

"And I will scare you even more, Salldronin," he spoke in a dramatic tone, "the spheres of Sacculus O'Great have been stolen... The Prophecy begins."

Both Sall and Morr looked obviously afraid.

* * *

Dronin came in, put his cloak on one of the shelves, shut the door and then sat on the chair that before was Morr's. He turned his head to the two men and spoke in a clear tone: "Please, sit. I'll show you."

Morr picked up a chair standing in a corner and then they all sat together around the small table, now again showing its light blue color.

Dronin reached into his pocket for a small round black device that he put on the table. "**AZ MACHINUM, RELEVVA TOT IN AZ TEO ET TOT EKO ELONIE** (O'Machine, reveal that what is inside you and what I let go from my mind)" he commanded to the device. It now became rectangular, a small hole appeared on top of the device and a holographic image of Never-ending Mountain appeared. At the same time, the table's light turned yellow. "It's a ... warning mechanism," explained Sall, "turns red when somebody approaches, turns yellow, when something attempts to communicate through mind... I assume it's now the device trying to get information from your brain, Master."

Master Dronin nodded, then turned his eyes to the three-dimensional image, "what you're about to see happened several hours ago."

The spheres around the top of the mountain were suddenly taken away like by wind, until they disappeared when out of the reach of projecting machine.

"They travelled to the deserts in the East, as the Prophecy said," continued Dronin, "you must travel to the Great Library in No-Vanyalo beyond the Pass, search for the Book of Power and make sure the spheres will return. On your way, you will find the boy. He's waiting for you in the village of St Tranquil."

"The Rebel, Roden, will await you at Morransfort and I will arrange for the Ranger to meet you somewhere on your road, too."

Both wizards seemed to expect all this, but Dronin's use of the word 'you' instead of 'we' unsettled them: "You won't be coming with us, Master?"

Master Dronin expired and shook his head, "I'm afraid not. For one, I need to seek the remaining member of the company, the Ranger, and then, I'm not in a state fit for a dangerous journey."

Sall did not understand. In his opinion, Master Dronin was the most powerful and wise wizard in the world. He was old, true, older even than Sall, but still, he was in good shape. Dronin apparently understood Sall's confused face and explained: "I can no longer control large amounts of magenergy. The power escapes me. I have the power plague³, my student. I will die in a few months."

When Sall heard this, his heart nearly stopped. He knew Master Dronin for a long time and he had been, despite their relation, his close friend all the time.

"But, Mister Dronin, " interrupted Morr, calling Dronin Mister and not Master since he wasn't his student, "it can be cured. You can blend with a *quelshen*⁴ and with your power control him."

"No, Morr," whispered Dronin, now very calm, "the nearest *quelshen* is far away and even if I could get there in time, I wouldn't want to. My life is over! I'm a lot older than you, Salldronin, and you already feel the age, too."

Sall knew this to be true, so he didn't interrupt.

"I have decided to make you my heir, Salldronin," Dronin put out a small card and handed it over to Sall, "this is the key to my home in the Morranshome. You may find something of use there. Your training is finished, Salldronin. Use my name well."

Sall nodded in acknowledgement. "I am honored, Master."

"Now, if you excuse me, I will take my leave. You leave in the morning. Time is of the essence, though if you get to the Library unprepared, it may all be for nothing."

³ The *power plague* is a non-infectious disease that decreases spellcasting ability and ultimately leads to death. It is especially common in the elderly and mostly in magic users. What exactly causes this condition is not known.

⁴ A *quelshen* is a snake-like creature that invades a living human body and, acting as a parasite, controls it from within. It is intelligent. One of its abilities is also to heal the body it controls and it can also heal the power plague. However, only the most powerful of magicians can overcome the parasite and reverse the control.

Dronin stared at the Sacculus cards on the table for a while, then took his belongings and left the cabin.

CHAPTER 2: DEEP TALK AND SHALLOW RIVER

During the dawn of sun the next day, both wizards were already en route. They both rode fine horses, brown ones, ordinary so that they would not arouse suspicion. When they, without talking with each other, left the hundred feet radius around the cabin, Sall said, summoning his power of a magician:

"AZ DOMUS, DEVISONIR ET HONIR (O'Home, be visible not and wait.)"

Shortly after he pronounced the final syllable, his cabin disappeared in a blur, then it seemed like if it was never there.

"Where does your spell take energy from?" asked Morr curiously, because he knew that bending the incoming light, the only means to hide an object, cost enormous amount of energy.

"It doesn't work as you think. I have a cavern beneath my house. My cabin was merely moved under the ground. The energy is taken from a lodestone⁵ stored there."

"Oh, interesting," said Morr, though he didn't seem to be interested. After a few minutes of ride, Morr asked: "So what do you think of this prophecy and, of course, of Sacculus?"

Sall raised an eyebrow: "You don't believe it? Dronin is the wisest man in the world and he's definitely right about the Sacculus. Concerning the prophecy, it's not entirely reliable. It's anonymous - we don't know who has written it nor do we have any proof that it is accurate."

"However, a part of it now seems to take place."

"Yes, it does," nodded Sall, "which would seem to indicate that all of it will come true. By the way, Morr, you still didn't explain to me the actions near the Northern Pass."

"Didn't I? Well, barbarian tribes are raging and the attacks coming on the Pass from the north are intensifying. Lord Nomarren has already requested assistance of our Kingdom."

"Yes, I know. What I don't know is why the barbarians attack the Pass."

"Who knows? I'd say it has something to do with a leader. Either the old leader died and they're confused or a new leader has appeared and he found it a good idea to storm the Outpost of the North."

⁵ Lodestone is one of the few objects in the world capable of storing magenergy.

Then, Sall, not giving any indication of what he was going to say, whispered: "We're being watched, Morr. On my mark, shield yourself with magic, draw sword and turn to the river."

Morr looked at the water flowing in the river on the left side of the road, covered with trees and bushes that took advantage of it to relieve of their thirst.

"Mark!" cried Sall, jumped out of his horse, drew his dagger and rushed to the river bank whispering two ancient words, **REISIR CONTEGUS** (Raise shield). Morr quickly followed him.

Waves appeared on the surface of the river and marsh treaders tried to escape the unstable area. Then, a head of a man with a childish face and light blue skin emerged from beneath. "Don't attack, Salldronin," warned the creature, "I am Warlick of the Water-Folk."

The creature looked scared, maybe it wasn't sure Sall would recognize him or like him.

"Warlick!" greeted him Sall, lowering his dagger, "what are you doing here, this far from your home?"

Warlick stood up and thereby revealed his true size and figure. He was about one meter high, his light blue skin was slimy and covered with pieces of green algae. His feet couldn't be seen since he was in the water up to his knees. His hair had a color that was a mixture of blue and green, though it went well to his overall appearance. Warlick was naked and made no apparent attempt to cover that fact. Since the Water-Folk were very good at maintaining their body temperature, there was no practical reason to have clothes. Moreover, they wouldn't be much of a use under water, where the Water-Folk spent most of their life.

"I was chosen to deliver a message to Lord of Ainetir from my queen Leena. I'm sorry, but it is most confidential and you can't hear it."

"That's okay, Warlick, why were you spying on us?" Sall wanted to know.

"I wasn't sure whether I can trust this friend of yours," Warlick turned his head to Morr, "I'm still not sure."

"You can tell him everything you could tell me. He's my apprentice."

When this last sentence left Sall's mouth, Morr began to protest: "Wait, Sall. I'm not your apprentice... I'm friend and I have my own independence. Anyway, I've learned most of my knowledge from other sources than you."

"Of course you have," muttered Sall, "what did you want to tell me?"

"My queen, Leena, wanted me to inform you of the events in the East."

Both wizards got serious and began to pay great attention. The Kingdom was located to the West and was almost absolutely safe ... as long as the Prophecy didn't fulfill... on the other hand, East was home to multitude of nations and races and peace had not often ruled in that land.

"The attacks by the barbarians beyond the Northern Pass become more and more frequent. Soon Lord Nomarren will have no choice but to retreat."

Sall and Morr nodded. This they already knew.

"Some villages in Loenia and eastern lands were destroyed by various means. Some by a plague or disease, others suffered an attack by wild animals. People believe it to be a curse. Leena said also that the one you call Ranger is helping with the defenses of the Northern Pass. And Warwanna said she believes that the spheres of Sacculus O'Great will soon leave the Mountain and head for Az Sasmir."

"It has already happened, Warlick," Morr said, "yesterday, the spheres were taken to the east."

"So Warwanna was right. She is then probably a good seer."

Sall wasn't so sure about that. In his long life, he had never before encountered a true seer who could predict the future. Most likely that Warwanna only predicted what would happen based on what was already happening. "Who is this Warwanna, of which you do speak?"

Warwick's face, if that was even possible for one of the Water-Folk, became pink. "You don't know? She's the high priest of the Water-God... and my betrothed."

A smile appeared on Sall's otherwise serious face. "Well, well. She has a good position. Is she pretty?"

Warwick smiled and splashed back into the water. Despite the shallowness of the river, he was able to disappear in it entirely.

"He's a bit shy about these things," explained Sall and went back to the horses. "By the way, Morr, I've decided to be known as Salldronin. Since my master is... is probably... well, I think he'd like me to use his name in honor. You know - disciples get their mentors' name at the end of the training and I think I'm trained enough, so... "

"As you wish, Salldronin," said Morr when he was getting back at his horse, "and I think you should cut down that full beard and shave yourselves. You're not modern anymore."

CHAPTER 3: A VISION

Niktian had just returned home from the market, that was currently taking place in the main square of St Tranquil. He put the meat in the kitchen area and found his way to the family's bedroom. It was a fairly large room with four beds, for Niktian's parents, himself and his sister. Although they were not extremely rich as to afford themselves a luxurious home, they were one of the more rich families that lived on Quarran's farm.

Niktian was an intelligent boy, though that didn't help him much with the works he had to do at the farm. In a village of St Tranquil's size, there was simply no-one willing to sacrifice his time to educate a small farmboy. Niktian's mother went into the room, asked him about the shopping and left. They didn't talk a lot these days. He was now unwilling to speak much, for he had a strange idea. He wanted to leave Quarran's farm.

It was not usual for a twelve years old farmboy to leave his family. In fact, it was not usual for a person to leave the farm on which he grew up until the end of his life. However, Niktian felt he had to leave, because no future awaited him here. He first needed to learn to read, then to know more about the world and ... and that was pretty much what Niktian knew. He didn't worry about what was going to happen after that. Where he would live or what would he eat.

Then, he heard a tap at the farm's front door and his mother opening.

"Good morning, madam. I'm sure my request will sound unusual, but can I see Loreos?"

"Of whom do you speak? There is no Loreos on this farm."

The man who entered into the farm continued: "Well, there's a boy in that room over there. We need to speak to him." Niktian got afraid. He did not see the man who entered the farm, but he was almost sure that for the moment, he was the only boy at the farm. What scared him more, however, was that the man knew he was here.

"There's only my son, Niktian. You can speak with him of course, but of what matter?"

"I'm sorry I can't tell you yet. First I have to see him," the man said in a doubtful voice, apparently he was surprised by that fact that Niktian was not called Loreos.

Two men, one of middle age and the second old along with his mother came into the bedroom. At the first sight, Niktian liked them. He kind of hoped that they came because of some adventure that was ready. Perhaps he was an unknown Majesty, like in the Story of Hidden King.⁶

Morr said to Salldronin, "I'm pretty sure that's him." Salldronin nodded and Niktian's mother interrupted them: "I intended to name him Loreos, but I was convinced by my husband not to name him after a king of the East. And who are you two? Are you kidnappers? Or sorcerers?"

Salldronin nodded again, "that's it then. The Prophecy was mistaken - an unforeseeable event happened and his name changed." Then he turned to respond to Niktian's mother. "We are not kidnappers, but your second guess is very close to the truth. We have come to tell you that your son needs to go with us."

Niktian's heart began to pound fast.

"What?" Niktian's mother was shocked. Clearly, she wasn't expecting all this, "could you now tell me what's going on?"

Salldronin murmured something that Niktian couldn't understand, then reached into his bag and put out a leather-bind block of papers. It was something Niktian had never seen before and from this, he was now fairly sure he wanted to be with these men. They were interested in him, sounded polite and looked able to teach him how to read.

Salldronin chose a single leaf of paper and showed it to Niktian, while Morr answered his mother: "My name is Morr. My colleague is called Salldronin. We're wizards, though we'd like you not to tell anyone. Your son will willingly go with us."

Niktian wondered how he knew that he would go willingly. But there was time for wondering later, because Salldronin already spoke to him.

"Look carefully at this picture, Niktian."

The paper the wizard handed over to him contained an image of a high wall with towers. The wall didn't end on either side of the picture, it was

-
- ⁶ **Story of Hidden King** is a fairy tale told in the Kingdom. It tells of a man who was born as a poor farmboy, but later turned out to be heir to the old king and a hero, when he slew a dragon.

apparently very long. Several archers were standing on its top, watching the surroundings.

"AZN IGNUTI PUGNIEN DE VALLUS. (The barbarians battle for wall.)" Salldronin said clearly, but he didn't summon any magic. Even as he said those words, Niktian's vision began to blur. Soon he did not see his mother, his bedroom, nor the two men. Instead, he saw images that did not come from his mind.

He saw the wall on the picture. It was exactly the same wall with same gate, but there were subtle differences. There were several cracks in the wall, it was late evening and torches illuminated the area. The men on the wall were wearing armor and had their bows strung. Niktian was unable to penetrate the soldiers' faces, because they were hiding their emotions perfectly.

One of them suddenly became alert and pointed at something in distance. The others turned in that direction as well. Alarm sounded. Every two seconds, a hammer struck into a gong to inform all of danger.

Niktian could then sense fear in the soldiers' eyes. They knew they would die and there was nothing they could do about it.

A large, heavy and hot stone landed on the wall, breaking the nearest tower and corrupting the wall's structure. The soldiers died instantaneously. The power of the thrown stone was immense. And more followed.

Niktian's vision blurred again. When he could once more see, a battalion of big, fat and obviously strong warriors marched through the destroyed gate. Then, the image slowly faded to darkness.

Niktian was lying on his back in the bedroom, and Salldronin was bended over him as if searching for signs of awakening. He saw his mother held by Morr on the other side of the room with a scared look on her face.

"What did you see, boy?" the voice of the man over him was nervous and agitated.

"The wall and the soldiers. They were killed. Army marched through the gate... what was that?"

Salldronin stood up, "A vision. You'll have them from time to time. It's a part of why we need you with us. Take the most important stuff. We will leave as soon as possible."

Morr tried to apologize to Niktian's mother: "We'd have stayed for dinner, but we're on a tight schedule and I worry somebody could have seen us in the village."

His mother was still shocked. It was really an unusual event, but it was easier for Salldronin to convince her, because she herself felt a farm wasn't the right place for her bright son.

"I'll return, mum."

"I know you will," she replied sadly, "I'll go pack your stuff."

INTERLUDE: THE ANCIENT PROPHECY

"Behold; for I hath seen the future and I am not afraid to reveal it to thee. Though it is grim, thou shouldest not doubt my words. I shalt recount to thee what I hath seen and thou shalt then agree with me.

I was sitting at mine workdesk with a servant to whom I ordered to write my every word. But behold, that night he wrote other things than he thought he would. I rose and hath gone to trance. Then I spoke, but knew not of what, for it was a god who spoke through me.

I told my scribe: "Hath thou written down what I had said?", and he said so. In the ages that followed, I worked hard and I studied to make sense of this prophecy:

Behold the story I say,
as insane as it seem may,
know now I'm not mad,
listen not and you'll be sad.

One day, the spheres will be stolen.
That day will prosperity plummet,
that day security will fall
and then, people will be no more.

For The Evil One will reborn,
and all humanity will mourn,
and he destruction will wrought,
more than anyone would have thought.

There is a way to save the day,
if you're not afraid and say your "nay",
five companions will meet by then,
of different places and classes men.

The Wizard Young, who knows Sacculus lore,
The Wizard Old, who knows it maybe more,
The Ranger Sharp, who treats nature fair,
The Rebel Good, who for his host does care

and above all, the Boy Farseer,
who holds whatever's for him dear.
So either those will help us all,
or the hell will soon us call.

Now behold, I came with answers. Whether thou believest me or not, the god had spoken to me again. Not with words, no. It was through thoughts that he told me what to do.

The sun shalt pass and winds shalt blow many times until the doom's day cometh. It could be many years, so don't thou forget.

The Wizard Dead shalt rise again and command to his minions: "Serve me!" And it shalt come to pass that hordes of dead and not dead wilt follow his lead. Destruction wilt be enormous, and world shalt not survive the fiends he wilt unleash.

And he, living in the evil mountain of black stone on the east, wilt steal the spheres atop the eternal mountain, because he wilt believe they wilt help him to conquer thy world.

Yet still there be someones who wilt maybe prevent catastrophe from happening. I hath spoken of five companions who wilt travel thy land and find a way to stop this evil.

Two wizards shalt form the core of Company. They both shalt excel at Sacculus, the sorcerers' game. And it shalt be, as it hath been revealed to me, that this knowledge wilt be of great use to them.

One Man who is not really a man will also be part of Company. The Rebel Good he is called and he is in fact two. A creature inside another. A small sneak serpent who liveth in harmony with his host and who findeth what hath been hidden for centuries.

The Ranger Sharp believeth in freedom and in beauty, coming from the eastern lands behind the hot desert and the wildforest. This Ranger wilt wear a weapon of light that wilt be envied to him by all.

But behold, for it shalt come to pass that The Boy Farseer, grown up in a backwater village, shalt join the Company in the Quest. And his power shalt be enormous. Loreos being his name, he wilt foresee dangers to befall the Company and wilt hopefully avoid them.

Forasmuch as I would like to give thee a more detailed guide, I canst not. But there be still this that I can reveal to thee:

The Company shalt go to find the Power Book in the caves beneath a city covered by a second blue sky. With the help of Loreos the Boy Farseer, they wilt find it and open it and there shalt be written what I canst reveal not. You

wouldest do well to heed mine words and follow them brightly. Aid in the quest wherever and whenever thou canst, for should the Company fail, the world as thou knowest it shalt be no more."

— The Ancient Prophecy, author unknown

CHAPTER 4: A NEW REALITY

An hour later, the three companions left the village during early hours of dusk. The journey was pleasant - no rain, no wind and the orange color of the clouds near the setting sun only added to the beauty of the panorama.

Niktian rode a brown horse called Gerron. It was his 'personal' horse. He was fond of animals and played with his small, cute horse Gerron every day. But now, his mind was occupied otherwise. He was thinking of his family and of mum, hoping he would see her again sometime. He trusted these men, yet he knew there was no logical reason to trust. They came into his house - or farm - and merely announced that they were taking him. Of course, they had so much power that it would be futile to resist them.

Niktian looked at Morr, who was younger of both wizards and who seemed more funny and polite, "Could you explain to me now? What happens? Who are you? Why me and where are we going?"

Morr smiled, "You have a great many questions."

Salldronin heard the conversation and approached the two so that he could hear their talk.

"I know, but I have the right for answers, don't I?"

"If you say so," Morr took a deep breath and answered the impatient boy. "The nations of the east are on the brink of war. A dark wizard terrorizes and destroys the villages of Eastern Loenia and the spheres atop the Never-ending Mountain disappeared, thereby awakening the Prophecy. I am Morr, this is Salldronin and we're wizards. And you — you are the Boy Farseer and you can predict the future, that's why you're so important. Is that enough?"

Salldronin grinned, "You forgot one question, Morr."

"Did I?... Yeah, our destination is the city of No-Vanyalo, a town beyond the Pass, where we'll find more about the Prophecy."

Niktian got overwhelmed by the number of information he received. Not so much by the gravity of situation, but by use of many unknown terms.

"What prophecy?"

"Good question. We actually don't know. It's called The Ancient Prophecy and almost everything in it came true. We don't know who wrote it, though. Some say it was an insane prophet. But during our way to St Tranquil, we figured it could be made by an ancient race, the Haedralines, which once inhabited this world."

Niktian attempted to understand all of this, "so what part do I play in this prophecy?"

"Oh... here Mister Salldronin knows that passage by heart. Recite it."

Niktian looked at Salldronin, who spoke dramatically, "*and then shall come to pass that the Boy Farseer, grown up in a backwater village, shall join The Company in the quest and his power shall be enormous. Loreos being his name, he will foresee dangers to befall The Company and hopefully avoid them.* And so on and so on. Most of it is nonsense or exaggerations. Also, it is full of *thy* and *thou* and similar stuff. The prophet probably thought it will make it sound more prophet-ish."

"Prophet-ish?"

"Yeah, more ancient at least."

"You said it was an ancient race that made the prophecy."

"Maybe... nobody is sure. It will take you some time to get accustomed to this new reality."

Niktian thought for a while. "So you carry me only to fulfill this prophecy?"

Salldronin shook his head, "of course not. Haven't you been listening? Besides, given your vast intellect, you'll no doubt help us greatly in the quest."

Niktian was unsure whether that was sarcasm or not.

"What is Loenia?"

Morr once again continued the conversation. "You don't know?"

"Should I know?"

"I don't know. I don't know what a simple farmboy knows."

Niktian was growing a bit tired of their evasive answers, though they were a bit funny. He didn't like that he was the one who they made fun of.

"Just answer me."

"Loenia is a small, independent country in the eastern lands."

* * *

They rode about five miles, until they finally stopped in the middle of a forest. Niktian helped the two wizards erect a tent. There was still full moon on the sky, although the treetops covered most of it and the light needed to make the camp came from the men's lanterns.

"Can you do magic?" Niktian was curious and wanted to ask this question a long time already. Sure, they said they were wizards but anyone could say that.

"Yeah, you could say so," answered Morr.

"Then, why don't you use it to make more light?"

"It's not absolutely necessary. And we don't want to let everybody know we can do magic."

"There's nobody around."

"How can you be sure about that? Besides, traces of magic stay on the spot for hours, sometimes for days."

Not a very satisfactory answer, thought Niktian, I still don't know whether they are magicians or not...

* * *

Niktian hadn't slept in a tent for a long time. He woke often during the night only to fall asleep several moments later. Sometimes it was caused by an owl or other sounds, sometimes by cold and sometimes he simply woke up without having a specific reason.

He was still not afraid. All the problems Salldronin mentioned seemed somewhat distant, unrelated to him. He knew he was supposedly part of this prophecy, he knew he had that vision, but never before he saw a prophecy that actually turned out to be true.

Morr gave a strange sound and blinked. He got up off his blanket and went outside. Niktian was already awake and fresh, so he followed him. It was an all-new day and the first day of Niktian's adventuresome journey.

"Can you read?" Morr suddenly asked. He somehow sensed Niktian's interest, apparently.

"No. It was *useless* for me, my mum used to say."

"She was probably right. But not anymore. It could prove useful for you to read more information about the world and to be able to leave us a note sometimes."

"You have some books with you?"

"Yeah, sure. And we have Sacculus, too. It's a great game. You'll love it. And we're heading to No-Vanyalo and the library they've got there is the largest in the world."

"Wow." He was truly excited now.

"And can you read figures?... Figures are letters that represent numbers, quantity."

"No. I counted on my fingers."

"Well, that's only sufficient for low numbers. You'll need to count with thousands." Then, he looked around, "you can gather some firewood for breakfast and begin learning. This is 'one'" said Morr and gave Niktian a small piece of paper with a figure imprinted on it.

* * *

The journey to the crossroads near Morranshome, where Salldronin planned to get some stuff from Master Dronin's home, took full four days. The wizards weren't pushing their horses very hard, they weren't in a great hurry. During the journey, Niktian had progressed in learning how to read. He already knew all the figures and several letters. He was a quick learner. He had no other visions during the journey and he enjoyed the ride. Never before was he this far from Quarran's farm. Morranshome wasn't the town closest to St Tranquil. Every evening, if he wasn't learning figures and letters, Niktian watched Salldronin and Morr play their game of Sacculus, but he didn't understand it. Cards were filled with text he couldn't read, he only noticed the numbers. In the top left corner of each card, there was a number in a 1 to 5 range.

"Would you like to learn it now?" had asked Morr, while starting another of their games with Salldronin, and noticing Niktian's obvious interest.

"Sure", he then replied and sat down on the forest floor beside the two wizards. As before, both prepared their decks and then Morr summoned the spheres.

"LETTA, AZ SACCULUS, ELONIR GLOBO IN AZ AIRE."

When the cloud formed several inches over the ground level, Morr began the explanations about the game, "you see, at the beginning of each round, eight spheres (or stones, if you like) of random color - red⁷, green or blue - are sent by magic in the middle."

"You can use magic now?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"Well, you were reluctant to create some light to help us put up tents and you do magic to entertain yourselves now."

⁷ In real Skaut Junák Sacculus card game, the colors are green, blue and yellow.

"Being in a good mood is important, Niktian," said Salldronin, "plus, the Prophecy said Sacculus will be of great use to us."

"Anyway, we each draw a card, or at the beginning of Round 1, six cards and put one in front of us face down."

Then, Niktian, who looked into Morr's cards, watched them play the first card in the game. Morr then announced 'One' and Salldronin said 'Green'. This was the part Niktian didn't understand. But the game looked interesting, so he asked Morr about that.

"It's a guess. If the strength of Salldronin's card - the number in the top-left corner - is one, his card won't work. If my card's color is green, my card won't work. However, my card is red. Now we turn the cards face up," he said and did so. Indeed his card was red and Salldronin's one had strength 1.

"You guessed right," Niktian exclaimed, happy that he understood a part of this game and that his learning of figures was of some use to him.

"Yeah, I see you can read the figures now. So, now I'll read you what the cards mean.

Berserk (red, 2, played by Morr): The card you play next round cannot be guessed.

Water cask (blue, 1, played by Salldronin): Take a blue sphere from the cloud.

"I still don't understand what your card is doing."

"No? No matter - you'll understand next round," Morr sounded disappointed about that, but he couldn't expect a twelve-years-old boy to understand everything, "anyway, apart from its normal effect, each card earns me a sphere - a stone of its color. My color is red, so I get a red sphere."

Morr touched one of the red spheres in the cloud and it fell down. Morr picked it up and placed it before him.

"**CIRCULUS NOVUS** (Next round)" said Morr and the seven remaining spheres returned to the pouch and a set of eight new ones emerged to take their place.

"So now, you're winning."

"I am. I'm better, you know. He's old and..."

Morr stopped abruptly when Salldronin gave him a repressive look clearly saying *stop-talking-like-that-now-or-you-are-going-to-be-in-trouble*.

"Four."

"Red."

"You're guessing at random?"

"No, Niktian," said Morr, "we're guessing what we would do if we were the other one... I mean, we try to guess what our opponent will do."

The men turned their cards face up.

Sun's Light (yellow, 4, played by Morr): Take up to four spheres from the cloud. Then, put two of those into your reserve protected.

Power Book Cache (blue, legendary, ∞): Here is where the Power Book lays hidden for centuries. Its power enables you to take all spheres in the cloud and also those that your opponent took this round.

"Okay. Now I understand nothing."

"It's a pretty complex game, and that's why it's so exciting. Spheres placed in my reserve protected cannot be taken by my opponent back in any way. So I now take four spheres plus one yellow and put two of them aside. You see, the effect of my card is applied, resolved, earlier in the round because its power is lower than the power of his card. The card with the lowest power is always applied as the first. Now, Salldronin's card is more complicated. It's legendary, which means that there is only one card of this name in the entire world."

"What?"

"You hear me - nobody but Salldronin has *Power Book Cache* card. The symbol that looks like eight that fell down is called *infinity*. It's a pretty complex term - it means a very large number, a number that large that you can never count up to it. It has two significances in the game - for one, it can't be guessed by guessing numbers, since *infinity* isn't a number, and it's always resolved as last in the round as I explained earlier. The passage *Here is where the Power Book lays hidden for centuries* is called flavor text. It has no impact whatsoever on the game - it's there only to amuse and educate the players. Now, Salldronin can take the remaining three spheres from the cloud and also three of my own spheres - he can't take all five, because two of them I already placed in my reserve protected so they can't be taken back.

"You got it?"

"Well..."

"I thought not. Never mind. You'll learn in time. **CIRCULUS NOVUS.**"

CHAPTER 5: A DOOM'S DAY CULT

After four full days of travel, Salldronin, who already cut down his full beard, Morr, who talked to Niktian frequently, and Niktian himself, who was finding this adventure very exciting, arrived at the crossroads two miles away from Morranshome, a big city, one of the greatest market towns of eastern Kingdom.

"Can I go to the town, Morr?"

"That would not be wise." It was not Morr, who replied, but Salldronin. "I'll go alone, unaccompanied - it will be less suspicious. I'll only take some dictionaries and research notes of Master Dronin," he stopped, probably remembering the fact that his long-time mentor was dying, "and we'll go on."

"But I've never been before to a big town."

"That's one of the reason we don't want you there. Lots of things happen in big towns that you wouldn't want to see."

"Like?"

"Like stealing on the roads, merchants trying to get as much gold of you as they can, guards that you have to bribe, and you wouldn't want to hear what happens in the dark alleys."

"Who's that?" Niktian pointed at a man who walked on the road leading east. The man moved at a slow pace, obviously not hurrying, had a cloak, though he kept his face revealed and held a staff with a bright red stone on top of it. He walked in direction of the crossroads, and then either to Morranshome or to St Tranquil.

"A strange traveler," answered Morr.

"You have met him before?"

"No. I say *strange*, I mean *unknown*. But I have met his kind before."

"What's that staff?"

"Staff of Arch Priests of Baa. You don't want to know who they are, the Baa."

The traveler approached. It was a man of about Morr's size. He had a serious expression on his face and was looking straight ahead. The staff was carved with ornate symbols.

"Hello, traveler." said Morr when the strange man was very near.

He turned his head and spoke - but slowly, carefully choosing his words, "Greetings. May the Spirit of Baa bless you all."

"We don't believe in Baa. Sorry."

"Do not excuse to me. It is I who am sorry for you, since the end of the world draws nigh and only the believers shall be saved."

"How do you know? I mean, that the world is coming to an end?"

"The Spirit of Baa shows us signs everywhere. You must only watch and listen and all shall be revealed. The Book of Baa speaks of a day when the spheres atop a lone mountain surrounded by burned plains will disappear. That day has come, so we know the doom's day approaches."

Then, the stone set on the top of the man's staff began to glow and pulse and after a few seconds, it stopped and resumed its original state.

"You are a most extraordinary boy, Niktian of Quarran's farm. As are you, unbelievers."

"We know," said Morr with a stone face, "could you tell us of how it looks like in the Pass?"

Butt Niktian did no longer listen. He couldn't concentrate. He was disturbed by the fact the man knew his name, but what he felt now was similar to a sudden physical illness. He closed his eyes, but continued to see.

He was lying on a soft, forest floor and looked at the sky. There were no clouds and no full moon. Thousands of stars shined white on the black background. He felt the fresh air of trees and he heard the night-birds sing. And then it came. Near one star, a new one, a red one appeared. After a few moments, it became clear it was not really a star but rather a huge red fireball. And then another one, close by, appeared.

The vision blurred and then, when he saw the black-red sky again, dozens of red blinking stars were falling down on the horizon. And the earth shook.

Niktian woke up. He was lying on a blanket in a forest not very different from the one in his vision. Morr was sitting on a stump reading a book covered in leather.

"What happened?"

Morr stood up and looked at Niktian. He then raised his eyebrows, "you fainted."

"I what?"

"You fell unconscious. Apparently this meeting with a Baa Arch Priest was too much for you."

"I remember that. How much time did I... sleep?"

"Four hours. Salldronin went to the town. We're half a mile east from the crossroads. We'll wait for him and then go on."

But Niktian was scarcely listening. It bothered him. He did not faint often. In fact, this could have been his first fainting at all. And with no known reason.

"It didn't happen the last time."

"Last time?"

"Last time I had a vision."

"Wait," exclaimed Morr, "let's get this clear. How many visions have you had?"

"Two. One at the farm and one four hours ago."

"What did you see in the vision?"

"Night. Two fireballs on the sky. And then more of them fell. It looked almost like if all the stars on the sky were falling. And the earth shook."

"Oh oh," Morr looked very worried.

"You believe it will happen?"

"Of course it will happen... unless we prevent it."

"Prevent it?"

Morr reached into his bag and took out a thin scroll, searched for one passage and read it aloud: "The Boy Farseer ... blah blah... foresee dangers to befall the Company and wilt hopefully avoid them. You see? You have this vision because it gives you time to prevent it happening!"

"How can you prevent stars from falling?"

"Well, for one, they're not stars, stars don't fall. It could be meteors - large rocks that fall to the ground from space - or something quite different and secondly, I don't know. That's why it's such a big problem."

"Then why worry about it?"

"The prophecy..."

"... can be wrong," Niktian said decisively, proving unseemly wisdom, "it has already been wrong once, with my name."

"True."

There was a momentary silence, and then Niktian walked up to the horses and caressed them. Then, he pursued knowledge about this strange encounter.

"So who was it?"

"Oh that... Demetrius, an Arch Priest of Baa. The Baa is a religion or a cult that tries to convince people that the end of the world is near, and all will die, save those who follow the way of Baa. It was not very active recently, so you could consider yourself lucky to meet one of their Arch Priests."

"I have never heard of Baa."

"No wonder. From most towns the Priests of Baa are banished. They used to force people to believe in Baa by magic and by force, which is strongly forbidden."

As an afterthought, he added: "Forbidden to all but the king..."

"So that Arch Priest is a magician, too?"

"Possibly. Most Baa Arch Priests aren't magicians and they only use the magic stored in their staffs, though this one was capable of reading minds so I think he can do magic. Even without staff."

"Do you know someone who believes in them?"

"A few," replied Morr, "mostly in the south-west of the Kingdom. Their supreme temple is located there. So, now, since you don't have anything to do, we could practice your reading."

The reading didn't go as well as Niktian planned. All the letters seemed similar and there were so many of them. Plus, sometimes several letters formed a single sound or vice versa and when he attempted to read, he read slowly.

"Wait," whispered Morr suddenly, stretching his ears. "**REISIR CONTEGUS ET REISIR CONTEGUS DEIN NIKTIAN.** (Raise shield and raise shield around Niktian.)"

Morr drew his dagger.

"What's happening?"

INTERLUDE: THE BOOK OF BAA



This includes citations only. The whole Book of Baa is not written out here.

"The world has no edges, for the Spirit of Baa is benevolent and did not want the explorers to fall down. So he made the world round."

"Not everyone is worthy of becoming a High Priest of Baa. To become one, follower must pass the test of Baa and prove his cunning, wisdom and ability to self-sacrifice in the run for life or death in the narrow path beneath the Supreme temple. And of High Priests, only the wisest and most determined will spread the Glory of Baa as Arch Priests."

"Arch Priests may only take commands from the Head of Baa and no other. Through the head's immense wisdom, the Arch Priests of Baa shall do its bidding and spread fast the glory of Baa."

"If sky turns crimson red, hurry fast among villages, for it means the doom's day comes and only the followers shall be spared."

"Go, Baa. Go and spread words of truth."

"Fear not, Baa. For if your numbers are sufficient, the Spirit of Baa shall come and speak to you before the doom's day and it shall guide you."

"People are stubborn. But masses are easily convinced of the truth by showing them the power of Baa."

"The Spirit of Baa is powerful."

"Guard well the staffs you've been given by the Head of Baa, for they are imbued with parts of the Spirit of Baa, Arch Priests. Benevolent Spirit lent you this power to convert people. But should you choose to abuse it, the Spirit's soul inside shall become angry and it will leave and you'll be expelled from the ranks of Baa and doomed to die."

"Haedralines are the worst enemies of the way of Baa. They are known by many names, but they are pure evil. When they come in their flying wagons, they'll try to stray you from the path of Baa. But let them not. If you hold and face them bravely, The Spirit of Baa shall save you and if you die, you'll be granted afterlife."

"Afterlife shall only be granted to those who merit it, only those who fought to spread the way of Baa or those who helped the suffering, or those who were great men in their life."

CHAPTER 6: ENCOUNTER

He nearly finished the sentence when two arrows were shot from the bushes, one at Morr, one at Niktian. Both would hit their targets were they not stopped by the invisible magic shield surrounding the duo. The arrow aiming at Niktian simply stopped dead in the air about two feet in front of him.

"What's happening?" he repeated the question. Morr, however, did not listen.

"**INCENDIO RELEVVA** (Reveal heat.)"

The speed of Morr's incantations was very fast, apparently this wasn't his first hostile encounter.

"**ELONIR CIRCULUS DE INCENDIUS**. (Let create a circle of fire.)" he said and both directions of the road on which they stood were suddenly blocked by a wall of fire. Niktian could see that this firewall surrounded them as a perfect circle.

"**POTENTIO ATTRACTAE MUTATIR** (Change the gravity force.)"

Niktian saw Morr make weird gestures, then six men flew from the nearby bushes to a spot several meters from Niktian's feet, crashed into themselves in the air and fell down. They were no doubt dead.

The Morr stopped with a face that was both satisfied and sad. The fire ring was extinguished instantly when Morr ended the combat.

"What's happening?" asked Niktian for the third time.

"I'd like to know that as well... we've been attacked, obviously. And I doubt these were simple robbers. They knew we were here and who we are."

"Why do you think so?"

Morr stepped over to one of the more fat warriors who was wearing mail shirt. "**ACCIR AZ QUELSHEN**. (Pull the quelshen.)" he said and a small dead snake, all grey, emerged from the limp body's mouth and was thrown precisely into Morr's hand.

Morr showed it to Niktian: "This, Niktian, is a quelshen. This small snake with its small brain is as intelligent as you and me. When it gets inside your body, it controls your actions. It can use you and you wouldn't even know about it. The quelshen live on the north-east of the Kingdom and when they venture in our lands, they usually have a damn good reason to do so."

"**DISRUPTIR** (Decompose.)." he added and the small snake exploded into a hundred of pieces that fell to the ground.

"But... was it necessary to...kill them all?" Niktian was shaken. For the first time, the problems Morr talked about arrived. Morr talked about war and in war, there were casualties. Niktian knew about it. He enjoyed stories of assassins and mighty warriors. He didn't mind the dead unless they were the main protagonists. But now, his friend killed *in real life* six people, bad people, but people all the same.

"What would you do in my place? Let yourself get killed?" Morr raised an eyebrow.

"No, but... you could stun them and let them live."

"I could. But what do you think they would do then?"

"Continue chasing us?" guessed Niktian, slowly beginning to understand Morr's point.

"Exactly. And next time, perhaps I wouldn't be able to raise the shield in time, so we would die. You choose. Kill or be killed. Do you want to be killed?"

"No, obviously."

"And so you need to kill." concluded Morr.

But Niktian protested: "The Prophecy doesn't say a word about us killing people. It says the Wizard Dead will kill, not us. So there must be a way to get there without killing."

Morr considered that: "Not necessarily. You have a logical fallacy there, Salldronin will tell you more about those, but there *could* be a way to get there without killing, nobody said there *had* to be a way. However, you are right and I suggest you to kill as few people as possible. Otherwise, you could find pleasure in killing and become a madman."

"Is everything okay?" said the air.

Indeed, the question was certainly asked around Niktian and Morr, but there wasn't anybody who would pose it.

"It is, old friend."

"Good," continued the air, "**VISONIR** (Be visible)." Salldronin's figure appeared next to Morr, blurring off the air.

"You can be invisible!" exclaimed Niktian. "Can I do that as well?"

"No, Niktian. Not yet. Magic is a difficult science and you're not experienced enough to master it. First learn to read, then we'll talk."

Again, Niktian was sure it was a definite decision and by no means would

he be able to convince Morr or Salldronin to start educating him magic right now.

* * *

"Morr, cleanup." commanded Salldronin.

"Me again?" protested Morr.

"You're young, I'm old. It's only logical that you should do the work. You have more magenergy."

Morr made a sour face, turned to the six bodies on the ground and said: "**DISRUPTIR ET VINDMOVO EVOKVIR.** (Decompose, and then create wind.)"

The bodies literally turned to dust that flew away into the forest, carried by the slow magical breeze invoked by Morr the wizard.

"That's a little too much, isn't it?" asked impatiently Niktian. He slowly started to lose confidence in his companions. "First you kill them and then you destroy their bodies so they can't be buried and their souls will never find peace."

Salldronin threw himself onto the saddle of his horse. "You forget things, Niktian. *First*, these men tried to kill us. *Second*, they are Ignuti - the Unwelcomed, the Barbarians - nobody would have buried them, they would have been burned. *Third*, if we did not destroy their bodies, guards all over the region would know something is wrong. And *fourth*, you believe in an afterlife granted by god?"

Niktian was surprised by all the words Salldronin said. Before, he was nearly sure he was right, but at this moment, all Salldronin said seemed reasonable and there didn't seem to be another way. Niktian saddled his horse Gerron and the three began riding again.

"I do. Believe in the God, I mean."

"Well, I think you're still too young for this discussion, but let's try. You believe in the new God, I presume."

It was an important question. Four centuries ago, whole Kingdom believed in the Old Gods. None of them was perfect, but together, they formed a powerful pantheon and cared for the humans. But then, men came from one village inside the Kingdom telling all there was only one God, who had no

name, but he saw all things and was a good god. Afterwards, the men burned old temples and statues built as a tribute to Old Gods. People watched and when they saw their Gods didn't punish the men for desecrating their temples, they concluded the Old Gods were weak or nonexistent. Masses then joined the ranks of New God worshippers and these days, four centuries later, virtually every man believed in the New God.⁸

"Yes," replied Niktian. It was natural. Everybody believed in him.

"Then you believe the God can see everything?"

"Yes, he can."

"So he saw us destroying the bodies, yet he didn't do anything to prevent it. Do you also believe he is all-powerful? That he can create a mountain out of thin air?"

"He would never do that," said Niktian, "but yes. He is able to do so."

"And of course, you believe he is good, not evil, that he tries to help us, protect us and to make better our lives."

"Yes, that he does. And he grants us afterlife."

"Yeah, sure. Now listen! Do you *REALLY* believe he is worthy of your prayers? Is he a true god? And... Can a true god really exist? If a god is all-powerful, omnipotent, all-knowing, omniscient, and if he is also all-good, omnibenevolent then how is it that evil still exists in the world? If our god can remove it, why didn't he do so? There are only three options - either the god is stupid, or the god is evil, or he doesn't exist at all. Either way, there isn't any reason to worship him."⁹

Again, Niktian couldn't respond. There was so much reason in Salldronin's words, that he couldn't think of why he wasn't right. A simple *But God **does** exist* wouldn't work.

"But it's all only a test," said Niktian. "A test to determine your worthiness. If you believe in the God, worship him and do as he says, he will grant you another life in his realm."

"Ah. So you believe," smiled Salldronin, "so you pray to your god every day, only to get an afterlife some god promises?"

⁸ This would seem to be a reference to Christianity. Old pagan gods have been replaced by Christ in Ancient Europe. Even though the religion of the Kingdom is inspired by this, it is certainly **not** an exact reference.

⁹ This is called *Problem of Evil* in modern philosophy. It is discussed whether this anti-argument is valid or not and no clear result has been universally accepted as of 2009. If you want to know more about this problem, visit the Wikipedia page http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Problem_of_evil

"It seems like a fair price."

"And you believe him? What proof do you have that your god doesn't lie? If I say to you, *Worship me as a god and I will grant you afterlife or do not worship me and be thrown to hell*, would you obey me?"

There was a certain truth in his words. All his life, he was told by others of God's existence and never once this fact was questioned. He had no reason not to believe in him. Yet this moment, he didn't know what to say.

"Do *you* believe in a god, Salldronin?"

"I do. Yes."¹⁰

Niktian expected this answer, but he didn't know why he expected it. It would be reasonable to think Salldronin didn't believe.

"Why, then?"

"I won't tell you." Salldronin grinned, "you'll have to find out on your own. You have to learn to make decisions yourself. Believe because you know why. Believe not because somebody tells you to. If you do that, you'll be easily manipulated. But that's a difficult topic, let's talk about something else."

* * *

During the ten days of travel from Morranshome to the Pass, Niktian learned many things. Most of the time, he was learning how to read. By the time they arrived, he recognized over half of the letters and was able to understand simple words.

He also made progress in the wizards' game, Sacculus. He still didn't read the cards' texts, but he remembered them by pictures. And he won sometimes, when Morr let him win.

His now-mentors educated him in geography, too. They taught him to read the map and told him basic facts. That the Kingdom covered nearly all the continent, the only exceptions being the Barbarians' lands and Loenia. That the core of Kingdom was separated from border provinces, Rockham on the North and Eastern lands on the East by mountain ranges. That mountain ranges were virtually impossible to cross on foot or horse, so to get past them, one had to use a pass. That to Eastern lands, there led two passes. One towards which

¹⁰ The author does *not* say religion is a bad idea. He does *not* say whether God exists or not in real world. In fact, he does *not* even say if God exists in the world of Sacculus.

they were going and one on the North that bordered with the Barbarians and that, according to Niktian's vision, would soon be overrun. That Kingdom's sovereign leader was Lord Stormwave, however, Lord Nomarren in the eastern lands and Lurc Rockham in the Rockham province held most influence in their lands.

That and more he learned.

Whole ten days he pondered the question of God. He tried to think of an answer, yet he kept failing. He knew there had to be an afterlife. He couldn't just stop existing. But how to prove that God had the power to grant it? That God existed at all?

CHAPTER 7: MORRANSFORT OF THE PASS

Gerron happily walked out of the forest and looked around himself just like his rider did. The view was magnificent. Niktian, Morr and Salldronin stood before a large opening between the mountains that stretched far behind the horizon. But here, in the Pass, they simply *weren't*. It was such a high slope to climb the nearby mountain that one would say a god had torn out a ten miles wide mountain and left a flat open space on its place. The fort guarding the Pass was the greatest building Niktian had ever seen. It was surrounded by a high circular stone wall protecting it from invaders. It had many towers, levels, catapults, windows, courtyards... pretty much everything. The fort also commanded the unobstructed view of the entire Pass. No man could sneak through it without the fort knowing.

"Behold," said Morr, "Morransfort of the Pass."

Then, together they rode in hurry to the city gates. While the fort occupied most of the protected place, Niktian also saw some houses.

"Morransfort?" he asked.

"Yes," said Morr, "I'm not sure, but I think Morran was a wealthy merchant who built both the town of Morranshome and this fortress."

"Are you related?"

"What?" Morr sounded very surprised, "no... Of course not. It's just a names coincidence. I come from an entirely different place in the land."

"So what do we do now?"

"Not much. Go through the city gates, buy supplies and continue to No-Vanyalo. Oh, and the Rebel is supposed to meet us here."

"How do we recognize him?"

"Easily. We'll find him in the library. I know him - he's a complete scholar. Nobody knows history better than he does. You'll find out, too. He and Salldronin talk about it very often."

"Speaking of which... Salldronin?"

The named turned his head: "Yes?"

"I figured out the reason to believe in God."

"Oh, that was quick. So?"

Niktian wondered for a while to find out if that was sarcasm, then said: "I know for sure there is an afterlife. You cannot simply stop existing - it's unthinkable. So, I pray to God. I pray to the New God, but even if he doesn't

exist, the real God, the one who does exist, whoever he is, will hear my prayers and make me in afterlife happy."

Salldronin thought for a while, "It's not the wording I would have chosen, but given your age, I'll assume it true enough."

Niktian was happy he finally found the answer he searched for ten days.

"Let's continue, Niktian. You still didn't answer in full my question. Don't you think God abuses his power? He forces us to worship him, yet he doesn't remove evil and suffering from the world. Wars rage through the world. Ten days ago, Morr killed six men who surely didn't want to die. Thousands die every week because of hunger and famine. God kills them all!"

"It's not God who kills. It's us."

"Then God is watching murders happen and, even though he has the power to prevent it, he lets them happen. Why doesn't he interrupt? Is he lazy?"

"No! He's testing us. He wants to determine whether we are really worthy of afterlife. And he makes miracles to help the suffering."

"Does he, eh?" Salldronin shook his head, "have you ever seen such a miracle? And you're missing the point, Niktian. God knows we are worthy. He's omniscient; *he thereby knows everything*, remember? And wouldn't it be better if the god helped thousands of men to live happy life instead of punishing some evil man in hell?"

"Maybe. It's too complicated."

Salldronin chuckled. "That it is. Let's not worry about this, then. Enjoy the city."

* * *

They arrived at the city gates. Six soldiers, three on every side, stood with their spears in hands before the massive closed gate. One guard walked before them and asked hastily: "Who are you?"

Morr took lead in the discussion: "I am Amber of Ainetir and these are my companions."

"And your business here?"

"Secret. I am a spy for Lord Erik."

"Can you prove it?"

"Hardly. If Erik's enemies captured me, I wouldn't want to reveal my allegiance to them, no? Besides, I am bored of this interrogation. Should I report your incompetence to Lord Erik?"

"You get bored pretty quickly, Amber. Why do you have companions?"

"Erik's orders. Secret orders. And I think his orders are also to let enter the town anyone not dangerous. I have a completely legitimate reason. Will you let me in now?"

The guard murmured something, unlocked the gate and let the trio in. "Welcome to Morransfort," he said the customary phrase.

"What was that, Morr?" asked Niktian, once out of the guards' earshot.

"Amber of Ainetir? Cover name. Think, Niktian. Six men tried to kill us. It's likely more of them search for us. We don't want to tell them we passed through here."

Salldronin interrupted, "So, Morr? You'll buy the supplies. I and Niktian will go for Roden the Rebel and we'll meet you at the eastern gate."

"We can't stay in here, Salldronin?" said Niktian.

"No, I'm sorry. I don't like to stay in big cities while on dangerous journeys like this."

* * *

They parted ways with Morr, and then Salldronin with Niktian, along with their horses, went to the citadel's gate. Salldronin spoke briefly to a guardsman who took their two horses and allowed them to enter.

The halls of the fortress were high and beautiful and masterly carved. Salldronin must have been here before, because he led Niktian straight to the Bibliotheca.

The citadel's Bibliotheca - called simply *library* by many - was enormous. Many shelves with many scrolls *and* books filled the interior of the room. In the corner near the entrance door sat a man with a book on a desk in front of him.

In the room's center, several people read books on the tables between the shelves. Salldronin looked at them and ignored them. Instead, he led Niktian to the rear of the room since Roden was apparently not among them.

There, behind a tiny desk, a medium-sized brown-haired man was writing something.

"Roden?"

The man looked up from his work and smiled. "Salldronin. I am Kel'meth, actually. So this is Loreos?"

"You're now the same guy, anyway, Kel'meth. And yes - this is Loreos, but his name is Niktian. We're sure he is the Boy Farseer of the Prophecy."

"Nice to meet you, Niktian." he nodded to the boy and closed the book in which he was writing. "Sall, did you know Noknurla Lake is situated inside the crater of an extinct volcano?"

"No. Is it?" said Salldronin and he was genuinely interested.

"Yes! It seems the entire northern mountain range was once a volcanic site."

"But how did you find that out?"

"It was not easy. I studied the shape and size of the two known western volcanoes and compared them to Noknurla. I also read the few historical writings we have from the Ancient Times and found out Noknurla, then called Syblius, last erupted eight thousand years ago. The explosion probably destroyed the mountain's top and somehow caused the rift to shut. And then, it was only a matter of time until rain and various mountain water springs found their way to the empty crater. And last, but not least, I consulted Larwin of the Ferocious."

"Well, I always say you are the best scholar in existence."

Kel'meth then closed his eyes and when he reopened them, his face's expression changed to curious. "I think that was enough. We can attend to scholarship later. Sall, you still didn't introduce me to Niktian."

"Oh. Er, Niktian, these are Roden and Kel'meth. Roden is the human whose body you see and the one who speaks now and Kel'meth is the quelshen inside his body. When you see the expression change and the two-second eye blink, they swap control of the body."

"And Kel'meth is a friendly quelshen? Because the one I have seen tried to kill me..."

Roden smiled: "Yes, he's totally harmless and he abandoned the ways of his kin. That is, of course, why he is called the Rebel by the Prophecy. Anyway, I'm pleased to meet you, Niktian. And, what's the plan now, Sall?"

"First, stop calling me like that now. Call me Salldronin. As for the plan, after Morr buys our rations —"

Niktian didn't hear any more. His eyes closed and his body slid down.

He saw the city gates of Morransfort, from the inside. They were closed, locked and barred. In addition, a shimmering field of magical protection covered them and the area above them.

"I am sorry, but the city is sealed. In absolute quarantine. No-one gets in, no-one gets out. That includes you," explained harshly the guardian to the mob who surrounded him.

"Niktian!"

"NIKTIAN! What did you see?" demanded Salldronin.

"This city... it will be sealed. The gate had... will have a magical protection."

"Oh," said Salldronin, "Roden, quick. We have to find Morr and leave the city as soon as possible. This can happen anytime and it's nearly impossible to leave a quarantined Morransfort."

CHAPTER 8: BEAUTIFUL MAGIC

They were late. The alarm announcing the shutdown of the city sounded almost immediately after the three met Morr. Salldronin and Morr were furious that they failed to fulfill the Prophecy, yet they knew they had no choice. It was now impossible to leave the quarantined Morransfort.

Still, they didn't know the reason nor the duration-to-be of the seal. Morr negotiated with the officers who, in the end, allowed them to meet the ruler of Morransfort, Lord Erik, tomorrow afternoon. It was not soon, but apparently, he had important stuff to do and it was a wonder Morr could talk to him this soon since the quarantine's reason must have kept the ruler's time occupied.

For night, the Company was given a big chamber for official guests. It had its own toilet and bathroom, four beds, table and wardrobe. It was not an absolute luxury, but still the quality of equipment far overwhelmed that of Quarran's farm.

"Can you at least explain magic, Morr?"

'That I can do. But you still won't be able to use it, for now," answered Morr.

"Niktian is a magician?" asked Roden, or Kel'meth, whoever it was speaking.

"*A magician-to-be*," corrected Morr.

"Wow."

"Morr? The explanation...?"

"Right. Magic is a fundamental force of nature. Its precise definition is a question even for philosophers. While it is present everywhere, most people won't notice it. Just like there is heat and light, there is magic. Many people around the world, myself, Salldronin and you included, can harness this power to their goals.

"Inside your head, specifically inside your brain, there is a small organ we call the **COESTUS MAGAE** - the magic storage. This organ, this storage, contains incredible amounts of energy that replenishes during sleep. The energy is called the magenergy and the act of casting spells is in fact summoning this magenergy to do whatever you wish.

"How that is accomplished, we do not know. Yet the coestus magae responds solely to the language of the Haedralines and so, we assume the Haedralines themselves played a part in the creation of magic.

"Mastering magic requires discipline and great knowledge. It doesn't work like in the Story of the Hidden King and other childish stories. I doubt Salldronin could make a ring of fire as I did when those barbarians attacked us. Magic is a difficult science to learn and no-one can hope to master it absolutely. I, for example, specialize in elemental magic, that is, controlling mass, water, wind and fire.

"Did I forget anything, Salldronin?"

Salldronin looked up from the book he was reading. And he had been reading almost every time he could. It was a dictionary of the language of the Haedralines - who Salldronin presumed to be the creators of the Prophecy - written by Master Dronin himself. It was one of the books Salldronin took from his master's house at Morranshome.

"No, Morr. Maybe you could do a practical demonstration."

Morr smiled then his face went serious as he concentrated.

"**AZ AQUUS, ELONIR DE AIRE ET AQUO ATTRACTIR** (O'Water, remove yourself from the air and attract other water)" he said and slowly, droplets of water began to appear in mid-air, before Morr's eyes. When there were enough of them, they seemed to join together and they did and thus, in the end, forming one small sphere of water suspended in the air and levitating slowly up and down.

"**GLACIUS** (Ice.)" he added and before freezing, the water took shape of a perfect pyramid three inches high. Morr put out his hand beneath the icy pyramid that subsequently fell directly into his hands.

"It's a gift for you, Niktian."

"It's ... beautiful," said he, amazed.

"Yeah, for now. It will melt in minutes, you know."

"What were the words you were saying?"

"Az aquus, elonir de aire et aquo attractir. Water, let go the air and attract water. But even if you say them, it won't work."

"Can I try?"

"Sure."

Niktian trusted Morr. He didn't think he would succeed. But he had to try.

He repeated the formula...

It didn't work.

"I told you so," said Morr. The pyramid began to melt.

"Morr, would you like a game of Sacculus?" Niktian changed the subject unexpectedly. He knew he couldn't learn magic in one day. "Before sleep?"

"Sure, Niktian."

And so the evening ended, with Morr playing Sacculus against Niktian, who used Salldronin's cards, with Salldronin himself memorizing words of the Haedralines' language, with Roden watching the game, without interrupting, and with Kel'meth, who was switching body-control with Roden frequently, giving remarks of type: "If I were you, I would win", "If you had played this instead of that, you would have won.", "You are all absolute amateurs," and finally, "This was the worst game of Sacculus I have ever seen."

Nobody liked his remarks.

Of course, it is necessary to point out that Kel'meth had never played a game of Sacculus before and that he had absolutely no idea of what he was talking about. He thought people would appreciate his sense of humor.

They did not.

* * *

Next afternoon, a chamberlain came into their quarters and invited them into the throne room. Before its doors, he left them and asked them to wait a few moments.

Few moments afterwards, the front door opened and Niktian with his friends were let in.

The throne room was indeed immense. On the sides of the rectangular room stood many statues of brave knights and on the wall hung many pictures. The floor, though, was stone and no red carpet lay on it. That was reserved for kings.

Lord Erik of Morransfort was not a king, however, he sat on the single throne in the room behind the sole table at the rear of the room, trying to look authoritatively.

The guard announced: "Sir Amber of Ainetir the Spy, with his companions, approaches."

Erik had surprise in his eyes. He knew, of course, that Amber of Ainetir would visit him today, but he apparently recognized another member of the Company, too.

"**AZ PORTAS, COLLIR** (O'Doors, close.*)" commanded Erik and the doors shut with a loud *bang*. "**REISIR CONTEGUS TOT SKOLIEN ANTE SONORAE DE INTERE** (Raise shield that protects against all sounds from inside.*)" he added so that their conversation could not be overheard.

"He's a magician?" whispered Niktian.

"Yes. Lord Erik, himself one, is one of the few lords who support magicians," answered Morr, "greetings, Lord Erik." And they all kneeled.

"Um, thank you, Morr. But you don't have to kneel before me. I'm very surprised to see you, Sall and Roden and Kel'meth. But who is this boy?"

"He is Niktian and to be trusted completely. We have a quest of great importance and need to leave the city as soon as possible."

"Of course, of course. That will be easily arranged —"

"What?" interrupted rapidly Salldronin, "easily? You have protection all over the city! How can we get out without anybody else knowing?"

"Through the secret passage in my citadel, of course. Did you think I would lock myself in my own citadel, Sall?"

"Salldronin. Thank you, then. We appreciate it. What's the reason for the quarantine, anyway?"

"The theft. Of the Ark of Sacculus."

The four, or five counting Kel'meth, were silent, either because they didn't know what the Ark is or because they understood the gravity of the situation. Niktian instead tried to remember the moment. He was in the presence of a lord!

"I heard the name somewhere, but I don't remember... what is The Ark?" asked Morr.

Lord Erik stood up from his chair and walked to his gold chest beside the throne. He opened it by the word **LETTA** and found there a small black device Morr and Salldronin were already familiar with. The holographic projector.

"**AZ MACHINUM, RELEVVA TOT IN AZ TEO ET TOT EKO ELONIE**," said Erik and a three-dimensional image of a fairly large chest with inscriptions in an unknown alphabet on it appeared over the black object. "This is the Ark of Sacculus. **ARCHUM SACCULAE** is written here, in the middle.

We assume the entire text is written in the Haedralines' language, however either a code was employed or a different alphabet and nobody has managed to translate it. What's even stranger, though, is that the Ark resists all attempts of opening, physically and magically, and also all attempts of magic analysis.

"And it's been stolen yesterday. My guards are searching the city right now. No one left Morransfort since the time the Ark was stolen and so, the guards have some chance of success."

And again, new information spread into Niktian's mind. He never thought the world to be so complicated. Science, magic, cult of Baa, visions, the Haedralines, barbarians, towns, two beings inside one body and now the Ark. Too much to grasp.

"Can we leave, Erik? We can't wait for the city to reopen. We hurry." said Salldronin, irritated.

"Of course," said Erik, "right after you give me some advice. You see, two weeks ago, an Arch Priest of Baa visited the town. He called himself Demetrius —"

"Ouch," said Morr.

"What?"

"We met him. He made Niktian collapse."

"Hum... anyway, he created a magical personal shield around himself and started babbling about the approach of the end of the world. He said The Spirit of Baa will come till the third week is over and demonstrate to us the nearing armageddon. So far, nothing happened and people don't pay much attention to it, but... Do you know of any... trap he might have set up to blow in near time?"

Salldronin knew immediately, "the eclipse. The day after the day after tomorrow, one hour after the noon, the sun will disappear only to reappear five minutes later again. It's a natural phenomenon but you should warn people about it. You don't want many Baa followers here, do you?"

"No... thank you, Sall - dronin. Your help is appreciated."

CHAPTER 9: WARM WELCOME

Erik revealed a secret staircase that led to a secret underground network ending beyond the Pass. The horses, however, couldn't fit in the narrow path, so they, including Gerron, had to be left behind, in safety of Morransfort.

Niktian did not part with his horse lightly. At first, he wanted to wait for the city's unsealing, but in the end, he was persuaded by the argument that Gerron was safer here than on the journey.

When they left, unseen, the Pass, a vast area with nothing but yellow sand welcomed them. A desert. The Eastern Desert of which many lays had been written. The Eastern Desert where day temperature was high and night was cold. The journey to No-Vanyalo would take weeks, so before riding into the desert, the four sit together to talk about it.

"Niktian! Stop mourning over the horse!" said Salldronin, "he wouldn't survive in the desert, anyway."

Niktian's thoughts were interrupted by Salldronin. He was, indeed, in his mind thinking of Gerron and regretting what he had to do.

"I do not like the deserts," said Roden. Niktian knew it was Roden and not Kel'meth since Kel'meth's tone was slightly lower and harsher.

"Neither do I," said Morr, "but we have to cross this one. There is no other way to No-Vanyalo."

"True," said Salldronin, "and therefore, Niktian, you have to understand some fundamentals of eastern life. Desert is defined by the absence of water. While we follow the Ariona River, it won't be a problem, but then, we'll have to save our water."

"Can't you create water from magic?"

"No. It's, as far as we know, impossible, but I could summon water from the air just like Morr did in Morransfort. However, the air of the desert is dry and it won't be much water. Not enough for the horses, anyway. In deserts, you use camels, and, since none of us can ride a camel, we'll need to go on foot. Walk slowly and breathe regularly. Never run if you can avoid it —"

"Is it that important?" interrupted Niktian.

"Yes, it is," affirmed Salldronin mildly, "unless you wish to die. Lots of inexperienced travelers have died in this desert. Now listen on. Never look directly to the sun. If you get lost and can't see the road, wait until we find you through magic. If you wander too far, we may not be able to locate you."

Salldronin stopped as he thought of more important stuff he could tell to Niktian. Niktian himself was already hard-pressed to remember all the security precautions. And he noticed that Roden, too, was paying attention.

"Yes, sandstorms and mirages," continued Salldronin, "against a lesser sandstorm we can raise a magical shield. However, from most of them, we'll have to take cover. When caught up in a sandstorm, cover your eyes with a piece of cloth, try to stay on top of the sand and ideally, run into a cave if there's one at hand. Sandstorms, although rare, are a very real danger, so don't underestimate them.

"Mirage¹¹ is a more difficult phenomenon to explain. I - nor any other man - don't understand how it works, but sometimes, you'll think you see water on the road, but you'll never reach it. Mirages are only illusions, not real things. Desert's hotness and dryness plays tricks on your eyes. Don't follow it or you'll get lost. Well, that should be enough for now."

"One thing is left," whispered Morr, "will we use levitation to move ourselves?"

Salldronin considered that, "no, I'm afraid not. We don't need to move that fast and our magenergy might be needed to make drinkable water and defend ourselves."

And thus, they departed.

* * *

The days in the desert were most trying and so were the nights. Just like Salldronin had said, the desert seemed indeed to test the strength of one's resolve. No clouds in the sky allowed sun to freely take the water from their bodies. Transpiration was painful and smelly. Moreover, their continuous movement soon exhausted them.

The night's sleep was not as refreshing as it used to be. It was very cold and the quick changes of air temperature, as Salldronin had remarked, had a negative effect on one's immunity system.

Night after the first day and night, they knew they couldn't make it this way. They still walked basically alongside the Ariona River, so they had enough

¹¹ In reality, *mirage* is caused by the difference of temperatures of upper air and air near the hot read and/or sand. Light arrives in your eye from different places due to refraction and reflection and what you see on the road is actually a reflection of the often blue sky. For more information, see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mirage.

of water, but all the same, they chose to walk at night and sleep during day. It proved much more effective.

Niktian hated every minute of night and every hour he asked Morr when they would stop walking. Yet they did not. The desert had to be crossed and the sooner, the better.

One mid-day, one noon, Salldronin woke Niktian from sleep and told him the eclipse was approaching. When it did, it was beautiful. Niktian had never ever seen such a thing. Within ten minutes, the light in the surrounding landscape virtually disappeared and it looked like at night. It even became cold. The sun had a weird purple color, then disappeared completely. Niktian watched it, his eyes under the protection of some spell Salldronin invented, all the time it was visible - that is about ten minutes. Then, he fell asleep again, his heart filled with joy.

When they reached the merchant village at the crossroads ten days later, Niktian begged Salldronin to make them stay. Yet he would not allow it. They marched on and without Ariona River, it proved much more difficult...

INTERLUDE: THE WIZARD DEAD

"Do you *refuse* to fulfill my orders?"

The sound of The Wizard Dead echoed in the dead, empty chambers in the hollow mountain of Az Sasmir. It was a creepy sound, the sort of sound that makes your back chill and your mouth freeze. The Wizard himself was a skeleton, white bones covered by a black leather cloak. He was creepy, true, but some courageous men, or women, could even call him attractive.

"Of course not, O Lori," answered the man who kneeled before The Wizard Dead, "I simply do not understand what you hope to achieve by destroying those villagers. They cannot do us harm. They cannot help us in our conquest. What is the reason behind their obliteration?"

"I will tolerate these thoughts no longer," hissed Lori through his white teeth set in his white skull, "the plan I have is grand and you would not understand it even if you studied it your entire life. I know that, because you can hide nothing from me.

"I had centuries, no, eons to think of it, nurture it, develop it. Eons stuck in this stupid mountain, locked in by those fools Haedralines. No, you would never understand the details of my design."

The man on the floor sobbed.

"But if knowing the reason helps you achieve the goal, I'll be so good as to tell you. For one, an unknown, anonymous attacker will inspire fear in citizens of the land. Fear is good for us. Two, when the Baa claim credit for these attacks, as is planned, people will fear their own obliteration as well and will join in masses the ranks of Baa followers. We will then have the whole population under our religious control. And three, in the world I am creating, there will be no place for humans like them."

"I... understand, O Lori," bowed the man and left the throne chamber.

Lori himself headed for another of the rooms inside the hollow mountain. The stone doors opened on their own when he approached and revealed a storage room. And in that room, Lori saw his spheres. All thirty-nine spheres of Sacculus O'Great, stolen from the top of the Never-ending Mountain, were placed in this one room. All of these spheres were now interconnected with a sort of a wire.

"My spheres," whispered Lori, talking to himself, "soon you and me will create a better world. A better world with better men, better slaves. Then I, the

one Haedralines called The Evil One, will rise again and show them who is evil. And it is certainly not me."

He touched one of the thirteen red spheres, "**LETTA, AZN SPHERAE, LETTA POTENTIO ELONIR IN EKO** (Let, O'Spheres, let move the energy from you to me.)".

And as he said, it happened. Pure energy was being transferred from within the spheres to Lori's body. And it was a lot.

"Soon, we will be masters. Let us begin the campaign." and he uttered a devil's laughter, the kind of laughter that makes your back chill and your mouth freeze and that makes the modern television-generation kids laugh.

CHAPTER 10: WEAKNESS

"**AZ AQUUS, ELONIR DE AIRE, AQUO ATTRACTIR ET GRAVITIR IN AZ COESTA** (O'Water, remove yourself from the air, attract other water and fall into the container.)" said Morr and with a continuously increasing speed of growth, a sphere of water appeared in the air, then fell down onto the cloth Salldronin put under it.

Niktian drank several cupfuls of this water immediately. He was dehydrated and so this distilled from-air-made water was enough, even though under usual conditions, Niktian would spit it out as extremely disgusting. Of course, these were hardly usual conditions.

"Niktian, take it easy. We're lucky that we don't see any sandstorm approaching," said Salldronin, a little irritated by Niktian's thirst that slowed them down.

"Take it easy? You stole me from my farm and now I am to die in this desert!"

"Think analytically, Niktian. One, you certainly won't die. Second, you went with us willingly, of your own accord. Third, every night we approach to No-Vanyalo."

Only the third reason had some effect on Niktian. Sixteen days elapsed since they left Morransfort. Their speed decreased rapidly on the crossroads when they no longer had the shade and water lent by the Ariona River.

"Think? You expect me to think?"

"Yes, Niktian. I expect you to think. Think in all situations, however difficult they —"

Niktian no longer understood what Salldronin was talking about. He only heard faint whispers and felt pain, exhaustion and he couldn't feel his legs.

"Salldronin! He's certainly not fine. He's dehydrated and his temperature's rising."

"You're right, Morr."

Niktian sensed he was falling on the cloth beneath him. He fell into the warm water with a *bang!* and a *splash!*. His face was over the level of water, yet his eyes were closed. He was too tired to keep them open. He resigned and chose to die... He thought of his parents...

"Morr, shade!"

A man knelt beside him and touched him. His hand was warm as was everything in this desert. Dad, mum, granddad, friends... never he would see them again...

"**AZ AIRE, CONTEGIR HAEN ANTE AZ LUCIUS SOLAE** (O'Air, shield us from the sunlight.)"

As Morr pronounced his incantation, Niktian felt relieve. The pain was not increasing anymore.

"Good. Now cool the water."

"**AZ AQUUS, GLACIR** (O'Water, freeze.)"

Yet the water did not freeze, it only became cold and it quickly began to absorb heat out of Niktian's body.

"Use this," Niktian heard the voice of Kel'meth the quelshen.

"Do it yourself, Kel'meth. I can't manipulate the quelshen healing device. It's not based on comprehensible magic and I've never seen somebody using it. It's up to you."

Niktian heard a growling-like sound over his chest. His pain was leaving. Such was the effect of the quelshen healing device Niktian was unable to see.

"We must levitate him from now on, Salldronin," said Morr.

And Niktian fell asleep.

* * *

During the next two days, Niktian was never fully conscious. He would wake up occasionally, demanding water that was immediately made available to him. Then, he would again fall asleep. His fever dropped and his body temperature continued to fall. He knew, at the end of the second day, that the worst was over. And during those and following days, Niktian understood how much he was dear to his friends, to Morr, to Salldronin, to Roden, even though they knew him only for a month. It also made him forget and in his mind, he forgave them for luring him on this journey.

Third day, when the greatest pain left, in his brief moments of conscience, Niktian pondered again the question of God's existence. And he thanked him for his quick recuperation. Yet then did it occur to him - who was responsible for the leave of his illness? God or the arts and caring of Salldronin, Morr, Roden and Kel'meth? And this chain of questions led him again to the

main idea: Was the God responsible for this? For the illness or for the recuperation? For both? Or for nothing?

From the fourth day on, he even began to enjoy the journey. He was lying on a transparent pillow of thickened air, levitating, being pushed by Morr's power of magic. It was very pleasant and comfortable, though it had to be painful for his friends who had to spend less magenergy on creating water and who had to walk on foot. Niktian would rise and walk with them, but he was still too weak to do so. And he didn't want to.

Sometimes Niktian's companions talked to him to interest him, keep him happy and also thinking, so he would recuperate more quickly.

Roden said: "You're strong, boy. You'll be on foot quick enough. Then I'll learn Sacculus and I'll beat you, I'm sure of it."

Then they switched control of body and Kel'meth continued in a deeper tone: "Don't worry about the Sacculus, Niktian. Me and Roden will never beat you. None of us is a good strategist. We deal with the past, not the future."

Salldronin said: "Niktian, do not be angry at us, it will help you not. Instead, occupy your mind somehow - it will keep you from having depressive thoughts, try for example remembering how to read. Remember the letter for M? For L?"

Morr also tried to communicate: "You wouldn't say how heavy you are. I already have to use the lodestone and that will be soon depleted, too. If we don't arrive at No-Vanyalo soon..."

A week later, Niktian felt good enough to walk, slowly, but walk all the same. And he regained his happy mood feeling almost no pain.

"Morr, could we proceed with learning letters?"

"You want that? You feel fine enough?"

"Yes."

"Wouldn't you rather learn something new, say, fundamentals of magic?"

Niktian's eyes flashed, "I can use magic now?"

"No! Certainly not now in your mental state. You could easily make a mistake. But magic takes long to learn and we should start as soon as possible."

"Fine!" exclaimed Niktian, though a little disappointed.

"There are three things you need to cast a spell. The first is a *coestus magae*, the magenergy storage with enough magenergy. That you have. The second is the knowledge of what you want to do. You can't simply say *Knock down that tree*, you need to know how you want to knock it down. In elemental magic, it's usually sufficient to create a force, whereas Salldronin's magic is very complicated. Third, you need to pronounce the incantation in the language of the Haedralines. Potentius means power, Incendius means fire, Mutatir means change and so on. This will be the most difficult part of the training - the vocabulary and grammar of this, second language. Do you follow me, Niktian?"

"Yes, only it's a lot more complicated than I thought."

"True. The prophecy also mentions nothing of your education as a magician, so if you don't want to learn, we won't push it. "

"No! I want to do magic. Let's start. Teach me some words."

"It's not that easy," countered Morr, "you'll have problems with the second requirement, too. To use magic, you have to learn science."

"Science?"

"Science. Only elementary. Properties of heat, light, gravitational forces, the order of the world, interaction of forces, friction, basic human biology and anatomy. That should do it."

"Do you know all of this?" While the idea of learning how the world works appealed to him, he couldn't help but think it would all be very boring.

"I know the basics. Salldronin knows the rest."

"So let us start."

"Right. Mathematics is the basic science. Can you add, subtract and multiply?"

"A bit. You taught me yourself when I was learning figures."

"Great. So, imagine a man walking on a road with a speed of 2 meters per second. How many meters he will have walked in five seconds?"

"Ten."

"Excellent. Now, let's proceed to a more difficult example. The man walked 300 meters in 100 seconds. How many meters would he walk in one second? That is, what is his speed?"

"I do... not know."

"That's what the Distance Formula is for. $Mobillat\ est\ derivat\ tis\ temporus$. Distance equals speed multiplied by time, see, it's simple, you —"

CHAPTER 11: NO-VANYALO

Within four days, a month and half since Niktian left Quarran's farm, they arrived at the gates of No-Vanyalo. It was the most beautiful and strange town Niktian had ever seen. Of course, the only other town he had seen was the military base Morransfort, so he couldn't compare very well.

The city of No-Vanyalo was built on top of an oasis. It couldn't be otherwise in the middle of the Eastern Desert. It was walled, just like Morransfort, yet blue-and-white tents stood erected outside the city walls as well. People were everywhere. No-Vanyalo was a great example of a prosperous trading city. Most men wore black cloaks, turbans and covered their faces and Niktian couldn't see many women.



Dominating the city was an enormous building, clean and semi-transparent, its walls made of glass. Architects talked about it as the most advanced structure in the world. It stood high and much of it was also underground. Another interesting feature of the city was a nearly transparent light blue dome covering all the buildings and walls from above.

"No-Vanyalo is beautiful. It always impresses me, no matter how many times I go here," said Roden as he, Niktian and the wizards entered the city, unstopped by the city guards. The traffic and trade in No-Vanyalo was high and stopping some four citizens would only hurt economics.

"What's this?" asked Niktian as a breeze of cool air shifted around him. And it didn't stop. Outside the city, the temperature was horrible and caused sweating. But here, he was as comfortable as in Quarran's farm. Even better.

"Air-conditioning," explained Morr, "the shield around the city absorbs heat from the inside and transforms it into energy. That energy is then used to move air. So they have both cold and wind here and the city life is much more convenient."

"Why can't we have this in the west of the Kingdom?"

"Economy and fear. For one, it costs a lot of money to build and sustain something like this and two, the king suppresses magicians because he fears they would use their powers to overthrow him."

"And king of the Eastern lands doesn't..."

"Not king, Niktian. Eastern lands are a province ruled by Lord Nomarren."

"Then, Lord Nomarren doesn't fear us?"

"He does. But instead of killing the magicians, he trains his own army of them, secret of course, so that he can have the advantages of magic and he can always defeat the magicians who oppose him. Now, that, Niktian, is the Great Library of No-Vanyalo."

Niktian looked at the tall glass building in the middle of the city. Before he could express his astonishment, a woman cry disrupted his feelings.

"I will *not* let you harm this boy."

The companions turned around. On one side of the street, a beautiful young woman in white dress wielded a longsword pointed against three fat men. Behind the woman stood a little boy with tears on his face.

"Come on, woman. Why battle? Just hand the boy over and nobody gets hurt."

"Do not come any closer or this day shall be your last!"

The man in charge of the three chuckled, "you are brave. I like your kind. What say you we let the boy go and we'll have some fun in my house?"

"Our orders were... er... to capture... that boy, sir." said one of the fat men in a stupid tone of voice.

"Shut up, man."

Niktian was shocked. How dared anyone behave himself like that in the middle of a town and to a woman? In such a loud voice? And why didn't anybody step in?

"Women are sometimes considered inferior to men in the eastern lands, especially in the Extreme Eastern Plains. Some stupid men call them *property*," explained Morr, catching Niktian's angry face.

"I come from the free lands of Loenia, filthy criminal. I am a free woman and I won't talk to the likes of you!"

"Well, well, well, woman wants to play," smiled the fat man, then he and his companions drew swords and approached the beautiful woman.

"**LUCISPATHUS!** (Lightsword.)" exclaimed the woman and what happened then made the walking traders look around. The sword in the woman's hand shined bright white color and it was almost impossible to look into the center of it due to its luminosity. The sword sparkled and lighting charges of energy enveloped it, with occasional sparks leaving the sword and landing on earth.

The men looked in horror at the magic sword, then put back their ones and fled.

"**FINIR** (Stop.)" she said and the sword looked again just like an ordinary weapon. The woman turned to the boy and her voice was mild, unlike that with which she had spoken the harsh words to the attackers, "go home, Noferan. They won't harm you again."

"Lightsword," gasped Roden, "I never thought I would actually see one of these. I need to talk to her."

With those words, he strode in the direction of the woman who noticed him immediately. She looked at him, then behind him and she smiled.

"Morr. Salldronin. Nice to meet you," she said.

Morr and Salldronin exchanged looks, neither of them probably saw this woman before.

"My name is Ellion. Master Dronin told me a lot about you in the brief time when he spoke to me."

"Master Dronin?" asked Salldronin, surprised to hear the name, curious about it, yet afraid anticipating the news of his mentor's death.

"Yes. It seems I am the Ranger and I should join. Master Dronin found me, described you to me and told me to await you here. I am afraid he's not in a very good shape."

It surprised Niktian that Ellion, the Ranger he thought would be some powerful warrior, was in fact just a *she*, a girl. An old girl, true, but female nonetheless.

"Aren't you supposed to help defend the Northern Pass?" asked Morr, "Queen Leena of the Water-Folk said..."

"Oh yes, that... I was defending the Northern Pass right until the last moment, believe me, but their siege engines were unstoppable. We had little protection by the means of magic. The Pass has already fallen," she said sadly, "troops march from No-Kept to meet the barbarian armies, hopefully they will

stop them and force them to fall back in their forests. Because if they don't, No-Vanyalo becomes their next objective and it doesn't really have the power to defend itself."

"Well, now that you're here, our company - call it what you will - is complete and we will fulfill the Prophecy," said Morr and the now five companions went, in a slow pace, to the glass building of Great Library, engaged in happy talk.

* * *

The giant library building stood high in front of Niktian, who looked through the glass doors at the interior, seeing long tables, shining bookshelves and many people, western and eastern, taking books off shelves, having a look at them, then putting them back at the shelves. The doors in front of Niktian weren't ordinary doors. Aside from being glass, they were composed of two parts set in the wall. They had no handle and apparently couldn't be pushed.

Niktian made a step forward and the doors moved on their own, left part sliding in between the double-glass on the left side of the doors and right part doing analogically. The way for Niktian was cleared and a breeze of warm air hit Niktian in his face. The Great Library had to have an air-conditioning of its own.

"Welcome to *Nobibliotheca majora*, the Great Library of No-Vanyalo," announced a sympathetic female voice coming from nowhere. The five entered. What Niktian saw astonished him. The entrance hall, called the Atrium, was so beautiful and comfortable that Niktian couldn't imagine scholars working here. He always pictured them as men sitting in dusty, small rooms in front of old parchment, like Kel'meth in Morransfort's Bibliotheca.

The room was perfectly symmetric; the floor was made of white marble that was almost impossibly clean. So many people walked on it - how could it keep its white color? In several isles of soil among the squares of marble floor, high palm trees provided feeling of being outside on fresh air. In the center of the room stood a fountain. Circle of stones kept the geyser water from flooding the room. A kid sat on the bench around the fountain and refreshed its hands in the cold water. On the left, shelves filled by new scrolls were being thoroughly searched by many visitors. A man sat behind a long table on the right, having lots of paper around him and reading a book.

"Wow."

"Wow, truly, Niktian," muttered Roden, "while No-Vanyalo impresses me, this is the center of interest. This library is the peak and pinnacle of present human culture. Nowhere in the world stands a similar building."

"Here you can educate yourself on the uses of magic, Niktian," said Morr, "magic said the welcoming words, magic makes work the air-conditioning, magic cleans the floor, magic runs the elevators, magic runs pretty much everything here. It's wonderful."

Roden headed for the long table and wizards with Ellion followed him. Niktian stared at the fountain, realizing multiple beams of colorful light ran through the water, making it even more beautiful than before. Then he hurried after the others.

"I am Roden, visitor 1304." he said to the man behind the desk, who searched the drawers, found a small card, not unlike Sacculus cards, and asked: "Control number?"

"Seven."

"Good," said the man, compared the image on the card, that, to Niktian's further amazement, was Roden's face, with Roden, grunted and handed over the card. He repeated the process with Salldronin, having only the word *Sall* in his visitors list.

"It's a keycard," explained Roden to Niktian, "if I want to do some potentially dangerous action, like accessing the core or taking a book outside the library, the record of it is inserted to the Great Library's database. So they can track us down if we do something bad."

While Niktian didn't catch the meaning of the word *database*, he understood and arrived at the rear of the room.

"So, I'll go to the Power Book Cache immediately and I'll try to open it. I will call you once I'm done. You, meanwhile, enjoy the library!" said Salldronin and began to descend one of the two staircases. Niktian looked forward to it, as did Roden. Morr and Ellion, Niktian sensed, were not as interested, yet they said nothing.

They entered the elevator. It was a rectangular room with low ceiling right next to the staircases. The doors closed behind them in much the same way the front doors did, coming from both sides of the doorway. The walls of

the elevator, unlike the half-transparent glass outer walls, could not be seen through.

"This... device... can move us up and down without any effort on our part. It is powered by magic. You simply press one of these buttons and the elevator will move. So, where do you want to go, Niktian?"

"Dunno, what is here?"

"The Book and Archive Levels for the most part. But some special levels are here, too. The Observation Level on the very top of the building. The Laboratory Levels, but those are restricted access rooms and we cannot access them. The Biosphere Level is beautiful - even for you, I think, Ellion - and of course, there is the Core Access Level. I think I'll take you there," said Roden, pressed a button and Niktian sensed the whole room moving upwards. It was a most unusual feeling and it made him sick in the beginning.

"Morr," Niktian asked when he recuperated, "how can magic work this way? There aren't any magicians here whose only task is to supply energy from their *coesti magae*, are there?"

"No, Niktian. No man could handle it. I didn't tell you this so far, but in fact, it's simple. Over centuries, the magicians, especially the Ferocious, discovered some items, some minerals, could hold magenergy in the same way a *coestus magae* does. Two minerals specifically have been discovered. Lodestone is the first, probably due to its magnetic nature - don't worry, you'll learn about magnetism later - and allows us to store much more magenergy than in our *coestus magae*. But then, to efficiently store it, the lodestone has to be big."

"And the other mineral?"

"Lightstone, also called Lucimir, although that name sounds awful to me. Lightstones are rare and their most visible property is light radiance. They glow, similarly to the stone set atop the Baa Arch Priests' staffs. And unlike lodestones, lightstones can store macros."

Morr was sure Niktian would ask what a macro is. He did.

"What is a macro, Morr?"

Yet Morr didn't have enough time to respond, for the elevator doors reopened.

"Core Access Level. To access the Computer Core, you will need your access card," said mildly the same female voice that greeted them in the Atrium, once again coming from nowhere.

CHAPTER 12: COMPUTER CORE

The room they entered was of the precisely same size as Atrium was, yet differently organized. Along the outer glass walls of the room, there were tens of small pedestals and on them laid out tablets of metal. People stood before some of those, occasionally touching the tablet with their fingers. In the middle of the room, protected by a shimmering energy shield, stood an enormous blue crystal, emitting blue light into the room. A perceptive eye could notice fine ornate symbols all over the blue stone.

"This is a lightstone, Niktian. And this lightstone provides the magic functions of the library. To respond to your second question, a macro, philosophically defined, is a procedure or an algorithm that is precisely recorded in a nonhuman medium and is executed automatically upon a predefined impulse. To explain it, you remember the *Reisir contegus* spell I used when we were attacked?"

"The one that prevented the arrows from hitting us?"

"Yes. Creating such a shield is a difficult process. You need to let air, light and sound pass, but not arrows or rocks. You need to be able to move on the inside of the shield, you need to cast spells from inside, but now allow spells to penetrate from the outside. You can't think of all this in the heat of battle, so you prepare it once at peace, cast it and imprint it - store it - in your *coestus magae* along with the code *reisir contegus*. Then, you simply say the words *reisir contegus* and your brain knows what to do.

"And," Niktian understood rather quickly, "this impulse, in case of lightstone, doesn't have to be spoken. The voice welcomed us and the doors opened when we approached and the elevator moved when Roden pressed the button. Is that right?"

"Yes. Exactly."

Roden walked up to one of the tablets: "I'll show you, Niktian. This is called a terminal, look."

The tablet's top was glowing light blue. Across the surface were written words, some of which Niktian understood: *ACCESS DENIED. PLEASE INSERT YOUR ACCESS CARD TO ACCESS THE COMPUTER CORE.*

"The crystal there has collected thousands of macros already. Scientists throughout the world come here and input their macros so that others could

benefit. These terminals could tell you precisely how many books are stored here, how old is Lord Stormwave or what is the result of the calculation 254 divided by 3. The amount of information is immense."

Roden threw his card into a hole on the side of the pedestal and touched the terminal screen. The letters flickered a new set of those appeared, along with an image of Roden's face: *RODEN. VISITOR 1304. ACCESS GRANTED.*

Then, the screen turned green and many different images, rectangles, circles and lines of text appeared.

"Wow."

"You seem full of 'wow's, Niktian. But you are right. This is the most fascinating invention ever. And its usefulness is increasing rapidly."

Roden touched the screen again and a small board was ejected from the pedestal. It was full of buttons with all the letters and figures Niktian knew and more.

"Let's see if it knows what's the weather tomorrow... .. hm, it does. But I'm sure you would all guess it anyway. Macro 6320, Weather-Prediction written by Nolessan. Tomorrow. Temperature of day: Very hot. Temperature of night: Zero. Precipitations: Minimal or none. City environment: Stable. Sometimes I wonder whether this macro doesn't tell us the same lines all over again..."

"Wow." said Niktian and thus summarizing the entire Great Library of No-Vanyalo in a single word.

* * *

Seven days they spent in the eastern city of No-Vanyalo. Seven days of rest and recuperation. Niktian let himself guide by Roden every day, exploring different parts of the Great Library.

The Observation Level had no roof, so an observer could, from The Observation Level, observe any and all movement in the city and beyond. Roden explained that Lord Nomarren's official spy stands guards on this stage every day and night.

The Core Access Level was often full of visitors and rarely got Niktian a free terminal for himself. It was much more comfortable than books, to stand before a terminal and have at one's disposal almost everything - tons of maps

were stored there and even more images of different places in the world. Niktian could spend hours in front of a terminal.

In fact, he couldn't, because the rules forbid occupying a terminal for more than thirty minutes.

The Book Levels were clean, ordered and many. Some books were simple scrolls, some were real, leather-bind fat books. In addition, most books were colored and contained ornate images.

The Biosphere Level, like Roden said, looked beautiful. There were no books nor terminals. The whole floor was populated exclusively by plants and bushes of many colors that grew from the soil on the floor. Most of them Niktian had never seen before, for they were very rare.

The Power Book Cache Level was out of bounds and forbidden to all but Salldronin. Unlike the rest of the Library, it was shadowy and ancient and deep underground. Salldronin returned every evening, always saying he had no clue how to unlock the Cache.

During his days in the merchant city, Niktian pursued his studies of reading, writing, magic, science and understanding of the world. Morr taught him strategy and warfare. Roden taught him origins and fables he did not know. Salldronin taught him physics and logic. Kel'meth discussed modern advances of human culture. Niktian was becoming a learned man.

Ellion's character was mysterious, though Niktian unraveled more and more during the week. She agreed with Niktian on the subject of killing and told him she had never killed a man before the defense of the Northern Pass. When Niktian asked her for opinion and advice concerning the question of God, she replied simply: "It matters not whether you know why you believe. Perhaps it even doesn't matter if the God exists. Your faith in his existence makes all the difference."

CHAPTER 13: VOY SOPHIUS OF THE HAEDRALINES

"Power Book Cache Level. Access to all visitors and all personnel strictly denied. Please, return upstairs," said the female voice, but they ignored it. Salldronin had convinced the guard to let them all pass on the eight day, since during the entire week he didn't find a way to open the Cache. He thought it would maybe open automatically when faced with the entire company as mentioned in the Prophecy.

The corridor was short and dark and ended with no crossroads in a solid wall covered with small phosphorescing white characters. None of them was similar to the letters Niktian knew.

"What is it, Salldronin?" asked Niktian.

"On the top, it reads Power Book Cache. And from the next word on, it's all nonsense. Words that do not make any sense when put together in sentences. *INCENDIUS, GLACIUS, AETHER, AQUUS*... Fire, ice, emptiness, water - they are simply concatenated words. So I thought it to be a code and I tried to decipher it. But to no avail. Any known and unknown decoding system, be it substitution, skipping, symbolic or code-in-code or others, all have failed me. And now it seems the presence of the entire group is useless, too. I've nearly given up hope."

"Never do so!" interrupted Ellion, "that's the worst thing you can do."
Salldronin chuckled. "So what do you want to do?"

A moment of silence.

Then another.

Nothing happened.

"I don't recognize any letters, Salldronin."

"It's a different alphabet. Sounds that can be pronounced can be written in multiple forms. Using letters of our alphabet, using hieroglyphs or using, for example, this. This is the alphabet of the Haedralines. They have, for example, a single letter for the syllable US - a very common letter combination in their language. Also, they have a single letter for the word *EST*, to give another example."

Then suddenly, a whole sentence of unknown words came to Niktian's mind. He didn't know how it got there, it just appeared. And he was sure it was a good thing.

"EKO SUM TECA DE HAEDRALINES ET EKO SPERIE INTRIR IN AZ PLAZA SOPHIAE," he said.

"What?"

"I don't know. What does it mean, Salldronin?"

"Can you repeat it?"

He did.

Salldronin thought for a while, then said in a sure voice: "I am a friend of the Haedralines and I hope to, or I wish to, enter in the place of science.

Niktian, this sentence has perfect grammar. Where did you read it?"

"I didn't. It simply popped up in my head."

"Popped up... hm..."

And Salldronin thought about it as a new riddle, watched the wall's end, then got up and touched one symbol - one letter. It began to glow in gold color.

"Wow."

"The glyph means *EKO*, I. I wonder - if I press, in order, all the words in your sentence..."

He touched another word, composed of three letters and it went gold, too. He continued right up until the last word. When he touched the group that formed *SOPHIAE*, all letters on the wall turned gold.

"Ego sum teca de Haedralines et eko sperie intrir in az plaza sophiae. Your sentence exactly, Niktian. It was a password."

The wall blurred and disappeared to reveal a small, circular room, illuminated unlike the corridor by lights coming from long tubes placed at the ceiling. The lights were blue and this blue radiance gave a mysterious appearance to the room. There were two terminals at left and right sides of the room and a locked door was closed at the opposite end.

"So this is a construction of the arch enemies of the Baa."

"The Haedralines are arch enemies of Baa? I didn't know that," continued Roden.

"Yes. The Book of Baa says that every loyal follower should be the mortal enemy of the Haedralines who are pure evil and they will lead you astray from your only path."

"But... they are good, the Haedralines, aren't they? You said they created the Prophecy - they wanted us to prevent evil. So Baa are lying." noticed Niktian.

"True. But try to look at it differently. What Haedralines see as evil, The Wizard Dead, whoever that is, may not seem evil in the eyes of Baa. On the contrary, Baa could worship him as pure good and consider Haedralines evil because they wanted to kill this pure good. And how should we decide? We haven't seen any proof of the wizard's evil, nor of his existence. Sure, some villages are dying in the east, and something stirs in the black mountain of Az Sasmir, but that's hardly a convincing proof."

"So why do we follow the Prophecy?"

"You tell me."

"I don't know."

"That's bad. Then try to find an answer. You should always know the reason for your actions... So most of the text in this terminal is written in the Haedralines' language and I'm not sure the guard will let us enter again, so make yourself comfortable... I'll start translating and I'll find the Power Book.

* * *

"And done!" shouted Salldronin happily after two hours of work with the terminal.

"So what is it? I don't know, but I don't find this adventure very attractive," remarked Ellion the Ranger.

"It's a three-dimensional message record. Damaged. Something must have gone wrong during the recording, but I transferred the data to this machine of mine," said Salldronin and showed them a small, black device. When he saw their faces, he added: "It's a message left behind by the Haedralines, an ancient race. They left it here for us to find and listen to. **AZ MACHINUM, RELEVVA TOT IN AZ TEO** (O'Machine, reveal that which is inside you.)"

In the middle of the room, a blue cone of light erupted upwards from Salldronin's now rectangular machine and inside that cone stood a figure of a man in his middle age. The expression on his face was mild and welcoming. And it spoke.

"I am Voy Sophius. I am the Haedralines' Prime Calculator of the Future and a member of the High Council. I have made the recording in hope it would save your world from destruction. It is also I who made the concept of the Prophecy and I who made it reality. If one of you died on the journey here, though it is unlikely, blame me. It is my fault.

"You must be troubled. The Prophecy predicts, in a vague way, many events that passed. You may think the future is predestined and you have no control over your actions. Do not fear - it is not so. For, as you will learn, you cannot know the direction and the position of a subatomic particle at the same time and therefore, you can only guess the future, you cannot see it or set it. But I won't bore you with science talk. The point is, Loreos, what you see, from time to time, are probable versions of the future and they can be changed if you do a lot of effort. We can guess the future and write it down, as I did in the Prophecy, but we can never be certain.

"Also, it is my duty to inform you that the Power Book is not here. In the end, I decided that this place is not safe enough. The Power Book, compendium of our lore, was stored in the Sunken City and is not of your concern. I wrote about it in the Prophecy only to lure you in here so that I could give you the information you need to defeat the son of the Evil One.

"But first, I will recount to you the brief history of my nation.

"Ten thousand years ago, we discovered space travel. We discovered that we were not limited by our home world. So we constructed ships and found this - we found your world, and more important, we found you. And you can see our surprise - in our entire recorded history, we always thought we were the only humans in the universe. Then, there were you and since it is probabilistically impossible for two different separated worlds to grow the exactly same humans, we began to wonder - who created us?

"We pondered many answers, yet only one satisfied us, one that was rejected for millennia, a divine creation. We concluded a higher being, not necessarily all-powerful, created us.

"And magic. Magic only figured in our fairy tales. But on your world, it was as real as you and me. You weren't aware of it then. You were young, inexperienced, and forgive me the word, stupid. We studied magic in hope to explain it. We never fully succeeded. We still don't, but we understood it

enough to harness it for our goals. We noticed small organs in your brain. We called them the *coesti magae* and we found their purpose was to create and store magenergy. That only confirmed our suspicion. You didn't know how to use magic, yet you were able to. Some god must have made you.

"Then we made the mistake. The foolish mistake. For reasons not known to me, my ancestors told you how to use magic, how to help yourself with it. Only some of you were successful, learned our language and used it. So you became magicians and we not. We could manipulate magic, true, but none of us possessed a *coestus magae*. You could do greater things than us. We hoped to become friends.

"Yet you didn't want to. You had magic and power and used it wrong. Wars erupted and your culture went down. Inventions were lost, libraries burned. Five thousand years to the past from your current time, that is five thousand years after our arrival, human civilization on your world was collapsing. So your leaders killed most magicians and wanted to start anew, without magic. But they didn't kill everyone.

"A single magician locked himself inside the hollow mountain of Az Sasmir, the Dark Stone. There, he mastered the magic of death. He mastered necromancy. He called himself a lich - dead and not dead. We called him the Evil One and we had reason to do so. To become immortal, he separated his soul from his flesh and while he stayed in his body, his organs died. He lost ability to eat or to drink. He couldn't feel pain. He lost heartbeat. Magic held his body together. In his wickedness, he tried to conquer the world, which we couldn't allow. We defeated him and being unable to kill a creature already half-dead, we sealed him inside his mountain.

"The problem was solved.

"Two thousand years later, for you it's three thousand years back from your current time, several years before I recorded this message, our enemy has come.

"The Demons. They are red beasts with a desire and ability to reproduce rapidly, enormous physical strength and vast intelligence. Like us, they were able to use spaceships to travel among worlds and since they needed space to live upon, they began to attack our worlds.

"We warred with them and at this time, we still war. We are not sure of the outcome. We may win - and we may lose. We decided, we Haedralines who

live on your world, to help in the war, since our knowledge of the future and our knowledge of magic could turn the tide of war.

"So you know our history. How does it relate to yours?

"When we decided to leave, I forecalculated the future of this world. I saw three thousand years of rebuilding society and then, complete destruction. I wished to avoid that, so I made plans. I thought about many ways how to avert the disaster. None of us can help you, since none of us will live in your time and we're not sure this is a war we'll win. So it is up to you. And my decision is to help you. So I made this Prophecy to guide you. I chose the five of you to do what must be done. Because of your abilities, but mostly because of your personalities and hearts.

"There is a 47% chance you were attacked on your way to the pass between the desert and the western lands. I am sorry for that, if it happened. I lowered the chance as much as I could. Now for the mission...

"I calculate evil will spread once more from Az Sasmir. I think it will be something similar to the old Evil One, but the calculations are extremely complex. The point is, masses of the evil's minions will attack and ravage everything they find. You'll need not numbers, but weapons. Weapons I can provide.

"Every our experiment, every our invention is duplicated and the copy is stored in Az Sasmir. Some of those inventions are weapons you can use to preserve your world."

The image blurred, disappeared, then reappeared. But Voy Sophius looked scared and anxious.

"The Demons are approaching this world! We will fight them, but we must leave soon. I'll leave as soon as I finish this message! Listen carefully! Behind the door of this room, there is a passageway leading to a pool of water. Don't be afraid and jump into that pool. It will transport you to the east, so you won't have to cross the desert again.

"Be careful while crossing the enemy lines. When near Az Sasmir, search for a rock formation that looks like the word *coestus*. It's the entrance to the storage hall of inventions. However, to prevent robbers from getting their hands on such powerful weapons, to access them, you'll need to get past four wards - five tests. I'll tell you how. Do not fail me.

"The first one tests your patience. You will be given almost no instructions, but your goal is to stay. Stay minutes, hours, days. The period is randomly generated. Don't give up - stay.

"The second is a group of riddles. Answers are *SUN* and *DAY*, in this order. Remember? *SUN*, *DAY*. The third test is a one of harmony —"

All of sudden, the image of Voy Sophius vanished. The Demons must have attacked him while he recorded the message, so he didn't have time to finish it.

CHAPTER 14: WE WILL BE HEROES!

[The song in this chapter comes from the intro song of Pokemon season 11 series.]

As the five, or six counting Kel'meth, entered the dark hallway behind the doors, a little discouraged by the speech of Voy Sophius and the mysterious journey that awaited them, Ellion started singing. Niktian saw Ellion sing before, but mostly she sang long, incomprehensible and sad poems. This one, instead, was full of joy and speed and it seemed out-of-place now.

*"On the road, far from home,
but you don't have to feel alone.
Brave and strong, together we will be.
It's our destiny!
We will be heroes!
We can change the world if we try.
I go where you go.
Forever friends, you and I.
We will be heroes!
We will be heroes!"*

The song had a simple, yet fast melody, and that made it easy to remember. Niktian loved it and moreover, he requested Ellion to repeat. He was not alone. It seemed Salldronin, Morr and Roden also never heard the song and wished to hear it again, too.

We will be heroes!

The song cheered them up. It gave them hope and it even seemed it was written directly for them. Everything worked.

*On the road, far from home,
but you don't have to feel alone.*

On the road they were. Far from home as well. And did they feel alone? Morr certainly didn't. He had travelled the entire world only with his horse and didn't feel alone. Niktian, however, began to feel homesick. He missed the farm and boys he used to play with. But what's more important, he lost his parents. They still lived, sure, yet Niktian questioned his I-had-no-choice-anyway

decision to leave his parents. He had a choice and he *did* choose to abandon them. A month and a half he was en route.

Brave and strong, together we will be.

They had to be. Cowards would drop already. Weak-minded as well. But this verse had a different meaning - it meant "If we are together, we will be brave and strong." Was that a warning? Could the Company ... disintegrate?

It's our des-ti-ny!

It was. Their journey was predestined and planned for them by Voy Sophius and his people. Their destiny was to work together in order to be brave and strong.¹²

We will be heroes!

An interesting thought. If they defeated the evil, would they be proclaimed heroes whose arrival would be celebrated in every town?

We can change the world if we try.

They certainly could. What if they didn't try? Could they resign? Or was the Prophecy forcing them to continue? Voy said they had free will. But was that free will somehow limited?

I go where you go.

Forever friends, you and I.

We will be heroes!

We will be heroes.

Niktian's dreaming, that bettered his mood significantly, was suddenly interrupted by Morr's call: "This is it. A whirlwell."

¹² "...it even seemed like it was written directly for them..." It always does. This is called the Forer Effect. Often you deem a horoscope or a personality analysis true, but in reality, those horoscopes and analysis are true for most people. In your mind, it is easy to twist the meaning of the song and so, I think pretty much everyone could think this song was written directly for him. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forer_effect

INTERLUDE: THE DEPART OF THE HAEDRALINES

About three thousand years ago, in the Sunken City.

"I recognize you are the oldest of our people, Troy," said Voy Sophius, "but we have a responsibility over this planet. We gave them magic. Magic is the source of their future problems. We must help them."

The High Council of the Haedralines, their supreme deciding organ, was having a meeting in the Sunken City, an underwater metropolis, the capital of Haedraline civilization on the planet.

"I agree with Voy," stood up Borea, a woman and the Environment Interaction Minister of the Haedralines, "it is our duty to make them survive. Voy predicted the future with high probability and you've all seen it. The Evil One will not remain locked in Az Sasmir forever. In three thousand years, he will steal the spheres of Sacculus O'Great, use them to boost his power and take the entire world under his command. Then, rebellion will no longer be possible."

"The High Council is well aware of the situation, Borea," shouted Aekroy Lucius, the president of the High Council, then calmed down, "as it aware of the fact we cannot reach and kill the Evil One at this moment. The war with the Demons is underway. There is no discussion over this - within a month, we will all leave this planet; including you, Voy, and you, Borea. Our nation needs you."

Voy Sophius was getting impatient - he was a scientist, not a politician. "There is a way, a simple way, to help this nation. My Prophecy plan is going to work. The company I have chosen will have the necessary personalities and abilities to cross the land and reach Az Sasmir. The genes I implanted in some people will culminate, in three thousand years, in one boy, in Loreos. He'll be the heir of my technology of prediction of the future. He'll be able to do what I do naturally, without calculations. I have only one worry - will they be able to pass the difficult tests in the COESTUS? I ask for permission to make them easier."

"That is out of question," rejected Troy Sacculus, the Research Safety Department Leader of the Haedralines, "I will not allow all to enter the COESTUS. If I did so, the humans would destroy themselves before those three thousand years elapsed. If your future saviors manage to pass all the tests, I

have no problem. But I don't think they will even exist. How can you so surely predict three thousand years of the timeline? So many things can go differently from your calculations."

"My simulations are exact," replied Voy Sophius, "and we are not here to discuss scientific implementations of the Prophecy plan. Experts gave the High Council all the documents proving the likelihood of success of the plan and as you know, it's pretty high."

"Enough," terminated the talks Aekroy, "while the plan of Voy Sophius could succeed, if humans reached the COESTUS before the specified time period, they could intervene in our war with the Demons and with the knowledge stored there, possibly make us lose. We cannot risk that, you've seen how unreliable these primitive humans are; the debate on this issue is over. COESTUS entrance tests will *not* be made easier."

The High Council was dismissed but Voy remained in his seat. He would not be so easily defeated. He already planned to hack in the COESTUS main computer and illegally, behind the backs of the Council, schedule alleviation and removal of some COESTUS entrance tests. According to him, the humans were predestined to reach the Haedralines' storage of weapons. And if they weren't yet, then they would be now.

He smiled.

CHAPTER 15: WHIRLWELL

Niktian's dreaming, that bettered his mood significantly, was suddenly interrupted by Morr's call: "This is it. A whirlwell."

And true enough, there it was. A shallow basin filled with trembling water in the middle of a large cave of solid rock. Stalactites were hanging over the pool and threatening to fall or so it seemed to Niktian.

The water wasn't calm. It wasn't producing any sounds, but it was moving from sides to the center as though there was a whirlpool. However, the level of water in the center equaled the one near the banks.

"You're sure about this?"

It surely seemed to be a crazy idea. They should jump in a *well* full of water and some strange magic phenomena? Niktian thought it crazy. Ellion apparently had identical thoughts.

"I have met these wells before," said Salldronin, "I never dared to jump in one, though. Some have studied their properties. They endure eternally, produce abnormal magic energy waves and are not very deep. When we threw stones in, they never came back, in any whirlwell, nor could we locate them on the bottom. There are several whirlwells in the world. We thought them to be some kind of a passage to another world. Now it seems they are teleports. But where are now the stones we threw in?"

Now this was a situation. By reason, the stones disappeared. By reason, they would also die or be moved elsewhere if they jumped in. Voy Sophius, however, said it would be fine and months of travel through desert could be spared by using the whirlwell.

Suddenly, Morr ran and jumped in the well with a *splash!*

"Morr?!"

"What did he do?"

Niktian was confused.

"Long time ago, we formed a telepathic connection," explained Salldronin, "I will know where Morr is and whether he is alive. The spell is rather complex, but works perfectly. So, he jumped first and soon I'll be able to tell you where he is... if he is."

"He sacrificed himself?"

"Sort of. There's a big chance he'll survive, though. And he did it."

All felt relieve.

"Where is he?" asked Kel'meth in his deep voice.

"Loenia. Few days walk from Castle Loenia. Voy was right. At Castle Loenia, we'll be given horses and ride to the Francia river, cross it and enter Az Sasmir."

"How much time will it take?" demanded Niktian, hoping to receive a number as big as possible, thereby delaying the final confrontation.

"Couple of weeks, I imagine. Maybe less."

That wasn't too much. The final confrontation was approaching.

"Let us jump, then." said Salldronin and water soon closed over him.

The rest of the Company followed.

CHAPTER 16: THE PURGE

The sensation was bizarre. The water was cold and when he submerged, he closed his eyes and thought he would drown. Then, all of sudden, Niktian felt a major pull upwards and reemerged on the surface.

After opening his eyes, he saw a forest above him and his friends sit near the second whirlwell. It was indeed a transportation device.

"**AZN VETUSI, INCENDIR** (O'Clothes, burn.*)" said Morr once Niktian climbed on the forest floor. His clothes felt warm again and the cold water of the whirlwell left them. Yet they did not burn. Apparently the words GLACIR and INCENDIR meant also changing the temperature, not only freezing and burning.

"Everybody's fine?" asked Salldronin and they all nodded, "then I suggest we have a meal and then go straight for Castle Loenia."

And suddenly, Niktian fell pressed onto the earth once more, having a sensation that had already become familiar to him, a sensation of memories that were not his own...

People of the village had gathered on the central square, kids, men, and elders, too. Most of them looked scared, many trembled and part of the children cried. Two men only stood bravely in front of the villagers, opposing each other.

One of them seemed to be the village leader, or mayor, as it was called in Loenia and he wielded a sword. The second one resembled Demetrius. He too was an Arch Priest of Baa, holding a staff in his right hand, having a stone look and the symbol of Baa - circle cut through by a sword - on his cloak.

"I ask one more time," bellowed the Arch Priest, "will you join the ranks of Baa and pay homage to the mighty Spirit?"

"Begone, invader!" shouted the mayor, "we will not accommodate travelers who threaten to kill us. You are one and we are many. Begone and return when you learn your manners!"

"And it was no idle threat, Terios the mayor. The Book of Baa teaches that those who refuse to follow the way of Baa must be destroyed."

"Be it as it may, you won't be the one to do it."

*"**NON PAROLIR** (Speak not.)! Your leader is mute, villagers. What say you now? Will you join the ranks of Baa?"*

Terios tried to say something, but no sound left his mouth. One of the villagers stepped forward, armed his crossbow and shot a bolt that stopped dead in the air two feet from the Arch Priest.

"Terios is right! Flee, foul creature!"

*"You have chosen your fate badly," said calmly the Arch Priest, "but the choice is yours. You will all perish! **LETTA ELONIR AZ TOXICUS TOT COESTAE IN AZ TIUS** (Release the toxin that is stored in my staff.)"*

The lightstone on top of his staff shone bright and the Arch Priest surrounded himself with an aura of light. Soon afterwards, Terios fell suddenly on the ground. Others followed. Within half a minute, the entire village dropped dead. The Arch Priest made the light disappear and, in a slow pace, marched to another village.

"Niktian!"

Niktian stood up, alarmed, and looked at his friends. "I had a vision, again. A Baa was in a loenian village, said something and all the villagers died."

"Slow down," commanded Salldronin, "this time we try to prevent it. Do you know where the village is?"

"Yes," he gasped, "I felt it. It's the one closest to us."

"Great. Now, can you remember the words he said while killing the villagers, if he said any?"

Niktian tried to remember the strange sounds, "*LETTA* for sure, *TOXIC*-something, maybe *ELONIR* or *GLACIUS*."

"Let, poison, release, ice. This could be bad. If the toxin is airborne, we'll be killed, too. Niktian, did the Baa survive?"

"The Arch Priest? Yes, he had the kind of shield you can conjure."

"Good, the village is about a mile ahead. We'll run now and run protected. Morr, I hope you have a lot of energy in our lodestones - we're going to need it."

"I do."

"REISIR CONTEGUS DEIN EKO, NIKTIAN, MORR, ELLION ET KEL'METH. DEVISONIR (Raise shield over us and let us become invisible.)"

Niktian didn't feel the spell at all. He could still see all his companions. Apparently, the ones invisible could see others invisible under the same spell. It sounded logical.

They started running.

* * *

Niktian was a fast runner. In fact, Niktian was good and fast at everything. He was a fast learner, fast reader-to-be, fast runner and fast thinker. He was an extraordinary boy. Some people could even call him better than extraordinary - unworldly, perhaps. Or influenced by a higher power...

The point is: they reached the village in Niktian's vision very quickly. Nobody noticed them. They hid behind the houses of the village and watched the surroundings. The situation was just like Niktian imagined it to be. An Arch Priest of Baa stood against Terios the Mayor in front of the village gathering. They arrived just in time.

"You want us to change our minds, give up what we've been taught and give up our free thinking, all only to make you happy? You must be a fool to ask that." said the mayor.

"I ask no such thing, Terios the Mayor," the Baa replied, speaking slowly, exactly like all Baa spoke, "I offer you a better path, a better way to spend your lives. Wouldn't it better if you had more sense in life? Helping the mighty Spirit of Baa change the world?"

"Perhaps, but we are in Loenia's free lands. We change our minds through discussion and argumentation, through debate and exchange of knowledge, not through threats. You've come to the wrong place."

"The Spirit of Baa will not wait till the end of your discussion. The choice to make is an easy one. Help us, in the way of Baa."

Terios stared at him angrily.

"I ask one more time," bellowed the Arch Priest, "will you join the ranks of Baa and pay homage to the mighty Spirit?"

"Begone, invader," answered Terios, shouting, "we will *not* accommodate who threaten to kill us. You are one and we are many. Begone and return when you learn your manners!"

"And it was no idle threat, Terios the —"

The time was short. The Baa would soon release the deadly toxin. Salldronin reacted first, ending the incantation that gave them invisibility and stepping from behind the houses in between Terios and the Baa.

"This man spoke right, Baa," said Salldronin, imitating the Baa's deep and pensive voice, "Loenia is a free land where people can make a choice about what religion they want. Your manners insult the principles of Loenia and I will defend this village if need be."

"Who are you to say such words?"

"My name has no importance. I am a powerful magician and I have more than enough power to destroy you. So, will you leave this village and never return or do you choose to battle me?"

The Arch Priest stared into Salldronin's face, trying to determine his power and whether or not he told him the truth. In the end, he decided to battle. "Let us begin our short duel, old man. **LETTA ELONIR AZ CIRCULUS DE INCENDIUS** (Let create a circle of fire.)"

A wall of fire surrounded both combatants and the scared villagers took a step back. The other members of the Company - Morr, Roden and Ellion - were silent and still.

"**LUCIO EVOKVIR** (Create light.)" bellowed Salldronin and a ray of white light stroke from his palm at the Baa, stopping two feet from him and bouncing off his magical shield in all directions. Niktian got temporarily blind. He knew this was a basic strategy in magicians' duels. Magical shields were constructed to prevent stones and arrows from penetrating, but not light or sound. If Salldronin's spell penetrated the Baa's shield, the light in large quantity could tear him to pieces. Unfortunately, the Baa had a shield designed by someone with intelligence and did not let light too bright in.

"**AZ AIRE, TICIR** (O'Air, vibrate.)" The Baa lanced a counter-attack, this time with sound. Niktian learned from Salldronin that sound was nothing but vibrations, usually in air. By creating small movements of air particles near Salldronin's personal shield, he could create a sound shockwave that would penetrate the shield and kill Salldronin. Fortunately, the old wizard was protected from this. He and his mentor, Master Dronin, had spent years designing this shield and it was almost impregnable.

"**AZ LUCIUS, FINIR AZ MOVUS ANTE AZ CONTEGUS DE BAA** (O'Light, stop moving before the shield of the Baa.)" was the counter-attack of Salldronin. Ordinary light was now bouncing off the Baa's shield and so he was enclosed in a black bubble, unable to see what happens outside. It gave some advantage to Salldronin. The Baa could not trace him.

"**LETTA!** (Push!)" he cried inside his bubble and a gust of air hit Niktian's own personal shield. The force generated by the Baa was sufficient to break the black bubble and he could see again. "Let us finish this child's play," he said aloud, "**INCENDIO EVOKVIR** (Create fire.)"

That was a powerful sheer-force spell. The Baa was sending streams of fire at Salldronin. Those did not have any effect, true, but they kept decreasing the strength of Salldronin's shield and lowering his reserves of magenergy. Salldronin couldn't hold for long - he was old and his *coestus magae* was not producing much magenergy now. Niktian knew it. Morr knew it. Ellion and Roden perhaps didn't, but that didn't matter.

Morr knew it well - he felt he needed to help his colleague and friend, he lent his own energy to Salldronin so that he could use it in battle: "**LETTA ELONIR AZ POTENTIOUS DE EKO IN SALLDRONIN** (Transfer the energy from me to Salldronin.)"

Salldronin's face expression changed and he blinked. He recognized his energy reserves were being refilled by Morr's spell. Niktian sensed he was thinking hard. This Baa had a lot of power. The only way to overpower him was to use a spell that could penetrate his shield without clashing with it. And Salldronin ... he thought he had such a spell.

"**AZ AIRE, TRANSMOVI DE DEIN BAA ET ELONIR** (O'Air, move from around the Baa and go as far as possible.)"

It worked. There was no visible change, but the air around the Baa's shield, air that was not protected by the Arch Priest's spell began to move thereby creating a vacuum around the Baa. The Baa's shield did not protect against overpressure. The air passed the shield easily and the Baa's body too. It was literally turned into pieces as the liquids and air inside his body struggled to get into the created vacuum. It was a horrible look. But it was a flaw in the enemy strategy and Salldronin exploited it successfully.

And that was what mattered.

* * *

"Thank you, Salldronin," bowed Terios, the mayor of the village, "we are in your debt."

Salldronin smiled: "It was nothing. It was my pleasure to help Loenia stay a free land with people who have free will."

"My words exactly, magician," continued Terios, "but I am afraid it is not enough. Loenia is losing its status of free land as we speak —"

"What are you talking about?" asked Roden. They had all already left their hiding places and joined Salldronin and the villagers.

"Many villages are being destroyed. Some say it is caused by gods who became angered. Everybody names a different god. Some say the evil spreading from Az Sasmir is behind this. All the same, Loenia is on the brink of war."

"Evil spreading from Az Sasmir? Oh, we have to go to Castle Loenia immediately."

"Why?" Terios was shocked, "do not go there. It is not safe. Plague epidemic broke up there. The entire city is leveled with ground. Who didn't flee, died."

Ellion stepped in the dialogue, excited: "And the Queen? Darlion the Queen of Loenia? Did she survive?"

"Of course she did," answered Terios, "she is leading the loenian army to the east of our land and there they will try to repel the invasion coming from Az Sasmir. You want to join them?"

"Yes, we do," said Salldronin, decisively.

"I can provide you with fast horses, if you wish. And I can show you the way. That's the least I can do in return for the assistance you provided to our village."

* * *

Twenty days.

The journey to the east of Loenia had been a failure. They found out soon enough that the horses Terios had given them were not as gifted as he thought them to be. One of the horses died early and had to be replaced in one of the loenian villages they passed. The battle on the banks of the Francia River that separated Loenia from Az Sasmir was imminent if it hadn't already started.

They had to be fast and yet, it took them twenty days to reach the battlefield. Twenty days of ride. Of course, those days were not wasted on

travel only - Niktian was extremely busy during those times. He learned and learned. At the end of the journey, he knew the entire alphabet and was able to read, albeit slowly. He also learned some basic vocabulary of the Haedralines' language just in case. Also, he and Morr often discussed different strategies. He learned what to do in battle, in a magicians' duel, during a siege, on an abandoned island. He became prepared for everything.

He also learned how to think. The discussions with Salldronin had no end. They talked about many dilemmas and Niktian managed to successfully defend his opinions only in some of them. But still, he liked to be challenged and he accepted the challenges Salldronin gave him.

And he was becoming nervous. He and Ellion - they both anticipated the upcoming events with fear and nervousity. Niktian himself was afraid of death and harm. The probability of being assaulted or assassinated grew day by day. He tried to handle this fear and partially succeeded. Ellion, however, was afraid of something else. Niktian knew that, though he was unable to determine the source of her fears. If she wasn't afraid of death, and she wasn't, what was she afraid of?

Twenty days and the Company finally arrived on the top of the last hill of loenian landscape and the hill from which the entire battlefield could be viewed.

CHAPTER 17: BATTLEGROUND

As they ascended to the very top of the hill, a magnificent view opened up before them. A low valley running along the Francia River on both sides. Blue and white pavilion tents stood erected on the heel of the hill and hosted Loenia's headquarters. Thousands of men, armed and not armed, walked across the plateau, every single one busy with a particular action - sharpening swords, practicing archery, fetching material, discussing strategies.

The friendly area ended with a makeshift palisade wall with towers and siege engines and then followed the no-man's-land. This was a nasty area - piles of dead corpses on a dead burning ground. Colorful and probably poisonous fumes went high from the fog that kept low on the earth.

Behind this area, protected by a shimmering bubble of magical energy that formed a semi-transparent blue wall, the holes and primitive buildings built by The Wizard Dead looked horrible and evil. Hordes of weird monsters swarmed behind the protective shield.

Well, some could view this area as magnificent; others could view it only as horrible.

"Do you think we will win?" asked Morr.

Niktian hoped Salldronin would say 'yes'.

"No," Salldronin said. He continued after a while: "Then there would be no reason for our mission. I have faith in the words of Voy Sophius - only if we succeed in the task, we may win. We'll take the Haedralines' machines and inventions, win the war and kill the one responsible. If we don't, then neither Loenia nor the Kingdom itself will be able defend itself."

"What's the gas out there?" asked Ellion, nervous, "it looks bad."

"I don't know. But this area should be free of volcanic activity," said Kel'meth, "it could be some sort of a biological or chemical weapon."

Niktian had learned about these from Salldronin and Morr during his instruction in warfare. He knew they were relatively modern inventions and quite terrifying - their power was such that they could obliterate thousands of people within a fraction of moment.

"Is it safe to go there?" asked Niktian, terrified. The day had come.

"Well, the Loenians look alive, so let's proceed!"

And they rode down the hill right into the middle of Loenia headquarter tents. People noticed them, but generally didn't pay much interest. Morr, who had been to Loenia several times already, asked a few soldiers and gained information as to where was the tent of Darlion, Queen of Loenia.

Morr identified himself as a friend of the Queen and the guards posted around the blue and white tent let them in. As they were entering, Niktian noticed Ellion was extremely nervous.

The tent was empty. Well, empty except for three persons, books and wardrobes on the floor and a desk with a chair. On the chair, of course, sat the loenian Queen, Darlion, as beautiful as Ellion, though a bit more dirty and injured. The man standing behind her was in full military clothing and uniform and had a harsh look - it was her chief military officer. The final person the wizards had already met was Warlick of the Water-Folk.

Niktian blinked.

Warlick, of course, was naked as it was the custom of the Water-Folk. Green slime was still frozen on his light blue skin. Warlick faced Darlion's table when the four entered and so they saw his back and bottom as the first thing in the tent.

"Morr?" Darlion said, quietly. Warlick turned around and smiled at Salldronin.

"Yes, Your Majesty. Me, my friend Salldronin and our friends, Niktian the boy, Roden the historian, Kel'meth the quelshen inside Roden and finally, Ellion the Ranger," Morr introduced them all. Yet again, Niktian was in the presence of a royalty. First Erik, now Darlion. He wished he could stay here, safe within Loenia's base camp.

"Ellion..." murmured the queen, then continued loud, "well, then. Why did you come? Do you want to join my army to fight those beasts?"

"No, Your Majesty," replied Morr, "but we need your army to help us. We are on a mission. As you probably know, the spheres of Sacculus O'Great have been stolen and the prophecy has chosen us to preserve humanity. If you don't help us, the entire mankind could perish! ... Too dramatic?"

"Not for me... We don't have much chance anyway. Those foul monsters are strong and numerous and those foul spells are powerful, too. I don't think

we can hold on much longer - maybe a week or two... or three. What do you need and how will it help us if you succeed?"

"We need to get across the enemy lines and into Az Sasmir. If we achieve our goal, we'll find weapons powerful enough to obliterate the army of the Wizard Dead."

"Lori."

"What?"

"Lori - it's his name. We interrogated some of his soldiers and they told us. Lori says that a new world shall arise and that he waited an eternity to make it rise and now the time has come and the soldiers are to be rewarded with paradise."

"Sounds like the Book of Baa," remarked Niktian, "you know - all this *Battle for your cause and you get afterlife or fail and be punished.*"

"You have read the Book of Baa?" asked Darlion, clearly surprised, "I thought only High and Arch Priests of Baa had access to it."

"I managed to steal one," continued Morr, "and Niktian now knows how to read. Could you tell us more about these soldiers of Lori? What are they?"

"Like the Prophecy said - some dead, some not dead. One of his underlings is an intelligent loenian general who, five weeks ago, was at my service. Lori somehow convinced him to switch sides. Also, it seems Lori, along with the Baa, are responsible for destroying many villages in this region. Some of them, however, now work for him - they fight for him.

"Most of his minions are not people, though. It's as if they had arisen from hell. They have multiple legs and arms, they do not walk straight and some aren't able to speak human words. Also, when they die, we have to destroy them to pieces or else they rise again. It's horrific."

"It is... Warlick, what are you doing here?"

"I'm here as a messenger of Leena, the Queen of the Water-Folk," answered the naked spy, "our race will soon join the battle, too."

"Sister!" exclaimed Ellion into Darlion's eyes, interrupting all discussion, "do not pretend not to know me any longer. Stop talking business and war - I... I need to speak with you, personally."

Niktian got surprised. So this was the source of Ellion's nervousity all the time. Not fear from the enemy, fear from this discussion she'd have with her - sister.

"Ellion," murmured the queen, "Ellion, I wanted —"

She didn't say anything else. A clot of blood fell out of her throat. More followed and quickly. She threw up pieces of her tongue and lungs on the floor from her mouth. Parts of her skin simply stopped existing. She fell unconscious on the surface of earth.

"**AZ CORPUS, LETTA VISONIR** (O'Body, let me see.)" commanded Salldronin before anyone else could react. Yellow glow surrounded Darlion's body for a few moments. When it faded, Salldronin's face was very, very sad.

"She is dead," he commented the fact everyone was painfully aware of, "her internal organs, including heart and brain, are irreparably broken. Completely disintegrated. She will never live again."

The military officer made a step forward.

"But how?" murmured Niktian.

* * *

"*Morpho disruptus* - Shape Riper, energy-enhanced phosphorous and acidic gas. It killed Darlion and it now occupies the no-man's-land. Darlion breathed it, probably, and the gas now took its toll. We cannot cross the land on foot," said Salldronin.

He said it two hours later, two hours after Darlion died, when he and the rest of the Company sat along with Loenia's highest ranking military officer in a decorated tent.

"Her death will have consequences," warned the officer, "she was our best strategist - even better than I am. We will not hold for a week."

"Don't you expect her death will wake up the spirits of your soldiers who will want revenge?"

"Maybe so. But it will also make them act in stupid ways. I don't want my warriors to go berserk. "

He said *my* warriors. All noticed it. He was ready to take over loenian armies in a moment's notice. Perhaps he could also take the throne for himself.

"Excuse me," sobbed Ellion, "you all think of the consequences for the army, but Darlion was my sister. Can't you be —" she sobbed once more, then left the pavilion in a hurry.

"It's too much for her," explained Roden, "she told me she last saw her sister at the age of five and never more. Why she left the royal court I do not know. Nor I know why she didn't return. But still, when your sister dies immediately after you find her after ten or twenty years, it must be a terrible shock, I imagine."

"We will leave Ellion here, in the headquarters. She'll not follow us to Az Sasmir in her current state," decided Salldronin, "and now, we have to get across the river. Any ideas?"

"Fly? Dig?" suggested the military man, "teleport?"

"Digging takes time," refused Morr, "if we flew, we would be shot down. You said they overwhelm you in the number of archers and spell casters and for teleportation, we don't have enough energy. The Ferocious and Salldronin, too, have tried to transport by teleportation, but they only succeeded with small objects and were left without any magenergy. So that is not an option."

"What about me?" asked Niktian, a bit intimidated by the presence of the military officer, but overcoming his shyness, "you said that I have a lot of energy in my *coestus magae*. Isn't it sufficient for the teleport?"

"No," shook his head Morr, "sorry, you're not that powerful."

"And what about the Ark of Sacculus?"

All looked up at the military officer who said this.

"A week ago, we have captured an Arch Priest of Baa with the chest. He also had the translation of the symbols on it. It says something about energy storage."

CHAPTER 18: AND THE SUNLIGHT WILL PROTECT US FROM THE TERRORS OF THE DEPTHS

The Baa Arch Priest stood, without his staff, enclosed in a semi-transparent bubble in a corner of another tent. He was well and conscious and even though his face was stone, Niktian sensed the Baa felt triumph. The Ark itself was located in the middle of the tent, guarded by two men.

It was just like the three-dimensional image Lord Erik had shown them in Morrnsfort. But there could be found a subtle difference. Three rectangular holes, about half an inch deep, were set in the chest and a line of text in the Haedralines' alphabet characters was engraved over them.

"It seems the Baa stole this Ark from Lord Erik and somehow he bypassed the city quarantine. Moreover, he revealed these symbols," said the officer.

"Yes, they were definitely not there before," murmured Salldronin, "it reads **ET AZ LUCIUS SOLAE CONTEGIER HAEN ANTE AZN FEERI DE PROFONDI**. And the sunlight will protect us from the terrors of the depths."

Morr's expression changed. He noticed something in the sentence on the Ark. He began to search his deck of Sacculus cards in his bag.

"Baa! Hear me," ordered Salldronin, "how did you make this appear?"

"It was the Spirit of Baa who revealed it to me. And it will be the Spirit of Baa who will ascend me to a better world," answered the Arch Priest, "you know the end of the world is near."

It seemed so, thought Niktian, the world would be going to end if they didn't prevent it.

"No," Niktian said aloud.

"Then know so. Soon The Wizard Dead will overcome the people who still prefer the old ways. Then, a sword shall be thrown through the world and the world itself will feel pain and its creatures as well. And from the ashes, a new order shall rise. An order where the way of Baa, the true way, will have no enemies."

It was an extract from the Book of Baa, Niktian knew. He read parts of the Book and listened to other parts. It was an interesting book. Niktian didn't like the priest's idea of a new order -especially if all including himself, his parents and Ellion should be destroyed - but the book itself was amusing.

"Salldronin, I found a connection," announced Morr, looking at the deck of Sacculus card that he had just found in his bag. "And the sunlight will protect us from the terrors of the depths. It is written on three cards in my collection. The Sunlight (red, 3, Take all the red spheres in the cloud.), The Shield (blue, 3, Put all your blue spheres into your reserve protected.) and The Terrors of the Depths (green, 3, Draw up to 3 cards from the top of your deck.) These cards form a group, all begin with the word *The*, all have the power of 3, all have different colors and the entire sentence *And the sunlight will protect us from the terrors of the depths* is on every one of them. Also, there are 3 spots on the Ark and there are 3 cards - there has to be a connection."

"You are right, Morr," said Salldronin, "and although the Ark still resists magical screening, there is definitely a lot of energy there."

"But you don't know what kind of energy," warned Kel'meth, "I feel a bit like opening a Pandora's Box."

"What is the Pandora's Box?" asked Niktian, curious.

"It's a long-forgotten myth¹³. It tells the story of Pandora, one of the Old Gods, who was given a box, told not to open it at any cost. It was a test prepared for the humans. Pandora was ordered to bring the box to Earth and leave it there for the men. She was supposed to tell them *If you are curious, you will be punished*.

"However, the plan backfired when Pandora herself opened the box, being curious. At once, the evils, the plague and the sicknesses located inside the box emerged and spread through the land like wildfire. That is the origin of evil in the world.

"Pandora, horrified by what she had done, reclosed the box and so, the hope and good remained locked inside. It's pretty much identical to our current situation. We have the Ark, we have no idea what is inside, we are curious, and we try to open it."

There was silence.

"True," said Salldronin, "but so far, the Haedralines only helped us. This Ark is surely the handiwork of them. I think we should proceed."

¹³ The real story about Pandora from greek mythology is very similar, though a bit different. Search Wikipedia or other sources for more information.

"You are right, Salldronin," nodded Morr, "and by the way, we have now found a proof that Haedralines were the creators of the Sacculus game and most likely the spheres of Sacculus O'Great, too."

"Ready?" asked Morr.

They all nodded. Except Ellion. Ellion wasn't here. At least so the heroes thought.

"I am," said a shaking voice of a female in the tent's entrance. They all turned towards it. There stood Ellion. "We have a mission to complete and I won't let you go without me."

"Are you sure?" asked Roden, since she was still partially weeping.

"I am. A Ranger is always ready. Proceed!"

Morr nodded and put the three cards in their respective places on the Ark, first The Sunlight, then The Shield and then The Terrors of the Depths. As he put in the cards, they began to glow.

When the last was in, Morr quickly withdraw his hand, just in time, since the top of the Ark rapidly opened and an extremely bright column of light left the Ark, went through the tent and then outside to the sky. They were all blind by now.

CHAPTER 19: DEATH FOLLOWS OUR TRAIL

"The energy is free, Salldronin!" shouted Morr. "Use it, now! Before it dissipates."

"I'm on it, Morr."

And after that, he muttered several very long sentences filled with obscure words. Niktian didn't understand most of them and only a few he remembered.

"AZ ARCHUM SACCULAE, POTENTIO MUTATIR ET ... LUCIO ATTRACTIR, AZ LUCIUS ET AZ INCENDAT, ET INCENDATO ATTRACTIR ... MATERIO IN AZ POTENTIUS MUTATIR ... ABSORBIR ... DEFINIR NO-UNUS ALOR EKO, MORR, NIKTIAN, RODEN, ELLION ... DEFINIR KEL'METH ALOR OBJECTUS IN RODEN ... NO-UNO IN AZ POTENTIO MUTATIR, STRUCTURO CONSERVANT ... LETTA, LETTA, LETTA ELONIR NO-UNUS ... STRUCTURO RESTRUCTURIR ... AZ MAGICKO FINIR!"

(O'Ark of Sacculus, change the energy and ... attract light, O'Light and O'Heat ... change matter into energy ... absorb ... define no-unus as me, Morr, Niktian, Roden, Ellion ... define Kel'meth as an object inside Roden ... change no-unus into energy, conserving structure ... Accelerate! Let go no-unus ... reconstruct matter ... end the spell!)

Niktian felt a strange tickling, subtle vibrations all over his body and then he smelt air distinctly different from the one in Ioanian tent. He felt bubbles of air trapped in his digestive system and thought he would throw up. But fortunately, he didn't.

Still blind, he paid attention to the air's smell. It was heavy and dry. It was the kind of air that makes you sick and makes you want to leave as soon as possible.

Slowly and gradually, Niktian regained his vision. An enormous mountain of black stone stood high beside him. The earth was crackled, dry, brown and without life. He looked at the horizons, and to the west, he saw the Francia River and the battlefield behind. They made it - the teleportation was successful. The column of light was still reaching the heavens. It was beautiful.

He looked behind himself and saw the rock formation shaped to look like letters of the alphabet Niktian knew. *COESTUS*. Just like Voy Sophius said. Beneath the rock shaped like C, a staircase led to some caverns under earth.

"Good work, Salldronin," complimented him Morr, "we can now continue. The riddles await us."

This was going to get exciting. They were going to explore treasure-hiding caverns protected by a series of riddles created by an ancient people. And if they did it right, they would not even have to battle the Wizard Dead!

But something more awaited them. Something far sadder. Niktian heard an unfamiliar sound coming from behind him. He turned around and cried out wildly.

The column of light was gone. Instead, Niktian saw a fireball expanding from the Ark. Clouds of dust escaped into air. Wildfire erupted. The tent was surely destroyed and so were the people inside it. The neighboring tents also suffered serious damage and more deaths would follow if the fire was not extinguished soon.

"I would never expect that," said Morr, "it's a Haedralines' machine. It was supposed to be safe. How could it explode?"

"Pandora's box," affirmed Kel'meth.

"The energy build-up near the Ark could, in theory, cause the explosion of the air itself," guessed Salldronin, "but I would expect the explosion to be much bigger. I think we're lucky."

Nobody commented the fact that several people died. Neither did Niktian. He grew accustomed to death. It was a part of life and mourning over it had no practical reason. What's more, he was now grateful for the poisoning of the loenian queen. If the *Morpho disruptus*, the Shape Ripper, hadn't killed her, this explosion surely would have. Ellion would have guessed so and she would have been sad and unusable now, in the middle of enemy territory.

"Death does indeed follow our trail," paraphrased Morr the title of a famous book of fiction written by Nolessan¹⁴, *Death follows our trail*. "First, we left Master Dronin behind, with the power plague disease, then the six barbarians, the Baa Arch Priest, then Darlion and now the Ark explodes... wherever we pass, people die."

"I know, but now, we must suppress whatever anger or pain we feel and pursue our goal - it is too important. Come on!" decided Salldronin and they went down the stairs.

¹⁴ Nolessan is an eastern scientist and writer. He does research in the area of weather prediction and air currents. He also writes catastrophic scenario books and fiction stories.

The final story arc had begun.

CHAPTER 20: TEST OF PATIENCE

They went down the stairs, down to a small room where they found themselves blocked by a black wall. As they entered, four white ancient characters¹⁵ appeared on the black stone wall.

"It reads **HONIR**," explained Salldronin.

"That means *wait*, doesn't it?" guessed Niktian.

"Yes. It appears Voy Sophius was right once more. This is the test of patience. So let us make ourselves comfortable."

"It will slow us down, the waiting."

"It will, but we don't seem to have a choice."

* * *

Twelve hours later, the night was black and calm. All slept except for Morr who stood guard in case something happened. The word *honir* still illuminated the small room and Morr was looking out at the stars, wondering whether a battle was raging between Lori, The Wizard Dead, and the confused leadership of Loenia or whether there ruled the same silence as here.

During his meditations, he heard a sound similar to a bell's one and turned his head. New line of characters appeared on the wall. Morr was unable to read. He didn't know this alphabet.

"Salldronin, wake up! Something's happening!"

Salldronin woke up instantly. Niktian as well.

"**HONIR EST FINIAE**. Waiting is finished. Finally!" he translated.

A cone of white light appeared in a corner. An old man, with clothes identical to the ones worn by Voy Sophius, but with a different face, stood, or at least his image stood, inside the light cone. At the same time, the black wall blurred and disappeared into nowhere.

"I am Troy Sacculus, Haedralines' Research Safety Department Leader, member of the Haedralines' High Council, creator of the Sacculus game and Commander of an haedraline battalion. In your time, perhaps I don't have these titles anymore, perhaps I don't even exist.

¹⁵ From here on, *ancient characters* means *characters of the Haedralines' alphabet*

"You are entering the *COESTUS*, a storage place for our inventions, knowledge and archive records. To enter this *COESTUS*, you have to prove you are a Haedraline or someone close to the Haedralines by succeeding in four consecutive tests.

"You have just passed the Test of Patience. Good luck with the other tests."

CHAPTER 21: TEST OF WISDOM

"**LUCIO EVOKVIR** (Create light.)" cast Morr a spell and they continued on with a sphere of yellow light levitating beside them. They were stopped by another black wall several meters ahead, this time with multiple lines of white ancient characters. They had to proceed fast - four tests waited and if every one of them was as long as the first, Loenia could lose before they reached the *COESTUS*.

"The eternal witness of the movements around,
powerful, strong, and having overweight,
it gives us life, it can take it back,
and while it is far, we still see its light."

When Salldronin finished, others thought. "So Voy Sophius proved he spoke the truth for a tenth time I guess. This is a riddle and we know the answer."

"Shouldn't it rhyme?" wondered Niktian.

"I translated it from another language, boy. I didn't have time to make it rhyme. I'll read the second riddle now."

"The eternal enemy of the darkness time,
periodically renewing, then dying again,
its power fluctuates throughout the times,
feels strong with flowers, feels weak with snow."

"The answer of Voy fits here as well," remarked Roden, "so, Salldronin, say it aloud."

The called one took a deep breath and hallowed: "**AZ SOLEUS. AZ DIEUS** (The Sun. The day.)"

It was, of course, correct. The wall before them, as everybody expected it to, stopped existing. And they went on, thrilled and awaiting adventure. They were asleep several minutes ago, but nobody was sleepy now.

CHAPTER 22: TEST OF HARMONY

Before the next black wall, the projection of Troy Sacculus awaited them.

"While the Haedralines are a society of science, we also admire arts, symmetric or asymmetric. You will listen thrice to a melody. To continue your journey to the *COESTUS*, you will have to, after the third playback, sing the melody correctly. If you fail, you will be required to repass the Test of Patience. You have now 20 seconds to prepare."

"This will be difficult, only three times to listen and then immediately begin."

"But we can hardly afford to pass again the Patience Test. We need to succeed. I think the most qualified person is Ellion," decided Salldronin.

"I will do it," she acknowledged, "I sing often and I learn melodies fast. At least I will be of some use."

Troy was already in haste to make them start: "You should be ready now. You will hear the recording for the first time. Listen!"

Softly first, then gaining intensity, a beautiful and harmonic melody could be heard. Multiple instruments were playing this and the sound seemed to come from the walls themselves. Niktian had never ever heard such a song - not even from Ellion. This was even more beautiful than *We will be heroes!* He didn't try to remember the melody - he enjoyed it. When it ended, he wanted the second playback to take place as soon as possible.

"This is the end of the first playback. You now have 20 seconds to contemplate."

"Wow," breathed out Ellion, "this is an incredible song. It's complicated, true, but I think I can manage to sing it. It still rings in my mind - I will remember this song forever. When we're done with this, I need to find more compositions by the Haedralines."

"You should be ready now. You will hear the recording for the second time. Listen!"

Niktian did indeed listen. Hearing the recording for the second time, he noticed some things he did not realize for the first time. And those things only made it more beautiful - more enjoyable.

"This is the end of the second playback," the voice of Troy Sacculus was hard and reminded Niktian that this was not a game but a question of lives,

"you will hear the recording for the third time now. After that, you will have 30 seconds to contemplate and then you will have to start singing."

Niktian didn't listen to the third playback. He was way too nervous now for that. "Good luck, Ellion," he wished her and noticed her eyes were closed and she mouthed the melody as the walls played it.

"This is the end of the third playback. You have now 30 seconds to contemplate. Then, start singing. The words you choose for the song are not important. The microphones here will analyze the tone and melody of your voice and determine whether or not you have been successful."

When Ellion sang the song, Niktian knew almost immediately they would pass. Her version, her interpretation of it was even more touching than the walls' one. But the melody was precisely the same. And he was right.

"Congratulations, Haedraline. You have passed the Test of Harmony." Troy said while disappearing and along with him, the black wall blocking their path disappeared as well.

CHAPTER 23: TEST OF SKILL

The image of Troy Sacculus was sitting on a chair behind a stone table. A black leather pouch, put on the table, immediately reminded Niktian of the Sacculus game. That must be it. In this test, they were going to play the game against Troy.

"Congratulations," welcomed them the old man, "I am sure you know of Sacculus, the card game I have invented and named after myself. You will use your own, personal deck and play against the artificial intelligence of the *COESTUS* main computer, personified by me. You have to win at least 2 out of 3 matches. If you do, you will be allowed to continue to the *COESTUS*. If you do not, you will have to repass the Test of Patience. Please, sit."

Then, he remained silent. There was a choice to be made. Who would represent them in the game? Morr or Salldronin? Who was the better player?

"So what, Morr?" asked Salldronin, "who will play? To be honest, I'm not sure who the better player is and who has the better deck."

Morr thought. "Well, Troy didn't say anything about the restriction to one player, did he? We can mix our decks now and play both as one."

"We could, I guess —"

"Great. So, we'll use my deck, it's more powerful, but you'll give me some of your best cards you have. Then you will sit down on the chair, be the primary player and I'll look over your shoulder and I'll be helping you."

"So you believe I am the better player?"

"Yes," Morr admitted. "Now, I believe we should use your *Power Book Cache*, *Master Potion Maker*, *Truth Is a Lie*, *Shockwave*..."

During six minutes, the two wizards exchanged cards and built the deck. Afterwards, they sorted the cards according to their color, laid the cards out on the ground and watched the deck to think of any weaknesses it could have. They made a few changes until finally, they were satisfied and Salldronin sat on the chair, opposite Troy.

"We can begin now," he said and put his deck of cards on the table.

"We shall begin now," repeated Troy Sacculus and a shining deck of cards popped in existence on his side of the table. "My sensors detect that multiple persons are present. If any of them looks at my cards and then speaks, you will lose automatically." Then, six cards flew from the top of his deck in his hand

and he said: "**LETTA, AZ SACCULUS, LETTA ELONIR GLOBO IN AZ AIRE.** (Let, O'Sacculus, let go a cloud into the air.)"

Salldronin drew his starting hand and at the same time, a cloud appeared in mid-air and eight spheres emerged from the pouch.

The first match was short as Troy, inexplicably, made a crucial mistake at the beginning by playing a *Madman's Wager*, a card very risky to play. This card was, in the outside world, considered a fool's card as nobody experienced was using it. The luck was with Salldronin and he gained 17 spheres on the very first round. It was then an almost guaranteed victory.

Troy was an impassive player and he didn't say anything except mandatory phrases, when he had to say *CIRCULUS NOVUS* to begin another round or when he had to guess the color or strength of opponent's card.

The second match, on the contrary, took hours to complete.

~~~ **3 minutes into the match**

"**CIRCULUS NOVUS** (New round)" said Troy.

"I would suggest you to play *Shockwave* now, Salldronin," helped Morr.

"So would I. But... don't you think he can hear us?"

"Yes, he hears us but he would not use it to his advantage. We would have recognized that earlier. Probably even in the first match."

"So I play *Shockwave* now, Morr."

He put the card on the table.

"4," guessed Salldronin.

"Red," guessed Troy.

"Damn," cursed Morr, "*Shockwave* is red. It won't work. I reckon he perhaps had heard us..."

~~~ **8 minutes into the match**

"Use *The Terrors of the Depths* now, Salldronin. It's a green card, he won't be expecting it and you really need to draw cards..."

"Blue," said Troy. He guessed wrong.

~~~ **21 minutes into the match**

"You cannot play *Enchanted sword* now, Salldronin."

"Why not? It seems like an excellent choice. *Enchanted sword* doubles the power of my next card in addition to putting some spheres into my reserve. And I have only strong cards in my hand. I could use that double power."

"Yes. But the sword won't work. He will guess it. It's a power 4 card. If I were your opponent, I would guess that you are about to use a power 4 card. So, don't use it. He cannot afford to guess anything else but power 4, because if he didn't and you played such a card, he would almost surely lose."

"I understand you, Morr. I just hope he understands, too..."

**~~~ 45 minutes into the match**

"This is starting to get boring, Salldronin."

"It is. But we are already in the middle of a match. Another hour and we'll finish."

"It's not important if we finish - it's important if we win."

**~~~ 1 hour 23 minutes into the match**

"*Movement of icebergs*. That's a wonderful card I just drew, Morr."

Morr looked at it, then he looked at the spheres hovering in the cloud over the table. "Salldronin, can you see that?"

Salldronin was already smiling at the cloud. "I am. I reckon we could win this round."

"What?" Niktian suddenly woke up. "You are going to win?"

"Yes. Unless, of course, he guesses power 2 or color blue. And none of it is probable. We are very lucky that the game is in this state. He would never expect me to win now."

Salldronin played the card, saying aloud "One".

"Power 2," guessed Troy.

"How could he know?" Salldronin pushed himself from the table, angry. "This is impossible."

"He is the creator of Sacculus, my friend," reminded him Morr, "he probably knows about every card ever created. He could know of the possibility that you have the *Movement of icebergs*."

**~~~ 2 hours 10 minutes into the match**

"This round is the final one. No matter what cards we play, someone is going to win, with all the building cards already on the table," remarked Salldronin.

"You are right. However, if both cards are guessed, he is the one who is going to win."

"That's true. However, if my card is not guessed and his one is, I am the one who is going to win. The effect of the cards wouldn't matter then. The one sphere I gain for the color of my card will be sufficient."

"So you will play a trap?"

"I will play a trap."

*Traps were a special kind of cards. If a trap card was guessed, it worked normally. If it was not guessed, it didn't work at all. So, if you suspected your opponent to guess 'blue', you would play a blue trap and your card would work.*

Salldronin put the *Eye of Hurricane* trap card on the table, face-down.

"Red"

"Blue," replied Troy. Salldronin won. He knew it. *Eye of Hurricane* was a blue card so it was guessed and worked. Troy's card was a red non-trap card and so it failed. Salldronin won.

"Congratulations," Troy got up from the chair, "you have won two matches. We need not proceed to the third one. The *COESTUS* opens up in front of you. Please, handle all objects with care. Do not allow them to fall into wrong hands. I have faith in you. Do not fail me."

## CHAPTER 24: WINDOW OF GOD, ARCHIVED INVENTION NO. 521

The wall before them disappeared, but the next room was not small. In fact, it was enormous. It stretched far and wide, perhaps to the very borders of Az Sasmir. It was strange Lori had not discovered it yet. The room was not empty. It was full of tables, silver machines, computer terminals, dusty bookshelves and small models of towns, ships, towers and castles. It was the cultural legacy of an ancient race.

Over the centuries, Haedralines had stored every bit of their culture, including technology, architecture, history, knowledge, poetry and literature. This, if returned to the human race, could boost their advance and move them forward significantly. But was that a good thing to do? Didn't Haedralines have a good reason to keep their technology secret?

All of sudden, another cone of light sprang from a black stone on the floor before them and they all knew someone would appear to tell them more information. But, to their surprise, it was not Troy Sacculus, who had designed this place, but Voy Sophius, the Prime Calculator, the creator of the Prophecy. And he spoke.

"Welcome to the *COESTUS*, Loreos and his friends. I have gained unauthorized access, behind the back of our High Council, to this system and I've done so to be able to leave this message here and also to facilitate some tests. I have lowered the period of waiting, I have made the artificial intelligence playing Sacculus more stupid. I did it so that you wouldn't need to waste time. Now, I will tell you what to do. This will be your final task before you can return to your normal lives.

"Behind this image, you should see a black sphere. It's a prototype of a Magic Dispel Device. Its development ended just several weeks ago and it, once activated, will remove all magic from the surroundings. It is my belief that if you activate this device in the presence of the Wizard Dead, if he is indeed the cause of your troubles, the magic holding his body together will fail and he will be destroyed.

"We only have one prototype! You cannot afford to use it wrong. If you lose it, or if it doesn't work, you will have to find another way to defeat the Evil One. Many powerful weapons are at your disposal here - you can use them. I hope you'll find a way to destroy our common enemy.

"What is also important: Destroying the Evil One will not destroy his army. The table behind me is a copy of the Window of God, archived invention no. 523. This invention enables you to look over the entire land and see detailed images from everywhere only by pressing the buttons on the table. That's why it's named Window of God. It's as if you were sitting in the God's garden in heaven and looking at the earth below.

"I stored a macro in this invention. If you execute it and choose a target territory, a bomb, a powerful explosion, will be sent there and all shall be destroyed. Be careful to destroy only the enemy, not your forces. My information tell me his only minions will be dead animals and plants that he forced to rise from the earth, gave life using necromancy and gave some thinking and intelligence. It will not hurt your conscience to eliminate these abominations.

"I must leave now lest my unauthorized access will be detected by the High Council and I shall be brought before a trial. They do not share the same trust I have in you. They believe I should not make the entrance riddles too easy. Goodbye and good luck."

The image faded and Niktian stepped forward, taking hold of the black sphere. A single button on its smooth surface invited him to press. But he resisted.

"Be careful, Niktian," warned Salldronin and passed to the Window of God. Niktian followed. He saw the world map and as Salldronin pressed the buttons, the view concentrated upon the battlefields of Francia River. He saw the two armies in the no-man's land. They were fighting each other. Fireballs and arrows flid above the soldiers' heads. The colorful fumes, the Morpho Disruptus, did no longer linger at the surface, but they were high, in the clouds. Loenian soldiers were now not threatened by the poison.

"Darlion said some people, some Loenians, joined Lori's army. We will kill them as well?" asked Ellion.

"Yes," affirmed Salldronin mercilessly, "it is not something Voy Sophius had planned, but he forecalculated wrong many things - Niktian's name for example. Still, we must proceed. There is no alternative."

Then, without asking anybody, he put his finger upon the words *LETTA GRAVITIR AZ EXPLODUS*. Let fall the bomb.



And in that precise moment, still having the black sphere, the Magic Dispel Device, in his hand, Niktian disappeared in a flash of light. He was teleported, but neither Salldronin nor Morr knew where.

## INTERLUDE: WEAPON OF MASS DESTRUCTION

Black pebbles atop Az Sasmir moved and began to turn around and fall. Soon they would start a minor avalanche of black stones on this mountain. But that was unimportant because nobody actually stood on it.

A light appeared on the top. A red laser beam ran straight for the clouds and beyond. The beam's lifetime would be less than one second. And in this time, it would cause so much loss.

The beam reached blackness. It accelerated and located a machine on the orbit around the planet. The machine blinked. Its operations-status signaling light showed it was processing data. The red light beam only lasted for seconds, but it transmitted enormous amounts of information. And all that data, all that information, only meant one thing. *Letta gravitir az explodus*. Let fall the bomb.

Two seconds the machine was searching for error in the received data. It found none. It made the choice - trapdoor opened and a grey capsule accelerated from within, heading for the planet's surface.

It would take it one minute to pass through the atmosphere. It would activate its shields in order to survive the speedy flight and then it would touch the land, in the very center of Lori's army near Francia River.

It passed through the blue bubble like knife passes through butter. Furthermore, the bubble disintegrated and fell under the pressure of the bomb.

And it hit the ground.

A chain of explosions.

Fireballs on earth.

Dead monsters disappearing.

Clouds of dust polluting the air.

Scorched earth.

When the cloud of dust dissipated into air, the loenian army couldn't believe its eyes. Where half a minute ago stood their most powerful enemy was now nothing. The earth was black, without life. Not even corpses remained.

Loenian soldiers erupted into cheers.

## CHAPTER 25: LORI: FRIEND OR FOE?

"Finally I met you, Niktian the farmboy," whispered a creepy sound, the sort of sound that makes your mouth freeze and your back chill. Niktian reopened his eyes and saw a black chamber with virtually no furniture, enveloped in black stone. He was without doubt still in Az Sasmir, but in a different place. And his friends were not with him.

"My name is Lori, Niktian," continued the voice and Niktian noticed a skeleton man with a cloak on the far side of the room, walking slowly to him. *The moment's come. The time was right.* Now, the fate of the world would be decided. "My name is Lori and I am sure you've already heard of me. I am called, unjustly, the Evil One. Do you know me?"

Niktian opened his fist. The Magic Dispel Device was still there. He only had to press the button. It was that simple. He raised his other hand to do so...

"I would not do that, if I were you," warned him Lori who had already approached, "I know you value Salldronin. You believe he is a wise man. And he says often *Do not do things because somebody tells you to do them. Do things because you know why.* I believe those words are full of wisdom. So, tell me, Niktian, why should you kill me? What have I done wrong to you?"

Niktian tried not to listen to him. He was evil - Salldronin and Morr were sure of it. But was he? He had to - this Lori had killed thousands in Loenia, allied with the Baa and tried to dominate the world once before, during the Haedralines' era.

"Yes, I have done all that," admitted Lori, "but it was all done for a purpose and a reason. If you are patient and wise, I will explain it to you. I'll start with my attack on Loenia."

It couldn't hurt to let him explain it, thought Niktian, he was still in Niktian's power. What unnerved Niktian was the fact Lori knew what he was thinking about. He was a telepath - a mind-reader.

"That I am, Niktian," confirmed Lori, "as for Loenia, you should know I tried to communicate. I sent a messenger to queen Darlion and invited her to discuss our future. I had a plan and a vision and I wanted to make them a reality. Darlion could help me in that. The messenger returned - Darlion refused him. So I had no choice and I had to take over Loenia myself.

"My vision of the new world is similar to the one described in the Book of Baa. I wish to remove all evil in existence and then start anew. A better place. A

heaven. Heaven on earth. A place where injustice doesn't exist. A place where people share their holdings with other. A place where swords and shields are thrown aside and papers and pencils are brought in homes. A place of blossom of culture and civilization. A place without barbarism.

"This kind of place I want to create. Can anyone blame me for that? Would you consider evil something that is trying to stop wars and restore peace? Tell me, Niktian - would you do that?"

Niktian never thought of that. He always knew Lori was attempting to conquer the world. But for what purpose? Why did people want to take over the world? Surely not to destroy it - who would want to destroy the world? To make it better?

"I do not believe you," refused the vision Niktian, "you do not create this place, this heaven. The only actions you do provoke destruction and death. Is that a place where injustice doesn't exist?"

"Let me finish," talked Lori, now mildly, leaving his skeleton bare scary and creepy voice behind, "I see in your mind. I see you believe Loenia is a free land where everybody is allowed to make his choices. I do not believe so. I saw Loenia. Did you know how many assassins are there in the cities at night? How many robbers ruin people's lives every day? How many tax collectors make people starve by taking from them all their possessions? You were always only in royal apartments among aristocracy. You did not see the lives of peasants.

"You know how many hours per day must poor farmers work every day to satisfy the hunger of their lords? How many hours they spend crying over their children dying to infectious diseases? Your father is a farmer, too. You know how difficult it is to be poor. You truly believe our world is the best one? That all people are good-hearted? That all wish happy lives to everybody around?"

"No," replied Niktian, now engaged in the conversation. He tried to convince Lori he was doing the bad thing. He didn't know he couldn't succeed. He tried to win without a fight. "But you only make it worse. You kill. You don't help."

**Lori's mind was submerged in deep thoughts. His need was survival. He knew the Magic Dispel Device in Niktian's hand could destroy him instantly. At least Niktian thought so. Lori tried to remove the device from the farm**

boy's hand by magic, but it didn't work. The device had a protection against magic. So the only other alternative was to convince Niktian not to activate it.

It would not be easy, Lori knew, but he needed to succeed. Moreover, he needed to succeed before the other members of the Company arrived. "You do not understand what I am trying to accomplish, Niktian. I don't try to eliminate assassins, robbers, kidnappers, bad people in general. New bad people would be born. I try to remake the human race; I try to reshape the world. Darlion didn't want to discuss. So I reshape the world myself, without help. *The end justifies the means*, Niktian. People would never agree with me. But I am right - and the world after the reshape will be much better."

Niktian considered it. Lori said he was transforming the world. He said the steps he had taken and was taking, like the conquest of Loenia, were inevitably leading to this new, better world. New thoughts appeared in Niktian's mind. The discussion opened his eyes. "How will you better the world once you conquer it?"

"For one, it is not a conquest, Niktian. It's a necessary step. And once the world is made aware of my existence and my power and I establish links to every monarch and lord, I will distribute a cure - a virus you could call it - that penetrates in a body by injection in large quantity and infects its central and circulatory system.

"The infected person, in the period of 2 days, changes personality. This cure, this virus, alters its brain in such a way that it retains its memories and intelligence, but stops having any thoughts of committing evil. People will not know what murder is. Or what is robbery. Instead, the virus will fill their minds with thoughts of helping people. That will be heaven on earth.

"People say this is impossible because there will always be someone who commits evil. My virus prevents it. Committing evil will be simply no longer possible."

That sounded like a good plan, admitted Niktian. If Salldronin was the one to propose this, he would agree. He always wanted people to be nice to each other and Lori could make it happen. "So why did Darlion reject it?"

**Lori was having success. His speech interested the boy. Furthermore, he was using telepathic abilities to send his own thoughts to Niktian.**

**Subconsciously, he was convincing the farmboy to think it was a good idea. It all contributed to the way Niktian felt about this. Lori enjoyed it. Enjoying was one of the few emotions he still retained after the death of his mortal body.**

**"What do you think, Niktian? That Darlion is some all-good queen who wants all people to be nice? She is a queen and a queen extremely engaged in politics at that. Her job consists of resolving disputes. If my vision were to come true, conflicts would no longer exist as all people would agree with each other. Politics would become unnecessary as everybody would have what he wanted. She would be no longer needed and she would lose her power. I believe that is the reason why she rejected me."**

It made sense. Just like Salldronin's reasoning always made sense. Lori's vision sounded very nice to Niktian. A world with all people good and all people nice and no arguments - no disputes. And Lori also had a very realistic plan to execute it. He wasn't such a bad man after all.

"But you kill people now only to be able to "heal" them later. Couldn't you simply infect them all at once? Without war? Without deaths?"

"No, Niktian. The amount of the virus that has to be injected in every human's body fills about three shots. They cannot breath it through air or eat it in meal. It has to be put directly in their circulatory system. Also, you should know I have tried. I took the spheres of Sacculus O'Great. These spheres are an invention of the Haedralines and they contain lots of energy. I hoped I could use this energy to spread my virus - my cure through air. But even though the energy in the spheres is hundred times larger than the sum of power of all magicians in the world, it doesn't help. I haven't devised a spell that would do it."

**A man entered the hall. It was a short man with a deep voice. He was one of Lori's most faithful servants. A quelshen was inside the body, controlling it. This quelshen was a friend and servant of Lori and the host had no power.**

**"Niktian. This is Argon. He's a quelshen and his subordinate leads the barbarian invasion in the Eastern desert."**

**"So you are behind this? Is that also one of your ways to get access to lords to spread your virus?" said Niktian, not very surprised.**

**"Yes. Unfortunately, that invasion didn't go as planned. The quelshen who is a subordinate of Argon was unable to conquer the Northern Pass without fight. Now, we have to kill thousands of eastern soldiers to gain access to No-Kept and so, to Lord Nomarren."**

**Lori turned around to Argon. He knew the man brought news and he knew what news he brought. Lori was a telepath. He knew Argon was about to say that the barbarian armies were losing to Lord Nomarren's forces and were being pushed back to the borders of the Ignuti's land. "Explain this failure, Argon."**

Argon bowed and deeply, strongly answered his master's demand: "The barbarians no longer accept my subordinate's authority. They do not think he's worth of leading them. They want to surrender to Lord Nomarren and go back voluntarily."

Lori eyed him, then Niktian, pensively. "You see, Niktian. During that war, people are dying. You know it and you hate it. I told you it is inevitable and you believe me. But there is a way we can realize my plan without wars. You and your Company have powerful allies. Especially Morr and Salldronin. Lords fear me, but not them. They and you could convince them of my plan."

Niktian slowly lowered the hand with Magic Dispel Device. Lori succeeded in convincing him. There was no evil in his face, even though he looked, as a skeleton, horrible. His plan was not evil either. Lori was a good man, it seemed. "We will talk about it," he said aloud, even though he knew Lori could read his mind, "if Salldronin and Morr agree, that is."

**In that moment, one of the walls burst open as somebody behind it cried *Letta*. Ellion stepped inside the hall. It could not come at a worse moment. An intelligent, not-naive person with emotional binds to Niktian. She could convince the boy that Lori was an enemy after all. This could not happen. However, by killing her, Lori would alienate Niktian. He didn't know what to do.**

**"Niktian! Do not listen to him," cried Ellion, "no matter what he says. It's all lies. His only wish is to conquer the world and rule it himself. Use the —"**

**"Incendio evokvir (Create fire.)" shouted Lori and a beam of fire stroke from his hand and hit Ellion's personal magical shield created by Morr. It passed through the bubble shield easily, shattering it. Lori had the power of Sacculus O'Great spheres at his side. The fire beam tore Ellion's heart out of her body. She fell to the floor and life was leaving her. She was being incinerated.**

**Lori turned back at Niktian. It was necessary to explain this fast, or else Niktian would believe her, "Niktian, she knows nothing of our discussion. You feel and you know that I am right. That my vision of the world is good. I am not the Evil One —"**

Niktian did no longer listen. Lori killed Ellion. Killed Ellion. Ellion. He may have had good plans and good ideas and good inventions, but he shouldn't have done that. Wise people do not do spontaneous decisions, Salldronin had taught him. He should talk to Ellion and convince her, too, not kill her. If he had killed her, than it was because he feared that in discussion, he would surely lose. That must have meant that Niktian's view at the beginning was right and he was manipulated by Lori all the time.

Then, the part of his mind that told him what to do before the Power Book Cache and that showed him the visions of the future became active.

*He saw Lori's armies burning villages, destroying castles. He saw red sky and black dust. That was no heaven on earth. It was slaughter and destruction. Thousands of human corpses lied on battlefields. Only strange monsters walked on the streets of once proud towns.*

There was no decision to be made. Lori was bad. Niktian was sure of it.

He pressed the button and at the same time, Morr, who appeared behind dead corpse of Ellion, sent a beam of red light at Argon.

The Magic Dispel Device changed color to white and then a flash of light blinded Niktian temporarily. Niktian felt headache as the magenergy stored inside his own *coestus magae* disappeared. When he regained his vision, he saw Lori's white bones on the floor and his black cloak a few feet behind. The machine worked - The Wizard Dead was no more. The Niktian looked at Ellion and she was still there and still dead. Morr, Salldronin and Roden were behind her.



On the opposite side of the room, the body of Argon, now dead servant of the Wizard Dead, lied limp. The battle was fought over.

The battle was fought over and the Company won. Lori was defeated. Work remained for sure - Sacculus O'Great spheres had to be returned on the Never-ending Mountain, peace had to be agreed on with the barbarians and the Baa had to be calmed down. But for now, the battle was over.

The battle was over, but Ellion died. It was a terrible cost. It could have been worse, but it shouldn't have been this bad. But it was a necessary death. Without Ellion, Niktian would be in Lori's power and he would have given him the Device as a proof of good will. Then, nothing could defeat him. Niktian knew now he had been manipulated.

He ran over to Ellion, even though he knew he couldn't help her. Roden bent over him and patted him on his shoulders.

*"We were all sad at that moment. We all liked Ellion. She was such a delightful, intelligent, beautiful and kind person. And at the same time, we defeated the Wizard Dead and annihilated his army. Happiness and relief mixed with grimness and remorse. I don't like to recall this particular moment. But a war was going on and in war, they say, there are casualties."*

*-- Salldronin's Memoirs*

## **EPILOGUE: THE WORLD IS ABOUT TO CHANGE**

The world is about to change.

The world is about to change and I know it. I am the Never-ending Mountain and I have been the silent sentinel of this land ever since its creation. I have seen waves higher than me. I have seen fire in the sky. I have seen mountains fall and mountains rise, but I was still the same.

I have seen the creation of primitive creatures. I have seen their evolution and upgrading. I have seen the birth of first humans on this world. I have seen the buildings of mankind in their early beginnings.

I have seen the arrival of the Haedralines and I have seen the terraforming they initiated. I have seen their war and I have seen the spheres they placed around me. I have seen their departure for war and the legacy they left behind. I have seen the Sunken City and the COESTUS. I have seen the Evil One and Az Sasmir. I have seen the Great Library and the Quel'shen.

I have seen it all, but never, never in my existence I have seen what I am about to see. Believe me, because I have never been wrong. I have seen much, more than any of you will ever see, yet I have never seen the coming change.

The defeat of the Wizard Dead was a subtle change, without meaning. Some people died - that happens all the time. New will be born. But what's about to happen will shake the very grounds of my planet.

The Baa's hunger for power will bring them before a situation they cannot control. It will be bad and the world will never be the same then. The change coming will be cataclysmic. Perhaps not even I, the giant mountain, the Never-ending Mountain, will survive the change.

I hope the Haedralines will return to set things right anew, but my hope is a fool's one. They will not come.

I will be here when the change comes as a silent sentinel of the land. As is my duty. But I am willing to die and I will await the future. I am not afraid.

The world is about to change and I will be ready.

Will you?

## HAEDRALINES' LANGUAGE VOCABULARY

**Letta** to let, to move, to push, to pull, to open *when you employ the word letta, you want to express a force of push or pull, usually push; the word is quite abstract, yet it is the most often employed word of the language*

**Accir** to pull, to call

**Aether** emptiness

**Aire** air

**Ante** before, against, contra

**Aquus** water

**Archum** ark

**Attractae** attracting, attractive, that pulls

**Az** article definite

**Azn** article definite, plural form **Bibliotheca** library

**Circulus** a circle

**Coesta** tank, bottle, storage

**Coestae** stored

**Coestus** storage

**Collir** close (as in *closed door*)

**Contegus** a shield

**Contegir** to shield

**De in** (*also dein*) about, around

**De of** (*preposition of genitive case*)

**Derrivat** speed, velocity, rate of change

**Devisionir** to become invisible

**Dieus** a day

**Disruptir** to decompose

**Domus** house, home, structure, building

**Eko** me, I

**Elonir** to go, to move, to get away from, to create *often employed together with letta as letta elonir meaning to create*

**Est** is

**Et** and

**Evokvir** to create, to invoke, to evoke (used in conjunction with elemental forces)

**Explodus** a bomb

**Feer** fear, terror, horror

**Finir** to end

**Glacir** to freeze

**Glacius** ice

**Globo** a cloud

**Gravitir** to fall (most often by the cause of gravity)

**Haen** we

**Ignutus** unknown, Barbarian

**In** in

**Incendius** fire

**Intere** the inside, the interior  
**Intrir** to enter, to gain access to  
**Lucius** light  
**Machinum** a machine, a tool  
**Magae** magic (adjective)  
**Majorus** great, big, major, high  
**Mobillat** distance  
**Morphus** shape  
**Mutatir** to change  
**Non** no, not  
**Novus** new  
**Parolir** to speak  
**Plaza** a place, a location  
**Portas** door  
**Potentius** power, force, energy  
**Profondus** depth  
**Pugnir** to fight, to war  
**Reisir** to raise  
**Relevva** to reveal  
**Sacculus** a pouch  
**Solae** solar  
**Soleus** the Sun  
**Sonorus** sound  
**Sophia** science, philosophy  
**Sophius** a scientist  
**Sperir** to hope, to wish  
**Spherus** a sphere, a ball  
**Sum** am (*used as Ego sum meaning I am*)  
**Teca** a friend  
**Temporus** time  
**Teo** you  
**Tis** sign of multiplication  
**Tius** a staff  
**Tot** "that which is"  
**Toxicus** poison  
**Vallus** a wall  
**Vindmovus** wind  
**Visonir** to become visible

## REGISTER

- **Aekroy Lucius** *was the president of the High Council of the Haedralines.*
- **Ancients** (*see Haedralines*)
- **Ariona River** *is a stream changing into a wide river that flows through the Kingdom and ends near the Isle of Storms.*

- **Atunaco, Castle** is a keep on the **Isle of Storms**, near which the Water-Folk live
- **Az Sasmir** is a hollow mountain transformed into a fortress by the evil force.
- **Baa** is a path of life. Followers of Baa try to spread their faith in the Spirit, even by force. The Spirit of Baa promises afterlife to those who helped its cause. At the beginning of the story, the Baa is a not-too-well known cult confined to the south-west of the Kingdom.
- **COESTUS** is a cavern inside Az Sasmir. Inside this cavern lies the storage of Haedralines' inventions and history. It is guarded by four puzzles.
- **Demetrius** is an Arch Priest of Baa whom Niktian met on his way to Morransfort.
- **Demons** a race of red beings with enormous desire to proliferate, currently at war with the Haedralines.
- **Dronin** is an extremely old wizard, former mentor of Salldronin, who then adopted his name, he is suffering from the power plague.
- **Ellion** is the Ranger Sharp of the Prophecy. She joins forces with Niktian in No-Vanyalo.
- **Erik, Lord** is the ruler of Morransfort, the city that stands guard in the Pass between the Eastern Desert and the core of the Kingdom.
- **Ferocious, The** is a group or a clan of wizards, very powerful, who believe in the superior standing of man and wizard over the nature and who believe the world can be understood if we base on scientific principles.
- **Gerron** is the horse of Niktian. He grew up on Quarran's farm.
- **Haedralines**, also called the Ancients, are an old human race, technologically advanced, currently at war with the Demons.
- **Ignuti** is a nation of barbarians who live on the north side of the Northern Pass.
- **Loreos (2)** was a king whose origin is from the East.
- **Loreos** is the Prophecy's name for Niktian. See Niktian.
- **Lori** is the chief antagonist of the story. He tries to conquer the world.
- **Lucispathus** is the ancients' language word for Lightsword and is the ranger Ellion's primary weapon.
- **Morr** (of Dol'Moren) is a young wizard who knows much of Sacculus, gods and learns even more during the journey. He's called The Wizard Young by the Prophecy.
- **Never-ending mountain** is one of the highest mountains of the west. On its top is the Sacculus O'Great.
- **Niktian** (also called Loreos) is the main protagonist of the story. He's a young boy with magical powers and foreseeing abilities. He's called The Boy Farseer and Loreos by the Prophecy.
- **Nobibliotheca majora** is the Haedralines' language name for the Great Library of No-Vanyalo, the peak and pinnacle of human culture and technology.
- **Noknurla Lake** is one of the parts of natural border between the territories of Ignuti and the eastern lands.
- **Nomarren, Lord** is the controller of the Gate and the Northern Pass and also supreme chief of the Eastern Desert. He lives in **No-Kept**, a capital city inside the Desert.

- **No-Vanyalo** is a postmodern city in the Eastern Desert, pinnacle of human culture and technology. It is here where the Great Library is located.
- **Power plague** is an uncommon disease among the magicians. The fluctuation of magenergy in coestus magae of the magician often causes disruption of this organ when the magician becomes old and usually becomes fatal.
- **Quarran** is a farmer, on whose farm Niktian with his family grew up.
- **Quelshen healing device** is a small fist-sized magic-based machine capable of alleviating pain, boosting immune system and restoring cells. The quelshen use it to heal.
- **Quelshen** is a race of beings several inches long. They invade bodies of other creatures, like those of Men and then control them. For example, a Quel'shen is swallowed by a man and the man falls unconscious. When he wakes, he can no longer control his movements. Instead, the Quel'shen with his brain does everything the man could. Also, Quel'shen have healing powers and "blending" with a Quel'shen often heals a man of all diseases, including the fatal power plague (see power plague)
- **Rockham** is a province to the North of the Kingdom.
- **Rockham, Lurc** is the leader of the Rockham province.
- **Sacculus O'Great** is a system of thirty-nine spheres circling around the top of Never-ending Mountain. It is claimed that once these are stolen, the worlds shall suffer a dark age.
- **Sacculus, The Game** is a collectible strategy card game played by the magicians. The gameplay is based on guessing the opponent's next moves and choosing the correct cards to play.
- **Salldronin** (also called Sall) is an old wizard who is part of the Company, the Prophecy refers to him as The Wizard Old.
- **Stormwave, Lord** is the king and sovereign leader of the Kingdom, he resides in Castle Stormwave.
- **Story of Hidden King** is a fairy tale told in the Kingdom. It tells of a man who was born as a poor farmboy, but later turned out to be heir to the old king and a hero, when he slain a dragon.
- **Sunken City** is an underwater city of the Haedralines, a capital of their civilization on this world. It is unknown what happened to it when they left for war.
- **Troy Sacculus** was the Haedralines' Research Safety Department Leader and the author of the wizards' game of Sacculus. It is he who made the COESTUS, the storage of ancient weapons and inventions.
- **Voy Sophius** was the Prime Calculator of the Haedralines and it is he who made the Prophecy. He also sat in the High Council of the Haedralines.
- **Warwanna** is the High Priest of the Water-God. Her betrothed is Warwick.
- **Warwick** is a spy of the Water-Folk. His betrothed is Warwanna.
- **Whirlwell** is a pool or pond of water, always perfect circle, where water flows to the middle. It is somehow capable of transporting material across great distances.
- **Wizard Dead** (see Lori)

## CREDITS

As you perhaps noticed, I did not write this book using only my imagination and free sources. Fantasy theme was not invented by me and many ideas here seen can also be seen elsewhere. I'd like, therefore, to cite some of the excellent books and other sources that gave me some ideas in my book. Some would call this *stealing*, some *plagiarism*, some *modern art* and some *a necessity*. The fact is, using other people's ideas is extremely common and no fantasy writer has written a book solely based on his own thoughts. In addition, this is a world-centered instead of plot-centered or even character-centered book so, for me, *plagiarism* is perfectly acceptable.

The first credited is **Stargate SG-1** for the concept of Goa'uld and Tok'ra parasites, here represented as the quelshen. The quelshen do not have a significant role in this story, but they will have it in the sequels if they come. **Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Haven** and **Stargate SG-1: The Ori Arc** for the concept of Baa religion that forms one of the major antagonists. **The Inheritance Cycle**, **The Belgariad** and **The Lord of the Rings** for definitions of fantasy as I used it. And **Pokémon anime series** for the song *We will be heroes* described in one chapter.

And, most credits go to the Czech Skaut Junak Organization for designing the card game Sacculus and giving me the idea of writing a wizards' story, and also for educating me and leading me through my life. I will be forever in its debt.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To **Junák**, of course, for reasons cited above and for introducing me to the way of life I prefer.

To **Gymnázium Pierra de Coubertina Tábor**, the grammar school I attend. Because the teachers, people and environment I met there helped me a lot.

To **Kevin Higgins**, from Ireland, for helping me very much with *Sacculus: The Wargame*; thanks to him, this will be my first game that does not have disgusting graphics.

To **Hanka**, because she demonstrated interest in the book, and because, despite being unable of high-quality English reading, she tried to read and she read. Also, she found several errors to be corrected and suggested several ideas for the story.

To **Jana** for reasons identical to the ones I used to acknowledge Hanka. The difference probably is that Jana is able of high-quality English reading and is therefore able to fully understand the story.

To **Mrs. Tricatnikova**, my English teacher, for allowing me to write my book during her lessons of English (for one year, at least) and therefore giving me the time I needed.

And of course, to **all readers** of this book. I look forward to have the sequels of this book read by you! Thank you again for reading.

*"To show the way to others, first you have to shine yourself."*



## Contents

|                                                                                   |     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Prelude: The Theft Of Sacculus O'Great .....                                      | 6   |
| Chapter 1: The Interruption .....                                                 | 7   |
| Chapter 2: Deep Talk and Shallow River .....                                      | 13  |
| Chapter 3: A Vision.....                                                          | 17  |
| Interlude: The Ancient Prophecy .....                                             | 21  |
| Chapter 4: A New Reality .....                                                    | 24  |
| Chapter 5: A Doom's Day Cult.....                                                 | 30  |
| Interlude: The Book of Baa .....                                                  | 34  |
| Chapter 6: Encounter .....                                                        | 36  |
| Chapter 7: Morransfort of the Pass .....                                          | 42  |
| Chapter 8: Beautiful Magic .....                                                  | 47  |
| Chapter 9: Warm Welcome .....                                                     | 52  |
| Interlude: The Wizard Dead .....                                                  | 55  |
| Chapter 10: Weakness .....                                                        | 57  |
| Chapter 11: No-Vanyalo.....                                                       | 61  |
| Chapter 12: Computer Core.....                                                    | 68  |
| Chapter 13: Voy Sophius of the Haedralines .....                                  | 71  |
| Chapter 14: We will be Heroes! .....                                              | 78  |
| Interlude: The Depart of the Haedralines.....                                     | 80  |
| Chapter 15: Whirlwell .....                                                       | 82  |
| Chapter 16: The Purge .....                                                       | 84  |
| Chapter 17: Battleground .....                                                    | 91  |
| Chapter 18: And the Sunlight will Protect us from the Terrors of the Depths ..... | 96  |
| Chapter 19: Death Follows our Trail .....                                         | 99  |
| Chapter 20: Test of Patience.....                                                 | 102 |
| Chapter 21: Test of Wisdom .....                                                  | 104 |
| Chapter 22: Test of Harmony.....                                                  | 105 |
| Chapter 23: Test of Skill .....                                                   | 107 |
| Chapter 24: Window of God, Archived Invention no. 521 .....                       | 111 |
| Interlude: Weapon of Mass Destruction .....                                       | 114 |
| Chapter 25: Lori: Friend or Foe? .....                                            | 115 |
| Epilogue: The world is about to change .....                                      | 122 |
| HAEDRALINES' LANGUAGE VOCABULARY .....                                            | 124 |
| REGISTER .....                                                                    | 125 |
| CREDITS .....                                                                     | 128 |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....                                                            | 128 |