

# THE TRAGEDY OF ROHET

Stephen Sonneveld

*Play/***Books**

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Illo. 1

## THE RED DEATH

The winged chimps scavenge the campsite near the mouth of the cave, recklessly tossing aside broken mining axes, animal pelts, weapons and whatever else in search of grubs and scraps.

Without warning, a lizard the size of a man charges from the cave and clamps a jaw of jagged fangs into the neck of a chimp! It releases its prey, confused by the screeches from the anxious flock, fluttering around and beating their puffed out chests. The injured ape-ling attempts to take to the air, but the Lizard's small arms and sharp claws snag it from flight and quickly back to earth, where the percussive thud from the cracking chimp's skull echoes off the rocky terrain. Seeing their companion dead, the flock takes to the sky in hasty retreat.

Torchlight swims over the cave walls, heralding the emergence of the barbarian Rohet from the cavernous maw. His eyes wince in the stinging wash of sunlight, as his sweat and grime covered hulking form pushes a mining cart of small silver chips to rest.

Lizard drags the dead monkey to Rohet and places it at his feet. Rohet pats Lizard on the head.

The campfire casts strange shadows across the scarred face and gullet of Rohet. The chimp's torso turns on the spit over the flame, while Lizard slumbers before a pile of gnawed-at limb bones.

Rohet studies a map. The actual mountain range stabbing the sky from the horizon mirrors the pictures on the parchment. Little huts are drawn in the mountain valley, though the real world huts and valley are far from Rohet's campsite view.

He rolls up the map, overdue to eat, but has a fitful time shaving off a piece of chimp meat with a dull sword blade.

A charred woman's body rests atop an extinguished pyre. Next to it, in this small stage of land leading to the village, an old witch is confined to the stocks. She makes eye contact with Rohet as he and Lizard head toward town. The spectacle of a witch brings no fear to Rohet, nor does the sight of a barbarian and his raptor pet give the shackled priestess pause.

Lined along a strip of mud are houses made of wood and earth. Some of the villagers sell pelts, others spin wool. The ale maker boils his hops.

Rohet brings his sack of silver chips to the Money Lender. The Lender examines one of the strange chips, unsure what to make of it. He places three stones on one plate of his scale, and a single silver chip on the other plate. Unseen forces draw the scale's meter to favor the chip. The Money Lender is perplexed by this anomaly. He puts a fourth stone on the opposite plate, but again the single silver chip registers heavier.

As the Lender fusses, Rohet scans the village. A man shoves a brush into the guts of a slain beast and uses the animal's blood to paint a red

diamond above the doorway to his home. It appears most of the doorways bear the same sigil.

Rohet's observation of this ritual is interrupted by the flustered Money Lender. His scale must be broken, or the silver must be cursed; either way, the Lender hands the chip back to Rohet and sends the barbarian on his way.

The villagers are apprehensive toward the muscular Rohet and his cold-blooded companion. A child cautiously approaches. Lizard clicks from his throat - but stops when Rohet reprimands him with a swat to the head. Rohet motions for the child to approach, and Lizard begrudgingly allows himself to be petted.

Rohet walks toward the house/shop of the Smith to sharpen his blade. He was not prepared for her to be so beguiling, and strong. The moment Rohet sees her, he becomes just another thing she melted. Now, the Smith is no stranger to receiving these kinds of looks... yet finds herself bemused on this occasion.

By all appearances, Rohet is a brute. It isn't just anyone who strolls down the mud with a wingless dragon at his side - even if that dragon is currently on its back enjoying the village children rubbing his belly.

There is a quality to Rohet the Smith is drawn to; the same blood rush of warmth she had when once compelled to help a bird with a broken wing.

Lizard perks up and all tranquility subsides. The sky blackens, and

hail pebbles pelt the village. The uncommon storm brings madness.

Merchants abandon their wares; parents neglect their children, all to rush behind closed doors.

The hail abates as quickly as it came. Rohet is confused, but Smith grabs him by the arm and drags him and his sack of silver chips into her shop. Lizard caws and Rohet whistles for him. The dragon enters the shop and Smith closes the door.

An otherworldly hum reverberates throughout the village. People cower in the corners of the homes. Families weep together.

Only the witch, confined to her stocks, is left in the elements to face the hell of nature, and she whispers it by name.

WITCH: Red. Deathhhh.

A colossal spectre takes form over the horizon: a red mist in the shape of skull. Not an entirely human skull, but something similar enough. The mist rolls from doorway to doorway, halted by, perhaps fearing the red diamond emblem over each frame... until it finds a home with no such marking.

The screams from inside the home are cut so short it could only mean the sounds and the lives simply ended without the peace of final breath; they simply ceased to be. The abruptness chills Rohet and Smith.

Despite this, Rohet spies through the uneven planks of the door and sees the witch. Without thought, he grabs a battle axe from the weapons rack and races out the door! Lizard scrambles after his master!

Smith watches from her doorway in horror. As the Red Death passes her



shop, she hears an unnatural crackle within her home. Light emanates from the silver chips. Small lightning bolts jump from chip to chip until they make a final leap into the dirt floor. The charges set the cloth sack on fire and Smith quickly snuffs it with a bear skin.

Rohet charges toward the witch, and a single swipe of his axe decimates the stocks! Rohet throws the old witch over his shoulder and runs back toward the mud path –

– where Lizard is challenging Red Death! Lizard barks and threatens with those sharp claws, but falls dead the moment the mist passes around him.

Rohet is stunned, but cannot voice his agony – an old battle wound saw to that. But today is a new battle, and even with an old woman slung over his shoulder, Rohet defiantly raises his axe toward the apparition.

The Red Death bellows a torrential shriek unheard before in nature. It eyes Rohet as much as such a thing can, before it retreats to the dark heavens.

Rohet and the village are pelted by another round of hail. Humbled, Rohet drops the axe and rushes the witch inside Smith's shop. They place her on the bed. Smith offers her water and the grateful old woman slowly drinks. Smith attempts to feel the witch's forehead for fever, but the patient swats her away.

Instead, the elderly witch touches Rohet's arm. He looks at her, dumbfounded. She undoes her tunic to reveal the reason they were spared. Branded upon the old woman's chest is a red diamond sigil. She smirks.

Rohet looks to equally dumbfounded Smith, and the three share a relieved breath at the witch's mischievous secret.

As soon as the storm passes, Rohet emerges from the shop, only to be greeted by the entire village, there to proclaim him king! But he has not the concern for that. Not when his friend lie dead in the street. He kneels over Lizard's body and it is times such as these he wishes he could voice his pain.

Lizard, laid out on the workshop table, unmoving in the disquieting stillness of death.

Rohet stands beside the table, the downward pull of grief clawing at his shoulders, eyelids and lips.

Smith sits at the sharpening wheel, glancing Rohet's dull sword against it until sparks spit. She shakes her head at the poor make and quality of the blade. The swordsmith could not even be bothered to balance it properly. Nevertheless, she blows off the dust of old battles and hands the barbarian his shining silver blade.

Rohet gently strokes the head and neck of Lizard, a final time. He holds the beast's impressive claws, pressing his thumb into the scarred mitt.

By nightfall, Rohet returns to Smith's living quarters carrying

patches of Lizard's scaly skin. He offers it to Smith with wide eyes, holding up his sword to imply he wants Lizard's flesh honored into his weaponry. Smith offers a gentle smile. She kisses her fingers and places those fingers on the Lizard's skin in affectionate tribute.

However, Smith is not so kind to Rohet's pitiful blade. A glint of devious pleasure in her eyes, Smith wraps her hands in leather and, much to Rohet's shock, bends his blade into a useless curl before, rather cavalier, tossing the scrap aside.

Determined, Smith walks to the forging flame, grabs a handful of Rohet's silver chips and tosses them into the melting pot.

The silver melts and the old witch nods.

Rohet leads the Witch and Smith to his abandoned campsite. He brushes away specifically placed moss from the mountainside, revealing a bolder blocking the mining cave entrance.

He places his hands against the giant rock, measuring his breath in preparation to roll the boulder away. He makes eye contact with Smith, however, and pauses, smiling. Rohet steps back, offering the challenge to Smith, who wryly raises an eyebrow, game to accept.

Smith digs her toes into the pebbled dirt and presses against the stone, exerting all that she has, leaving sweat no choice but to squeeze from her arms and brow. Lightheaded, Smith stops to gather lost breath.

Rohet playfully offers to help push and is swatted away. Rohet

smiles, and, despite the aggressive determination toward the task at hand, Smith smiles in return.

Reinvigorated, Smith mashes her fingertips into the rock and pushes forward. Voiceless Rohet claps steady encouragement.

Smith's toes scrape backwards on the landscape. Undeterred, she kicks away the momentum and stamps a new foothold. To the Witch's delight, the boulder rocks, then rolls, exposing the cave entrance.

Smith is exhausted, but satisfied, and falls into Rohet when he, ever smiling, embraces her in celebration. She returns the embrace, but there is a push and pull in their eye contact, the magnet force of attraction.

The Witch strikes a flint and lights the mining cart's torch, ensuring the magnets do not lock this day. Business is at hand.

Rohet leads the expedition into a section of the cave spared from the gnaw of mining picks and chisels. Instead, crude paintings adorn water-smoothed stone.

Smith's intrigue is quickly scuttled when the elder Witch falls breathlessly into her arms, panting in disbelief at the discovery. A smile takes root on the Witch's face, and her tears of joy refuse to stay captive.

WITCH: The story of my faith, dear children.

Upon the wall, a painting: a red diamond is balanced on a horizon, jagged mountains in the distance. Another portion depicts small human figures worshipping the Red Death, misting its ghostly form from the red diamond.

Another portion has more vibrant paint, with less of it chipped away. It shows two human figures, both holding a single ball of fire, their human bodies larger than the red-skulled ghost.

A final painting shows the Red Death killing the fire bearers.

Rohet is distracted by the first painting. Smith examines the wall, unable to discern his trouble. He reaches into the mining cart and removes his rolled up parchment. He holds his map to the painting... and discovers the jagged, stabbing mountains match.

The Witch is agog at the implication.

Smith cuts her own finger until a red droplet of blood seeps out. Using the cave painting as a reference, she draws a red diamond on Rohet's map, a destination drawn in blood.

Smith hews a track into the stone with unparalleled craftsmanship. Carving leaves no room for err, yet the grueling process is a seeming war of attrition between the stone and the mason's muscles and eyes. She is driven, though. This template will resemble no other sword she has forged, much as the same that Rohet, to her, resembles no other man.

The Witch sits in a corner of the workshop, humming sad songs while sewing Lizard's jutting knuckle and claw over a sword hilt.

Rohet drops more of his silver chips into the molten sludge of the melting pot. His mind is plagued by the cave paintings. Knowledge of fire made man independent from the demon. Perhaps command of this fire can

finally slay it.

Rohet has his eyes closed. He holds out his hand. He feels the scaled texture of Lizard. He opens his eyes and sees the dragon's claw in the hilt of the silver sword. Rohet cannot believe the extraordinary craft. He looks to Smith. She smiles, but her smile fades upon noticing a tear running down Rohet's cheek. Smith embraces the mass of man. They nuzzle, trying to pull apart, but it is so much easier to kiss the one you love.

Rohet and Smith steal glances and smiles from one another as they walk down the village path. Children sword fighting with sticks excitedly race to Rohet, their small hands tugging his muscular arms until his entire bulky frame is drawn into their make believe war. He brandishes the Dragon Claw sword with an unfamiliar flourish, and soon the boys and girls are mimicking his theatrical thrusts and parries.

Smith breaks away to inspect the freshly-uprooted treasure on the Farmer's vegetable stand, unaware the bucolic scene is being watched by bleary eyes. Most of the patrons seated at the tree stump tables in the ale maker's yard drink their mead from wooden cups in unobtrusive pleasantries. The long-bearded giant sitting alone has no use for such peace, and belches up a loud cloud of barley -

GLABBARD: Spirit slayer!

Winged monkeys scatter from the trees, and spiders stop on their line. The children drop their play swords and run to hide behind one of the many piles of the ale maker's barrels.

Smith stands beside Rohet, ready to face the mountainous threat. Yet, though Glabbard is as tall as man and a half, his ever-widening grin and slow shuffle toward Rohet bespeak of a fellow in need of a friend, not a foe. Rohet sheaths Dragon Claw, but his tense shoulders remain taught.

GLABBARD: I am Glabbard the Grim! Perhaps you've heard of my legend. They sing it everywhere! Eh, everywhere but this land of mutes. I have known the riches of many things, Spirit Slayer, but what I would give for a good chin wag.

Glabbard inspects the trenched scars slashed across Rohet's throat.

GLABBARD: *Naturally.* Good cut. Deep. I might've given you those in the battle of... something, for... one thing or another. Though, you are still alive. Mercy. I was merciful that day. Come! Pull up a barrel and let me admire your scars.

Rohet politely smiles, and Smith does the same, trying to pull Rohet away - an advance that is stopped when Glabbard grabs the hilt of Dragon Claw. Rohet quickly turns, swatting the giant hand away. The branch may have been moved, but the rest of the giant's towering trunk remains firmly rooted. The ale maker's patrons slowly rise from their benches, unsure what titanic collision awaits them.

Glabbard rolls out a slow, unimpressed growl. Still, he is impressed by the sword.

GLABBARD: Good one, that. Was watchin' when you were dancin' with the children. Too bad you didn't have it when you were waving that toothpick around in the air during the reaping! Haw! We all know the only reason that spirit subsided was because you held up an old woman's ass!

Glabbard downs a cup of ale from the nearest table within reach.

GLABBARD: And they wanted to make you king. I came here to be king. Aye! The sole voice in the land of mutes! Hmph. Let me tell you, let me tell you, Spirit. Slayer. In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is an outcast!

He lumbers from table to table, downing his fill, but with an eye on, and loud mouth toward, Rohet.

GLABBARD: The God of No Gospel has been terrorizing these lands since before the calendar. An old-minded lot believed sacrificing a couple of missionary sisters would stop the ghost's wrath. I tried telling them, I tried. They didn't want me as their king, so they can suffer me as their drunk!

Glabbard clumsily removes his broadsword and emasculates a barrel. He presses the barrel over his head and drinks from a shower of ale. He throws the barrel down, and warped wood planks hurl toward the villagers lining the path.

Glabbard's eyes lose their friendliness. He twists his mighty broadsword in the air toward Rohet.

GLABBARD: How 'bout an exhibition, little man? G'wan. Impress



your lady friend. Though by the looks of her, maybe it's 'er I should be fighting!

Smith grits her teeth and steps toward Glabbard, game for battle, but Rohet pulls her back. He looks in her eyes, and both realize what foolishness this is. They decide to walk away.

GLABBARD: That's it, run away! You lost more than your voice, *Spirit Slayer*.

Glabbard rampages through the ale maker's yard, overturning benches and smashing cups and pitchers. Once again, he attempts to hoist a barrel over his head to drink; aghast, the Ale Maker rushes to stop him, only to be thrown through the air by one of the giant's careless flails.

GLABBARD: The fool chieftains we killed for had it right, Slayer. Spy what you want and grab it!

Glabbard drinks another barrel's worth, only to toss that barrel into the petrified crowd - where it thankfully shatters against a tree.

Glabbard howls in drunken delight and Rohet has heard enough. He solemnly walks toward Glabbard, Dragon Claw in hand. The giant takes fewer steps, and windmills his heavy sword, taking aim at Rohet's head!

Rohet's momentum will not be denied. The swords spark, but Glabbard lifts his only in defense, the befuddled big man left with no option but to walk backwards - and then run, the weight of every Dragon Claw attack pulsing him back that much more, a strike for every heartbeat.

In a single motion, Rohet sheaths Dragon Claw and drives his head and hands into Glabbard's wide torso, running faster. Rohet pushes out his

arms and the giant takes flight, splintering a stack of barrels.

Rohet's chest heaves, the blood rush of battle grimacing his face and making a feral form of his back. The red runs out and he begins to regain his composure. Glabbard is prone on a pile of broken wood, awash in ale before him, and the mute villagers point and appear to laugh at the giant's fate.

Their bodies settle, though, when Rohet extends his hand to Glabbard. Stinking of ale, shocked into sobriety, the humbled longbeard accepts the offer, though it takes two hands for Rohet to help the giant to his feet.

Glabbard takes a pouch with a familiar jingle from his belt and tosses the bag of golden coins to the Ale Maker.

Rohet winces as a huge hand slaps his shoulder. Glabbard wipes the ale from his eyes.

GLABBARD: So. Drinks are on me.

Morning. Inside the shop, Rohet clutches a twin sword, Dragon Tail. Smith drapes a wide, silver necklace over his shoulders, while the witch paints a red diamond on the front plate of the metal collar.

Smith demonstrates to Rohet that - as she had witnessed during the ghost's reaping - the Dragon Claw sword will be the lightning rod for the Red Death's power. The collar and the second sword, Dragon Tail, will provide a circuit for the energy to travel. Ultimately, Dragon Tail will ground the evil force, directing it into the earth.

He understands, and the inevitable moment is at hand. The witch exits to prepare the horses, not wanting to hear the sorrow of young lovers parting.

A towering red diamond balances on point on the wasteland's horizon. The unsettling hum is inescapable. Following the blood-marked map, the old witch leads Rohet to this ancient place.

As their horses approach, he soon realizes it is not a diamond shape, but a cube made of red stones; perfect stones of the same size and stacked with precision. At the very precipice where Kube meets land, there is a single doorway wide enough for one man - an open stairwell to antiquity itself.

The witch offers a final blessing as Rohet enters Kube.

The stone stairwell leads to a chamber with no dividing walls; just an open space with what Rohet assumes is an elaborate throne room. A large white glow hangs above the center of the room, but from what source is unknown. Along a wall is a wooden framed structure filled with leather blocks containing dried animal skins with funny little pictures upon them.

Lightning bolts materialize from the Dragon Swords, racing up and down the twin blades. The lightning jumps to the collar and the jolt startles Rohet. Even more unnerving is the red mist spitting up from between the crevices in the stone floor, helplessly drawn to the swords.

The Red Death rises!

Lightning surges throughout Rohet, almost more than he can withstand. Red Death shrieks in unholy delight.

Outside, not only does the witch see the gathering storm clouds, she witnesses the very bricks of Kube jut in and out - entire sides of the structure become the tumult of waves.

Inside, trapped in the agony of the lightning storm, Rohet struggles to touch Dragon Tail to the ground. With his all, he finally pushes the tip of the blade to the stone floor - and tyrant Death thunders into the floor like a waterfall of smoke! Immediately, part of the ghostly mist reemerges, thrashing and twisting not to be imprisoned there. It howls at its captor, Rohet.

The epic turmoil of energy rips the air itself apart, revealing Rohet windows to other times and other lands, indiscriminately opening and closing all around him.

Red Death whips back and forth from the pulling prison of the floor. Rohet trembles, unable to contain the convulsing forces. Dragon Tail is pulled from his grip and is flung into one of the unknown worlds before the window closes forever.

The hum is oppressive, worse than any thunder. Red Death jerks and pulls and puffs, but it cannot free itself from the floor. It batters itself against the weakened Rohet. The mist mingles with the electricity, tormenting Rohet's body. The red diamond plate bursts from his collar and clinks down the stairwell to the outside world - a sight which sends the witch into manic spellcasting.

Rohet struggles through the pain to muscle Dragon Claw to the stone floor. The demon screams, and lightning and mist unite Rohet and Red Death into a single force. The windows to other worlds fade as all energy converges on the foes.

His body crushed by the weight of the storm, Rohet musters his willpower to bring the point of Dragon Claw to the floor. The shrinking Red Death quakes, as more of it is driven into the stones. It is enough of a reprieve that Rohet brings the blade down a second time, and the desperate demon thrashes.

Rohet places both hands on the hilt of Dragon Claw. He aims the sword at the stone floor. Red Death struggles to wrest itself from the inescapable prison. Rohet pushes against the weight of the suffocating mist and lightning ribbons to raise Dragon Claw above his head. The Red Death wails.

Rohet's useless vocal chords quiver a howl unheard. With all of his might, Rohet plunges the sword deep into the stones with such a driving explosion of force that the image of the apparition's howling skull bursts through the outer wall of Kube, forever trapped as a relief in red brick.

The skull on Kube overlooks the wasteland, a monument to its own defeat.

In the throne room, Rohet struggles to find a rhythm of breath. He is exhausted. The nattering hum of the place remains.

He wobbles to an upright stance, leaves Dragon Claw buried deep in the floor, and shuffles toward the stairwell.

The old witch isn't there to greet him. Neither is his horse. He sees the face of Red Death imprisoned in the stone, and is confident his aching-all can begin the journey home to his beloved.

Even the trees seem different along the path. No part of the village remains standing. What cruelty is this? He knows from the mountain range that the village should be here, but nary a trace remains. His heart sinks in anguish at the fate of Smith.

He must find her.

Yes, these are strange days; wild, supernatural days. She is here. She *must* be here.

On the hill in the distance he sees a village made with walls that shine.

Onward.

## THE HYVE WAR

The once magnificent church is now in disrepair. Paint peels, pews are cordoned off, and the ceiling is soiled from absorbing centuries of candle smoke and incense.

Upon the altar sits a tribute case made of glass and gold that must have been fine before the years covered it in dust. The relics it contains are decomposed fingers, curls of hair, and a silver plate in the shape of a diamond, covered in a scratched and faded red ink.

The four priestesses conducting the ceremony barely outnumber the congregates. Among the old and infirmed is seated Harse, a rough-faced man uncomfortable in his silken robes. He constantly tugs at the golden livery collar that hangs upon him, pestered by it.

The lilting voice of Priestess Loreli pushes the mass along. She points to the stained glass set in the walls. They appear to depict Rohet in various scenes of battle.

LORELI: I do not fear this war, for I have faith in our Lord of Lightning. Was it not our Lord who turned the tide against the invading robber barons? Did He not answer our prayers and rise again to defeat the Plant People? Was He not there in our time of need when Eldric the troll giant terrorized hill and dale, and also when the AutoMantons conspired to destroy natural life? What is this Hyve compared to the light of our Lord? If the Lord is for us, who can be against us?

Loreli raises her hands.

LORELI: May lightning reign.

The congregation murmurs, "May He reign."

The church itself is a relic of another time. Life bustles in the streets but apart from the frail, old building. The Shimmering City has built up around it, a modernity that has outgrown its keystone.

Priestess Loreli stands on the chipped stone stairs, thanking the congregates as they slowly exit. Harse deliberately waits to be last.

HARSE: That was a lovely sermon, Priestess.

LORELI: Said to another empty hall, Chancellor. Look at them all mucking about. Not even war commands their interest anymore. And with the king away at battle, shouldn't you be protecting the queen?

HARSE: She's fiercely independent.

Loreli smiles and nods, until Harse continues.

HARSE: Stubborn. Glad to be rid of me -

LORELI: Jakob -

HARSE: Loreli -

She touches the livery collar.

LORELI: We both made our vows.

She leaves him on the steps without a second glance. He touches the part of the collar she touched, but finds it cold. With a heavy sigh, the Chancellor continues into the street.



King August blurts out a hearty laugh.

On the battlefield, men and women defending the realm hack and cleave their way into the ranks of the insect humanoids.

The stocky king surveys the misery from atop his horse on a nearby hill, surrounded by his royal guard.

AUGUST: All of this technology at their disposal - fire pistols, tanks, bombs - and look at them, Tothtartan! They prefer to face their enemy with nothing but guts, sword and shield!

TOTHTARTAN: They are bold, Your Grace. Of course, the fire pistols and flying chariots are too unproven, too costly and too unstable. Presumably part of the reason the AutoMantons were defeated. Why we try to harness the ineffectual inventions of the losing side when we have perfectly reliable means of killing each other is beyond me.

AUGUST: I've often wondered if war creates technology, or if technology leads to war.

TOTHTARTAN: Ambition creates war, Your Majesty.

AUGUST: Hmph. Well, let the philosophers who were not here wonder why we bled for them. Today is their day - my warriors. Their courage will end this war.

TOTHTARTAN: Again, Your Highness, I must disagree with you.

Tothtartan unsheathes his sword and raises it to the King's throat.

AUGUST: What are you doing, whelp? Just because you're captain of the royal guard, do you honestly believe these men would follow you to betray their king? Seize this traitor!

The royal guards do draw their swords, only to encircle the King with a jaw of blades.

TOTHTARTAN: Strategy, dear King, *wins* wars. Unlike courage, it is tangible. Much like the discontent a people feel toward an unhelpful king.

King August clangs away Tothtartan's sword and kicks his steed to ride off, unprepared when the royal guards slay his horse. The plump king plummets head over heels, landing with ungainly impact upon the sudden earth, his armor cracking apart. August hastily casts off the broken pieces and reaches for his sword. As the King scrambles, Tothtartan takes deliberate time dismounting and approaching the fallen monarch.

Out of breath, August finally reaches his feet. He holds his sword out for a fight; a mad, confident grin invites the conflict. Tothtartan saunters toward him.

AUGUST: What was the price of your treachery?

TOTHTARTAN: All the power in Kube.

AUGUST: Ha! I could've promised you that. Fool!

August howls, charging Tothtartan in a mad flurry, which is easily unmanned by a few graceful flicks of Tothtartan's wrist. The charging royal falls to his face.

TOTHTARTAN: In actual war, Your Highness, they don't just allow

you to win.

August's eyes widen, expecting a final strike, not Tothtartan's gloating and vulture-like walk around the injured king.

TOTHTARTAN: To your knees.

August harrumphs and reluctantly obliges.

AUGUST: You dream of a bygone age, Tothtartan.

TOTHTARTAN: Says *the king*.

AUGUST: Kingdoms condemned to the sea by vengeful gods, red ghosts devouring the souls of heretics? It's all carnival conjurors, dinner party diviners, now. What you seek - if it ever existed, at all - that well of magic has dried from our world long ago.

TOTHTARTAN: Curious how those with power are so quick to dissuade others from achieving any.

AUGUST: *You've* done all right.

Tothtartan swipes his sword against the king's face, prompting August to squeal a pained shriek. Blood slowly crests over the gash, and when the streams of color reach August's lips, he spits mist and droplets toward Tothtartan.

AUGUST: This will be avenged a thousand fold.

TOTHTARTAN: Oh?

AUGUST: They will rise from their mourning to hunt you -

TOTHTARTAN: As you mourned your brother after I slit his throat, and you watched from your newly minted throne as an innocent man

paid for the offense? Why must the corrupt always feign righteousness? It is a coward who cannot face his nature.

AUGUST: You're a power hungry shit.

TOTHTARTAN: Who will not die a delusional coward.

Tothtartan raises his blade.

The standard of Hyve is raised.

Hyve leader Dactyle sits on his throne in the open air encampment of his victorious army. Seated at his side is the witch, Sersee.

Tothtartan approaches... carrying the head of King August.

TOTHTARTAN: A gift, great Dactyl.

Dactyl accepts the gift and laughs. He holds the bloody mess to his upturned snout, then tosses it to a sentry.

DACTYL: Put this in a cauldron and tell my soldiers their soup is made of king.

SENTRY: Yes, Leader.

DACTYL: And I have a gift for you, traitor-to-man.

With a wave of his hand, a regiment of Hyve soldiers march in formation, stopping before the throne. Tothtartan's breathing slows.

DACTYL: Are you not pleased?

TOTHTARTAN: ...My gift was to be the power of Kube.

DACTYL: And you shall have it, once the Shimmering City is secured. I will lead the frontal barrage, and upon my signal, you will lead the second flank into the breach. Together, we will overwhelm them.

Tothtartan says nothing.

DACTYL: This is not agreeable?

Tothtartan slowly moves his finger over the hilt of his sword --

SERSEE: Allow me, my Leader, to illuminate for the traitor.

Sersee removes her eyes and places them in a glass bowl of water. She gently swirls the water with her fingers.

SERSEE: Yesss... You will find the key that unlocks all secrets to Kube. Very soon. Very soon.

Tothtartan remains stoic. Finally, he removes his fingers from the hilt of his blade. He bows and walks away. His newly gifted regiment follows.

Sersee places her eyes back into their sockets, as Dactyl mocks her.

DACTYL: He will show me his neck. Very soon, very soon.

SERSEE: So you say, my Love.

DACTYL: And so it shall be.



Illo. 2

Rohet walks with trepidation upon stone cobbled streets and between the shimmering walls of this hundredfold village. His unease shrinks him, and he is laughed at, pushed aside, ridiculed. He doesn't understand the grunts and wheezes of foreign language emanating from their mouths, but he certainly recognizes the intent.

He is aware his pastoral fashion is out of style among their silk robes and lace, but this menagerie of races turn such differences into bloodsport.

At last, an old woman dressed all in white - a kind of witch, he believes - takes his arm and leads him away from the growing mob. He responds to her kindness and follows.

Even shimmering cities have a soup kitchen where the sick and homeless disappear. Priestess Ann brings Rohet in and sits him at a table. He feels better here. The families among him are filthy, and though they cast curious glances his way, at least they keep their curiosity quiet.

Ann walks to the food table - whispering to Priestess Julie.

ANN: We've got a real fanatic this time.

JULIE: That poor soul.

ANN: He scarred his face and neck just to look like Him.

JULIE: Can he talk?

ANN: I don't know if he even understands.

JULIE: I'll bring the bread. You get the soup.

They walk over and gingerly place the food in front of Rohet. They hand him small weapons, then motion he should lift his hand to mouth. He

doesn't understand. He looks around and becomes aware the people use these weapons to shovel the food into their mouths. Using the stick with the rounded end, he eats his soup. He closes his eyes, it tastes so good. The first mouthful reminds him of his hunger, and the second one is quickly followed by more.

Just as he settles into a rhythm, the Sisters drape a rug around his shoulders. This is no pelt he has ever felt before. It is softer, and seems to be woven of a single thread, not a patchwork of fur. Strange, but warm. He smiles at Ann and Julie. They smile in return, and leave him to his meal.

Tothtartan leads his regiment marching through the desert. One soldier trips and the uniformity quickly disintegrates. Tothtartan whips his horse toward the melee.

TOTHTARTAN: What goes on here?

SOLDIER: I tripped, Captain, over... sssome old sword.

TOTHTARTAN: Amidst all this sand, and you happened upon some old sword.

SOLDIER: Yes, Captain! I ssswear upon Leader! Here it is!

The soldier hands his captain Dragon Tail.

Tothtartan freezes; though tense and rigid upon appearance, his heart is rabid. His fingers snake around the hilt and squeeze.

TOTHTARTAN: Very good, soldier. This may help us in the siege. I should take it to our Leader without delay. I'm putting you in



charge. Make camp, as planned, then await my word.

SOLDIER: Yesss, sir!

With a violent kick of his spurs, Tothtartan rides toward the horizon.

Queen Olana holds the progeny to her breast. The suckling prince feeds into a slumber that is unbroken by the hesitant footsteps of Chancellor Harse.

HARSE: Your Majesty...

She knows from the tone in his voice. She knew from the humble crouch in his step. Her husband king is dead.

But she does not weep, only holds her little prince closer still.

OLANA: Chancellor... prepare the city for war.

Merchants shudder their doors and windows to protect their trinkets. Walls of glass, steel, marble and fine stone are buttressed with mud and sandbags and any assorted large refuse - broken carts and wine barrels, mostly.

These delicate people in their fineries scurry when the palace guard marches down the street, dragging off another lot of drunks and destitutes to defend the junk barricade by the fortifying wall.

The cacophony in the streets does little to offset the tranquility of

hopelessness in Rohet's soup kitchen. Perhaps he is simply tired. Though he was shown kindness here, he understands he is among the cast offs, the men who talk to walls. He holds no judgment over them, but wonders how he came to be in such a place and such a world. He feels a certain light has diminished from his spirit... but for such things to return, they only require a spark.

The fortifying wall surrounds the entire Shimmering City, and not every area receives equal attention. There are no soup kitchens here. A barricade of filth is all that would have stood in Tothtartan's way were he to charge his regiment into the ragged people's area under Dactyl's banner. That battle plan of the same old game pieces scratching against the same old board is no longer Tothtartan's concern.

Bread and smoke sticks are the only currency worth the bribe that grants the disguised Tothartan easy access into the city's war fervored streets.

The traitor knows that even if he must make his escape from the city during the height of the impending battle, a few more payments to the ragged people of crust to fill the belly and smoke to cloud the mind will set him on his way, as those in abject poverty know no allegiance but to survival.

Atop his steed, Harse leads the royal guards past the church, only to be stopped -

LORELI: What are you doing? Chancellor, answer me.

Harse motions for the guards to march on. He tries to settle his unruly steed.

HARSE: We're barricading the city. We need all available hands.

LORELI: By raiding shelters? They'll be slaughtered! They're no more soldiers than your friends with the feathered hats.

HARSE: Would you rather they be slaughtered by the Hyve all the same? At least this way, they'll be useful!

LORELI: Listen to yourself.

HARSE: This is war, my lady, and time is -

LORELI: You speak as though a man without a heart.

Harse huffs.

HARSE: Of all the times to show care for *my heart*.

LORELI: Of all the times to be petty!

HARSE: Gather your Sisters and bulwark your refuge.

LORELI: Our Lord will protect us!

The steed bucks, and the frustrated Harse rides off.

Palace guards burst into the soup kitchen. The lost men and women rise to their feet in fear, but only the Priestesses let out startled screams. Guards quickly escort the Sisters to the street.

GUARD: By order of Her Majesty the Queen, you are all hereby conscripted into the defending army.

Rohet watches the lost people struggle against the guards roughly pushing and pulling them to the street.

An old man talking to a wall wails in terror as he is dragged away.

OLD MAN: Not another war! Not another war!

The sound of it is unnerving. The withered veteran reaches out to Rohet... who has found his spark.

The barbarian upturns the large table and with his immense strength, dozes a flank of helpless guards against the wall.

By the entrance, a guard aims his fire pistol at Rohet, who has never seen such an object, though understands it is obviously a weapon. The smoldering, uneven meteor rock that powers the retrofitted AutoManton weapon spins in its chamber, but as it combusts to fire, it rattles too near to the chamber casing. An explosion of flame backfires into the guard's face and he wails in agony.

Taking advantage of the unfortunate distraction, a guard draws his sword and rushes to attack the threat. With no weapon to protect himself, Rohet sees the metal soup bowl, quickly grabs it and flings the lead disc into the guard's nose which instantly shoots out blood. The guard gurgles on the ground in pain, dropping his weapon.

Rohet retrieves the abandoned sword, and every available guard raises theirs against him.

HARSE: Halt!

The guards immediately stand at attention.

HARSE: Who is this man?

SQUAD LEADER: One of the degenerates, sir. An obvious religious zealot.

From a distance, Harse examines the scars on Rohet's face and neck...

HARSE: What is your name?

Rohet doesn't understand. To break the silence, the squad leader abruptly marches toward him, barking.

SQUAD LEADER: The Chancellor asked what is your name?

A few swipes from Rohet's blade and a boot to the chest are all the supposed zealot requires to dispatch the bully and send him flying across the room.

Rohet sees the fear in the guards' eyes. They cannot beat him. He even senses the same from their leader. Emboldened, Rohet corrals the lost people behind him, then scrapes his sword against the stone floor, drawing a line between his people and the guards. He raises his blade in a warrior stance.

The nervous guards hold their weapons with sweaty hands, waiting for Harse's call.

HARSE: We will deal with you after the war.

Relieved, the guards follow Harse out of the soup kitchen and toward war.

Priestess Loreli helps the elder Sisters, Julie, Ann and Mary, to their knees as they pray at the altar. The effort was for not, as all four Priestesses are intrigued by the mysterious stranger entering their house of worship.

He removes a rolled-up blanket from his harness and unfurls it on to the floor. The Sisters rise to their feet, stunned at the sight of Dragon Tail.

Without thought, the Priestesses encircle the blade, close their eyes and rush into a breathless, murmuring mantra of thanks and praise.

Tothtartan is bemused by their devotion, for a short while.

TOTHTARTAN: Where is the Dragon Claw that will help me unlock Kube?

He picks up the sword, which the Priestesses sense, but continue their prayers behind closed eyes, unabated.

TOTHTARTAN: Where. Is. The Dragon Claw?

The Sisters ignore him, so he lops off the head of Priestess Mary.

Loreli's eyes shock open at the sound of the sickening slice. She trembles, aghast as the blood of the nun's corpse washes upon her shoes. Dry, cracked sounds spit from the naked throat.

LORELI: Please. We don't know where the twin sword could be.

Tell him. Tell him, Sisters.

Ann and Julie continue at their prayers.

Tothtartan slowly exhales.

He raises Dragon Claw to strike, but Loreli lunges for his arms,

blocking the fatal blow and struggling to gain control of the weapon.

TOTHTARTAN: Now *this one* has spirit!

He throws her against the marble altar, where she crumbles in agony.

LORELI: We are only messengers -

Tothtartan cleaves off Julie's head. Loreli struggles to her feet, arching over the altar for support. In his fury, Tothtartan's chest heaves. He brings Dragon Tail down upon the neck of Ann in an afterthought of disgust.

He stomps to the altar and presses his body against the curve of Loreli's. He grabs a handful of hair, craning back her neck.

TOTHTARTAN: Where is the sword!

She screams, flailing to escape, her wild arms shattering the casket of relics!

Rohet watches the entrance to the soup kitchen with a vigilant eye. One of the lost people runs in and quickly begs Rohet to follow.

Sword in hand, Rohet cautiously makes his way up the road to the church, where a mournful crowd has gathered. Among the stunned and silent onlookers is Chancellor Harse.

The church floor is awash in the blood of three horribly murdered Priestesses.

The air escapes Rohet. He makes eye contact with Harse, whose ashen face is that of man whose spirit has left him.

HARSE: Where is my Loreli?

Rohet empathizes with the weakness in his voice.

The alarm horns blow. Everyone snaps out from the stupor of tragedy and into action. Some run to the barricade, others to lock themselves in secret places. Rohet and Harse stiffen their spines. Their eyes lock, sharing a disgust for the fate of the Sisters, and now, a common thirst for recompense.

Loreli's white dress is stained red, which flitters past the tough flora at the edge of the forest. Tothtartan pushes her along. Her tears have dried on her face. She sleepwalks through the world, probably unaware she is clutching the red diamond plate from the relic case.

The sounds of bees and howling wind become louder before morphing into something else altogether, the omniscient presence of *it*. The forest finally breaks, and there, over the stony wasteland - Kube.

The Hyve lays siege to the Shimmering City. Bug men archers make a pincushion of the grounds before the barricade.

Hyve wranglers load the awesome horned Rhinocs onto catapults. The beats are hurtled into the fortifying wall! The fine stone and masonry crack into a crater, while portions of the barricade on the interior wall come crashing down.



The dazed Rhinocs wobble from their craters and opt to eat the weeds on the battlefield before their wranglers - those fortunate enough not to be picked off by archers - bring the beasts back to purpose.

The Hyve foot soldiers prepare their weapons, racing into formation.

Harse leads Rohet and a battalion of guards to the weakest part of the barricade. They stand ready.

The wranglers aim the Rhinocs at the crumbling wall. After two more barrages, the wall crumbles, and the barricade is destroyed.

The insignificant specks, Tothtartan and Loreli, stand before Kube. The soulless stone eyes gaze over them.

Tothtartan holds aloft Dragon Tail, and raises his baritone above the oppressive hum.

TOTHTARTAN: Great Spirit! Share with me your knowledge and I shall conquer in thy name!

When no answer comes, he lowers his sword and his head.

Then, in answer to his despair, bricks slowly creak apart. The two walls above the skull butterfly open, revealing the strange throne room, a library... and Dragon Claw stuck in the stone floor.

Loreli clutches her relic, her heart filled with the hell of a faith rewarded.

Tothtartan sumptuously smiles at the majesty offered him.

The first band of Hyve foot soldiers rush toward the breach. Dactyl watches the war unfold from his flying chariot, Sersee at his side. The chariot hovers steadily for most of the time, but sudden lunges caused by the unstable meteor rock ricocheting against the engine core sends Sersee grasping for the rail.

DACTYL: Where is Tothtartan? The moment of final victory is at hand!

SERSEE: It would appear he has betrayed you before you could betray him.

Dactyl grunts.

DACTYL: And how would he have known about that?

SERSEE: He did not need my conjuror's eyes.

DACTYL: No matter. The Shimmering City is ill-prepared for such an onslaught. Their king is dead, and their queen soon will be. Commander! March my army through that breach and once the humans have been conquered, seal it with their dead.

COMMANDER: Yess, Leader!

The Hyve warriors converge toward the breach.

From inside the broken barricade, the royal guard hear the faint sounds of alien battle cries and armored bodies rushing onward. One Hyve warrior is followed by an unrelenting wave. Harse, Rohet and the royal guards try to contain the battle to the breach.

Though many are brave, Rohet is fearless. He is not mad. He is not

fierce. He is strong, and he is wise. One strike of his blade accomplishes twelve of a lesser's. The brands of war upon his face and neck prove he is fallible. That he is still breathing proves he has learned from them. He finds no worthy foe among the bug men. They fight because it is the nature of their existence. Had their Leader instilled any sense of real purpose, they could have been unrivaled. Instead, Rohet bests them all.

TOTHTARTAN: No! No! Nooo!

The bricks of Kube cascade together, once again sealing the secrets in.

TOTHTARTAN: I have the sword!

Blue lightning scratches against the sky. Red mist swirls in the empty pools of the skull's eyes, and Tothtartan steps back at the sight of an awakening demon.

Hyve warriors keep advancing into the breach, but it is apparent Rohet is the reason why they are not gaining ground.

DACTYL: What is going on!

SERSEE: It would appear your foes have found a champion.

DACTYL: One man does not turn tides!

SERSEE: But which man, dear Leader. Look closser.

The veteran conqueror is not easily surprised, but the scars

inscribed in Rohet's flesh, and the barbarian's command of the elements takes Dactyl's breath away, if only for a moment.

DACTYL: ...a pretender.

Sersee's shrill laugh undercuts Dactyl's pensive observation, throwing him into a barking rage.

DACTYL: Deliver the martyrdom the pretender is so desperate for!

The insect soldiers rush toward the Shimmering City in the blind fury of war.

The red mist swirling in the eyes of Kube intertwine with blue lightning. The stone face comes to life. It gazes down upon Loreli, who desperately clutches the red diamond plate.

Kube gazes down upon Tothtartan, who is clutching one of the very swords which helped enslave the demon in the red stone.

To Loreli's horror, a mist and lightning stream shoots from the eyes of the skull and burns off Tothtartan's head!

Blue electricity surges through Rohet's collar! He crumbles to his knees as the lightning races over him. All the warriors pause in battle at this supernatural event, the glory of something bigger than war.

Dactyl hunches over his chariot, muttering madly.

DACTYL: This cannot be. I, I shall not permit it.

SERSEE: Your day is at an end, my Love.

Dactyl looks over, startled to see Sersee's hollow eye sockets, and quickly crestfallen at the solemn fact the witch has divined his future. Enraged, he slaps the bowl from her hands. It shatters on the chariot floor and she wails as glass, water, and her eyes scatter into the pitch of battle below.

SERSEE: You are damned! You are damned!

He kicks her from the chariot, and she plummets into the dust and blood of the soldiers below.

DACTYL: I am destiny.

Tothtartan's headless body is motionless. The mist and the lightning dissipate from the red stones, and Loreli prays her ghostly savior slumbers once again.

For Loreli, though, prayer is the softening temper to her obsession, knowledge. She runs to Kube, feverishly examining every brick within reach. Then she sees it, the stairwell; a simple passage to profound enlightenment.

She takes a step, but falls to her back, bellowing in pain! Her stomach expands. She sweats, pants, and screams.

Rohet rises from his heap. The electricity has run off and smoke

escapes from his pores. Harse's lips tremble. He cannot contain his joy.

HARSE: All hail the Lord of Lightning!

The royal guards cheer - then hack at the bug men with renewed zeal.

The Hyve warriors climb over their dead to escape from the breach.

DACTYL: I ordered no retreat!

COMMANDER: It isss the Lord of Lightning! He has returned!

Dactyl blasts the Commander with no less than a missile from his flying chariot. The meteor powered missile charts wildly off course, fatally into one of Dactyl's retreating legions. In an unraveling rage, the insect conqueror flies over his retreating soldiers, raining more fire down upon them.

DACTYL: Cowards!

He flies over the breach and into the air space of the Shimmering City far quicker than the archer's tips can stick him.

HARSE: He's headed toward the palace!

Dactyl crashes his flying chariot through the glass doors of the throne room's balcony. The queen's defending guards are little match for the chariot's bursts of fire, and soon the room falls silent.

The control panel of the chariot blinks emergency flashes, the red lights strobing against Dactyl's dazed face as he struggles to lift his broken body.

DACTYL: Face me! Face your conqueror!

Queen Olana slowly emerges from behind the burned throne, cradling her baby.

DACTYL: Hand me your crown, and your son will live as my slave.

Queen Olana draws a flame pistol she was hiding behind her baby, and shoots a fire ball into Dactyl's stomach. He doubles over the chariot's control panel. Blood drips, then pours from his mouth, pooling over the emergency lights, which no longer pulse, but remain a steady red.

DACTYL: Desstiny.

He pushes the fire button.

Just as Harse, Rohet and the guards arrive at the base of the palace, a massive explosion erupts burning debris from the throne room balcony. Glass, steel and blood splatter to the cobbled stones.

At dusk, Rohet and Harse saddle their steeds amid the ruins.

HARSE: This isn't victory.

Rohet looks at him, though he is unable to understand.

GUARD: The procession is ready.

HARSE: Take the Queen and the Prince through the streets, then to the square with the other bodies. When all the dead are claimed, bury them at Hillstoke.

Harse climbs onto the saddle.

GUARD: Where are you going, sire?

HARSE: *Sire?*

GUARD: The royal family is dead, which makes the chancellor next in the line of succession.

Harse is speechless. So many thoughts and fears and emotions bubble up in his mind's eye, but all return to her.

HARSE: I leave to find my queen.

Harse signals to Rohet, and they ride off.

Harse and Rohet race across the stony wasteland to the body at the base of Kube. It is Loreli... and in her arms is a baby girl. The two men rush to her side.

HARSE: Loreli...

LORELI: Jakob. I have seen terrible, wondrous things. All of my searching is over.

Harse smiles, fleetingly.

LORELI: Inside Kube, I will be at one with our Lord, Jakob. I have suffered, I have endured, and it has led me to my reward. I must walk those steps. I must go.

HARSE: But... this child.

Loreli hands the baby into Harse's loving arms.

LORELI: She is but a symbol of my journey. The bad has been expelled from me - he, the devil, has been expelled from me - and I will enter a new world pure of body and clear of mind.

HARSE: She... she has your eyes.

Loreli achingly rises to her feet, her only desire being to reach that doorway. She stumbles toward it, but offers a look back.



LORELI: She has my old eyes. And I never wish to see from them again.

Loreli enters the doorway and begins a tired climb up the stone stairwell into Kube.

Harse remains kneeling on the ground with the child in his arms. His trembling lips struggle to speak, struggle to call out to Loreli, but she is gone.

The baby looks at him. She is a frail and helpless thing in need of a protector. He weeps.

As Harse and the baby mount the steed, Rohet sees a familiar piece of silver nearby where Loreli gave birth. It is the red diamond plate from his collar. He snaps it into place - lightning whips across the sky and envelopes him!

Stunned and fighting through the incredible pull of the light, he signals to Harse to ride with the baby to the safety of the woods.

The lightning ebbs away, and the bricks of Kube's overwalls once again cascade apart. Loreli is within the library, opening every book, oblivious to the supernatural change around her.

Bricks hover in the air. Rohet cannot comprehend why the floating bricks from Kube form a direct stairwell to the throne room, to his sword, Dragon Claw. Red mist snakes across the hard earth, and the winds of a vengeful storm cut into Rohet's spine, skychange that is the harbinger of the red demon.

If battle must be met, again, Rohet requires Dragon Claw. Spying his

goal, the warrior cautiously jumps from floating brick to floating brick of the mystical staircase to it. He hears a clang. He looks down - Tothtartan lives! Rohet sees Tothtartan's arm holding Dragon Tail and bracing to pull the rest of his body up to the first brick.

But Tothtartan is no longer human. A red cube floats above his corpse-colored torso where his head once rested. Tothtartan's face is but one side of the cube.

The reanimated man sees Rohet above him for the first time, and a wicked grin crosses his lips. As he grimaces, the cube turns, revealing a second face on another side of the cube, one that resembles the skull imprisoned on Kube.

Rohet needs no translation. He makes a hardscrabble effort to climb the floating bricks toward Dragon Claw. The heedlessness causes him to slip, and he nearly plunges to his demise, instead landing hard on a floating brick below.

Tothtartan is intrepid on the floating bricks. His sense of balance seems as effortless as it did during his king-killing swordplay.

And a swordsman he is. He leaps, ready to impale Rohet with Dragon Tail, but Rohet rolls out of the way as the silver blade sparks against the red brick.

Rohet ducks and weaves Tothtartan's parries, not expecting the shoulder block that sends Rohet once again crashing to a brick step below.

His quarry out of the way, Tothtartan ascends the floating staircase. His human visage, facing behind him, can see Rohet making strides up the

bricks.

Tothtartan hews at a brick until it cracks in two. He lifts one half and hurls it down at Rohet! The brick batters Rohet's shoulder, knocking him off the step. The brick continues to fall, but Rohet's bleeding fingers dig into the edge of the step to hang on.

Tothtartan makes his climb to Dragon Claw, unaware that the brick-half he threw at Rohet has not fallen to the ground. The mystical magnetism that keeps the bricks hovering compels it to float back up into place. Even in his wearied state, Rohet knows an opportunity. As the brick floats past the other steps, Rohet makes the daring swing and lands upon the upwardly floating brick.

Tothtartan cannot muster the strength to dislodge Dragon Claw from the stone floor of Kube - and the attacking Rohet ensures he never will. The two scuffle on the floor, but Rohet is distracted by the other sides of his enemy's cubed head, which do not show faces, but some kind of representations of moons and many Kubes. A solid punch to Rohet's crooked nose sends the barbarian reeling back from Tothtartan.

Rohet reaches for Dragon Claw, but not even his great strength can release the sword from the stone floor. Tothtartan grabs Dragon Tail and rushes in for the kill - but Rohet sidesteps, and the demon man is unprepared for the electrical storm generated when the two swords meet.

Tothtartan flies back from the burst of lightning erupting from the base of Dragon Claw. Rohet braves the storm and seizes the hilt of Dragon Claw, causing lightning to race through the sword and around his collar.

Through might and magic, the sword is freed!

Enraged, Tothtartan attacks! The swords clash and lightning sprays out from the battle. The air churns around them. The fabric of space rips open and mends.

Unlike the Hyve, Rohet has met his match in Tothtartan. Even in Tothtartan's rage, it is as though he has already envisioned the whole fight. Rohet is caught in a stifling defense, unable to mount any kind of attack.

But Rohet is wise and not without courage. If Tothtartan wants the sword, Rohet will give it to him. Rohet tosses Dragon Claw skyward, and the baffled Tothtartan perilously claws at the air, focused only on that which he covets.

Capitalizing on his distraction, Rohet pushes Tothtartan through one of the mysterious portals. The would-be mage helplessly falls deeper into the pocket to some other place. The air around Kube seams together, sealing Tothtartan there.

Dragon Claw clanks and clunks against the stone floor. Though Tothtartan has escaped with Dragon Tail, the threat is over this day. Rohet picks up Dragon Claw. He runs his fingers over Lizard's scales and smiles.

In his mind's eye, he sees Smith smiling.

He sheathes his sword.

The bricks once again link together, closing Kube to the world. Rohet walks to Loreli, who looks different to him, somehow. Under the eerie

light of Kube, the lines around her eyes and mouth seem deeper, more pronounced.

He attempts to pull her away from the leather bound animal skins. As he does not possess the capacity to speak in the language of these people's grunts and wheezes, he simply holds her by the arm and offers a gentle smile. The Priestesses were the only ones to treat him well, and he wishes to return the kindness, earnestly pointing to the stairwell.

Loreli looks at him. She truly looks at him. Quaking fingers are almost afraid to touch his face and the ridges of those famous scars. This is the man from the stained glass. This is the man from the holy books. This is... just a man.

But this *place*. This is heaven, the hall of all answers.

She pulls herself away from Rohet, driven by her own curiosity, to pour over these wonderful books!

He realizes he cannot help her because she does not wish to be helped. Rohet descends the stairwell alone.

## OUR DAYS OF PEACE

The King's Page looks out the window through a telescope.

PAGE: Your Highness, the lightning storm has ended.

HARSE: Then we shall see what fate awaits us.

High in the simian villages of the Forever Trees, the winged apes grunt and cackle in laughter as timid Airbo is scolded by their chief, Tice, over the offering of unconscious Tothtartan.

CHIEF TICE: Again you have cursed us! I should have skinned you alive when you let my daughter die!

AIRBO: She fell from nest! Little birds do!

Tice clobbers Airbo with the kingstaff, much to the howling delight of the villagers.

CHIEF TICE: *Uff*. It cruel to kill a thing so ignorant of own stupidity. The failure of your mind is all that saves you today. Baby your devil in another nest. If you poison our village with your presence again, I will strip you of wings and you will never fly in heaven.

Airbo's lip trembles, which elicits even more laughter.

CHIEF TICE: Go!

Airbo hurriedly hoists Tothtartan over his thick, simian shoulder and shuffles away from the only home he ever knew, amid a rainfall of sticks

and berries thrown in ridicule at him by his mocking former neighbors.

Rohet is confused at the strange sights on the journey to the Shimmering City. Farmers in the outlying areas are using Rhincos to plow fields. A new road, though worn as an old road, has been laid utilizing the tough armor of the bug race. The fortifying wall surrounding the city bears no evidence of Hyve attacks, but caravans upon caravans of lost people camp against it.

From the turrets above, soldiers throw scraps and garbage down to the lost people. It is good sport for the soldiers to laugh at how the weak and hungry fight in filth for rotten food.

The wall now has an impressive gate that holds a massive steel representation of Dragon Claw crossing Dragon Tail.

The soldiers notice Rohet on the road and hastily call for the gates to open. On hearing the chains creak, the lost people storm the entrance behind Rohet. He safely passes through a flank of soldiers, but the oncoming lost people are pushed and punched back to the outer world. Rohet watches the immense chains creak along the pulley, ensuring the gate shuts the surplus population out.

The streets soon fill with a cheering throng. They wear many-layered clothes of luxurious and delicate fabrics. He is greeted with smiles, but then those same lips whisper behind fans. Others puff out proud barrel chests and sly grins the type of which he'd only seen when the Money

Lender discovered a rare coin.

Some hurriedly line the cobbled stones with ornately decorated mats made of dragon scales. Once Rohet steps on one, the delighted owner holds it up for all to see while others wag money at him.

Rohet isn't certain, but the soup kitchen might have been along this path. He cannot find it, only opulent shops and dwellings with crowded balconies of people cheering his arrival.

They lead him to the church. The entrance appears the modest same, but a greater structure has been constructed atop it. Inside, many have already filled the pews, an eager audience. People fight for a seat as Rohet walks down the aisle toward the grinning Cleric, who is draped in grandiose necklaces over his silver-hued vestments.

For the first time, Rohet sees those old stained glass depictions. They are of him? But how can that be? He's never faced a giant, or a metal humanoid. One is accurate: the colors of the glass are vibrant, new. It dwarfs the rest. In it, a triumphant Rohet stands atop a pile of dead Hyve warriors.

Merchants, and children prodded by overeager parents, bring tribute, crowding the aisle with baskets of coinage and food. The Cleric places his hand on Rohet's shoulder and raises his other hand to indicate the congregation should quiet.

The Cleric motions Rohet should address the assembly. Yet, Rohet is distracted by the golden emblem dripping from around the Cleric's neck - Dragon Claw crossing Dragon Tail.



Anxious about the silence, the crowd shouts requests. They want to see the sword! They want to see lightning! He doesn't understand until the people begin acting those things out.

Rohet hesitantly obliges. Without flare, he brandishes Dragon Claw and holds it up for all to see. The titters give way to grand applause.

A knowing smile curls Rohet's lips. He sheathes his sword. He smiles at the congregation, which only brings about more applause. The grinning Cleric approaches, clapping wildly - until Rohet rips the golden chains from his neck.

The Cleric is stunned, but Rohet is still confidently smiling. No one knows how to react. Rohet tosses the chains into the tribute baskets. The people politely applaud.

Rohet unsheathes his blade, but, this time, the crowd becomes concerned when the warrior's smile fades. With a powerful strike, he brings Dragon Claw down upon the marble altar, cracking it in two! He grabs the Cleric by the nape and shoves him to the floor of the aisle. The finely dressed congregation scrambles and scratches over each other to clear away from the aisle seats and toward the nearest exit.

Rohet motions the Cleric should carry one of the tribute baskets. With a glare in his eye, he instructs others to do the same, and no one refuses.

The barbarian leads them down the street. Celebration has given way to uncertainty. A belated reveler attempts to place a dragon scale mat on the ground, but Rohet kicks it away in one step, and offers a swift kick

to the scalper in the next.

Rohet signals for the soldiers to open the gate of the fortifying wall. The slow turn of the heavy chain tests Rohet's patience. He holds aloft Dragon Claw and lightning plunges through him! To the quivering terror of the populace, he throws a massive bolt of electricity to decimate the pulley! The chain fleetly runs its course, and the gate bursts apart.

The lost people, however, are too frightened to rush in. They see the smoke emanating from Rohet and his sword. He beckons an old, toothless woman. He scoops out a handful of coins for her, and motions she needs to pick out food from the tribute baskets. He then points to the Shimmering City, indicating she is welcome here.

A line begins to form among the lost people. Rohet lifts the Cleric by his vestments and motions to dispense the tributes. Affright, the Cleric agrees.

Rohet sheathes his sword and walks toward the palace through the suspicious and disdainful crowd.

At the palace, a young warrior woman watches the scene through the telescope... and smiles.

A sparring partner dutifully awaits her command. The young woman turns, picking at her sword, distracted.

SPARRING PARTNER: Has the session concluded, Lady Miranda?

Miranda realizes she has been aloof. She stands at the starting line, sword drawn. The starting bell sounds, but before the timber even leaves

the air, the sparring partner is unmanned, and a non-sparring sword point rests a whisker length away from his grizzled throat.

Miranda sighs.

Tothtartan awakens on a bed of dead branches and leaves. He rises to his feet, surprised to see that he is in a nest higher than the clouds.

Winged ape man Airpo returns with giant grubs. He tosses the squirming sack of them into the nest and the roly-poly maggots roil at Tothtartan's feet.

AIRPO: Eat.

Tothtartan sits on the edge of the nest.

TOTHTARTAN: Why have you brought me here?

AIRPO: Found you in trees. Took you to village. Elder saw your sword. Bad magic, bad magic. They try kill you. Airpo fight them. Airpo mighty. Elder said Airpo no longer ape man. Cannot go home.

Airpo tears apart a grub with his sharp, serrated teeth. He broods.

AIRPO: Airpo angry.

TOTHTARTAN: ...I can see why. You saved a life, and they banish you for it.

AIRPO: Airpo should be chief!

Tothtartan lifts a fat maggot to his mouth and chews a piece off of the wriggling grub.

TOTHTARTAN: Yes, my friend, I believe you should.

He pauses, then inspects Dragon Tail, certain that Airpo sees him doing so. Tothtartan tosses the sword to Airpo, who appreciates the shiny blade.

TOTHTARTAN: I belonged somewhere once, as well, Airpo. A world that left me unsatisfied. Brutes and warlords who only recognized power if it meant putting a heel to their enemy's neck, or my knife to the brother's. They had no imagination for the arcane, for the possibilities of the so-called bad magic. Their power was one dimensional. I dream of a power that will span every dimension.

Airpo holds the sword by the hilt, certain Tothtartan sees him doing it.

AIRPO: Airpo village be safe?

Tothtartan smirks.

TOTHTARTAN: I will make you chief. And in turn, your army will support my siege of Kube. Whatever I do to this world, your village in the trees will be safe. You saved my life. I owe you that much.

Airpo grunts and tosses Dragon Tail back to Tothtartan.

They feast on squirming maggots.

The royal Crystographer slides the sheet of crystal into the spine of

the camera, then removes the fabric covering the lens.

CRYSTOGRAPHER: Just keep that pose for the next hour, Your Highness.

Miranda's hearty laughter presages her arrival.

MIRANDA: My father stay silent for an hour? I'll believe the crystal when I see it.

CRYSTOGRAPHER: Princess, please. We shouldn't distract. This is the fifth sitting we've attempted, and something always -

The throne room doors blast open and King Harse shoots to his feet.

The Crystographer bawls! He yanks the crystal sheet out and smashes it to bits on the floor.

CRYSTOGRAPHER: I knew it!

HARSE: You're *excused*.

CRYSTOGRAPHER: Forgive me, Your Grace.

The Crystographer gathers his equipment in a huff. He turns to face the intruder and finds himself standing before the Lord of Lightning. He drops the camera and falls to his knees.

CRYSTOGRAPHER: My *God*.

Miranda watches as Rohet helps the Crystographer stand, then also helps in gathering up the camera pieces. The Crystographer is humbled by Rohet's kindness, and exits, dumbfounded.

Rohet faces King Harse with a smile that quickly changes to a look of concern. Harse has considerably more lines in his face and gray in his hair.

Harse embraces him, with an honest laugh.

HARSE: Do I look that old? You've been at battle for a generation. Every day, I would peer out this window waiting for the lightning to end. Seasons passed. My baby... yes, you were there. My little girl has grown into a woman. At last, you're home.

MIRANDA: Father... I don't believe he understands.

HARSE: No, Miranda, not the words. But this man knows he is my brother.

Rohet offers a warm smile. Harse puts his arm around his friend's broad shoulders and walks with him out of the room.

HARSE: My house is your house.

Miranda watches them go.

Munching on a sugar biscuit, Dr. Zarmond enters the garage and is so startled to see the contemplative Miranda seated on the work bench that she nearly chokes on the sweet.

MIRANDA: Oh! Hello, Doctor. Sorry for the fright.

ZARMOND: Your Highness.

MIRANDA: I saw the light on...

ZARMOND: Yes, I just stepped out for a cup of kava and... *another healthy meal* since I worked through dinner again.

MIRANDA: *Mm.*

Zarmond pours some of her kava into a cup and hands it to the distracted Princess, who smiles and accepts.

ZARMOND: Rumor mongers speculate that your father is keeping with unpopular company.

MIRANDA: Yesterday they sang his praises in the streets, this Lord of Lightning. Today he's a pariah because he treated the lost people as equals. How quickly our belief turns to contempt when it no longer favors our interests.

ZARMOND: The King's association with this man will only erode public support.

MIRANDA: I doubt he cares. I've never seen my father so... vulnerable.

She stares down at the work bench and sips her kava.

MIRANDA: Thank you. It's good.

ZARMOND: I knew you only came to see me for the home brew.

Miranda smiles, somewhat laughs.

MIRANDA: It isn't that good.

Zarmond chuckles.

MIRANDA: There was a device that came out of the war with the AutoMantons. It wasn't a weapon. It transformed sound into a language of gesture.

ZARMOND: Your highness... perhaps some things from your father's past are best left unspoken.

MIRANDA: I've stopped asking.

Zarmond nods and sits beside her.

MIRANDA: I've gone through my phases. I thought I had reached that point where I would begin to understand him; where the child sees their parent as an adult, not a symbol.

She sips her kava.

MIRANDA: Guess I'm the one that still has the growing to do. As a young woman. And as a swordsman.

Miranda blurts out a laugh. Zarmond rolls her eyes and walks to her bench.

ZARMOND: You'll be the death of me, child. Of all the mysteries "our lord" could unlock and you want him for nothing more than a sparring partner.

MIRANDA: don't think me selfish. You're free to pick the lice from his brain about history. My field of study is conflict resolution.

ZARMOND: We used to call it war.

MIRANDA: War is for warriors. The battles that end wars are the only ones I'm interested in fighting.

Rohet figures that Smith's shop and entire dwelling could fit inside this one palace bedroom. The bed is large enough to swim in. It is too soft. And it is covered in those strange pelts that have no skin or fur. The pillows are not stuffed with feathers, nor even hay. Anxious and



restless, Rohet rolls, and rolls again until he finally rises out of the bed.

He explores the hallways, reaching a great room full of those leather packs with the thin sheets of animal skin. What a curious good.

Rohet is unaware Miranda is spying on him from the hall. She watches as he delicately examines one book after another. He twists and turns the tomes in all manner of direction, not able to discern what it is they are.

Airpo leads Tothtartan through the woods to a cabin beneath torturously mangled trees. Tothtartan steps toward it, but notices the skittish Airpo clutching to a pine. Airpo looks at him and shakes his head, "No, no."

Undaunted, Tothtartan walks to the cabin alone. He stops when the door suddenly opens - but no one is there to greet him. He brandishes his sword and continues on.

Without warning, unseen spirits pluck Dragon Tail from his hand and into the darkness of the cabin. An ethereal voice resonates from the black.

SERSEE: Tothtartan. Do you believe the Red Death isss the only oasis of the internature?

TOTHTARTAN: Am I not here, conjuror?

Two small, white spheres roll out from the cabin and stop at Tothtartan's feet. He looks down at them - and Sersee's eyes return the

gaze!

By their own will, the eyes roll back into the cabin.

Tothtartan's cubed head shifts from the face of a man, to the face of the demon skull. Emboldened, he enters the dark sea behind the cabin's doorway.

The door slams shut, but it is unnerved Airpo who shutters.

From a palace balcony, Rohet watches the sun rise over the mountains he knew so well. In the streets below, the silken citizens snarl at the sight of him. He has no use for their displeasure.

Rohet turns to enter his bedroom, surprised to see Miranda.

She offers to take him by the hand.

Miranda brings the barbarian to the garage, where a green plank stands near a table and chairs.

Miranda puts on gauntlets and plugs some manner of device in her ear. She displays one of the leather packs from the great room.

MIRANDA: Book.

As she speaks, her hand makes a gesture. She repeats this same sound, and her hand repeats the same gesture.

She touches his hands to configure them to the shape of the gesture.

MIRANDA: Book.

This time, she makes no gesture.

MIRANDA: *Book.*

He understands the sternness in her voice. He associates the sound with the gesture, and now he must make the same gesture. He does. She smiles.

She takes a white stick and makes with it marks on the green board.

MIRANDA: "Book."

He gestures. She nods. He realizes the white scratches on the green board must be the same as the sound and the gesture. He repeats the gesture and nods.

Miranda is elated.

Hours pass. The green board is full of markings Miranda has taught Rohet are called "words."

He wants to continue learning, but Miranda sits down, mentally fried. She waves her hands "no" and he reluctantly nods.

She points to him.

MIRANDA: Now you teach me.

He doesn't comprehend.

Deftly, she rises from her seat, pirouettes around him and removes Dragon Claw from its sheath. He quickly rises, unsure of her intent.

She laughs and tosses him the sword. She holds out her own blade.

MIRANDA: You. Teach. Me.

He smiles.

Swords clang!

Airpo flies home to an empty nest.

There is no horizon within view from the Forever Trees. He sits alone, watching the dark orange burn away to star shine. He munches on a grub, staring off into the metamorphosis.

As Airpo lifts the writhing grub to his mouth, he notices the gray hairs on his arm. And now, another day has gone.

Some winged apes are content to be alone. Airpo was never given the choice.

He daydreams of being chief - so caught up in it that he catches himself muttering. His crooked black fingers dribble his lips, as though he brush away the gnat of madness too much solitude brings.

He eats his grub. He focuses on that.

He has had better.

A bird flutters through the open windows of the church. Sweaty workers on an unsteady scaffold crowbar away the final stained glass memorial of Rohet.

The choleric Cleric supervises the removal from the safety of the church aisle. The workers balance the delicate depiction dangerously close to the edge of the scaffold.

CLERIC: Let it fall.

The blade-shaped stained glass flips from the scaffold and Rohet's image breaks into a thousand colorful shards upon the marble floor.

Within a few swift sword strikes, Miranda's non-sparring blade is directed at Rohet's throat. She smiles, smug and pleased. Yet, when she looks into his eyes, they direct her downward, where the tip of Dragon Claw rests beneath her left breast. Miranda gnashes her teeth and throws down her sword, signing wildly.

MIRANDA: <Damn it! Why didn't I see that? Had I advanced another step for the kill, you'd have plunged into my heart!>

Rohet smiles, and appears to be laughing.

MIRANDA: <Yes?>

ROHET: <You're speaking without the translator device.>

Miranda looks at her hands and realizes it is true. She smiles and shrugs.

MIRANDA: <Guess I just needed to be angry enough.>

The honest assessment makes Rohet smile even more.

In the servant's kitchen, Rohet cuts a green tree fruit and shares the slices with Miranda.

ROHET: <If you were a warrior in my time, you'd be eating more than tree fruit.>

He pats his belly, indicating men of large girth.

MIRANDA: <But their enemies would have to cut through all that

fat before reaching any muscle.>

Rohet nods, popping a slice of fruit into his mouth.

MIRANDA: <I see you didn't belong there, either.>

Rohet convulses, taken off guard by his own laughter. Miranda smiles, biting a slice in half.

ROHET: <Some of us wanted to fight a leaner game. Wide men for wide battles, but some skirmishes required speed, stealth. I thought I learned the best of all styles, but I've never encountered any opponent like Tothtartan. The finest fighters take away your options, and he left me with none. No chance for any offense.>

MIRANDA: <Yet you prevailed.>

He shakes his head.

ROHET: <I delayed.>

MIRANDA: <How would you defeat him if you ever had to face him again?>

Rohet's lips curl into a wry grin.

ROHET: <You tell me.>

Miranda crooks her eyebrow.

MIRANDA: I believe I will.

The playful sincerity of Miranda's voice once again sends Rohet's shoulders into body laughter.

She laughs, smiling as she peels the fruit slice. He watches her perform this mundane task, drawn in to her smile, the life about her. Then

he realizes it.

Rohet looks away, studying some crusted kitchenware hanging on the wall, successfully suppressing his smile that was so vivid and honest, just a moment ago.

The silken people holler and argue inside the crowded Tap Inn. From the street, the Cleric witnesses an agitator, John, rip apart a picture of a crown to a vocal contingent of approval.

The Cleric enters the rowdy inn and joins John at his table.

JOHN: Wobbly boy! Another ale. Try not to spill it this time.

Spes, a young man with a large brow and a lopsided smile, interrupts his dishwashing to run a large stein to John's table. He trips, falling face first onto the ale and nut shelled floor.

Some laugh, but none as loud as John.

JOHN: I'm not paying for that!

Everyone laughs at that, even Gothicer and his band of Shadow Cannibals seated in the back, but John's cackle still manages to rise above the din.

JOHN: Look at 'em. Even his body stutters. G'wan. Get back to whatever it is I'm payin' you for.

CLERIC: You make him nervous.

JOHN: You'd know all about makin' young lads nervous.

CLERIC: Vicious rumors from vicious lips.

JOHN: Vicious, supple lips.

The proper server brings ale for the duo, as the Cleric tosses the ripped apart poster pieces in the air.

CLERIC: Quite a display.

JOHN: Thank you, preacher.

CLERIC: Of treason.

JOHN: It's only treason if I recognize him as my king.

The Cleric blurts out a laugh. John toasts him.

JOHN: Or any damn king.

John belches. The Cleric blinks away the stench.

CLERIC: That's anarchy.

JOHN: Even her. No use for the lot of 'em.

The Cleric offers a curt smile, takes a sip of ale and rises from his seat.

CLERIC: Thanks for the drink.

JOHN: What brought you in?

CLERIC: Sizing up the competition.

JOHN: No competition here. This house is open seven days. Yours is only open one. Nope! No competition at all!

John releases another chortle as the Cleric continues on his prim way.

A meditative Tothtartan sits cross-legged on the dirt floor of



Sersee's cabin. The witch sits before him on a chair fashioned from the rib cages of several large animals, the bones intertwining in abnormal marriage.

Tothtartan strains and the candle flames flicker, lapped up by an ever-growing circuit of wind.

SERSEE: The Red Death resistss you.

Tothtartan exhales, his chest caving in defeat.

TOTHTARTAN: You coax it.

SERSEE: I have learned my craft, and it is in service for no man.

TOTHTARTAN: Not anymore.

SERSEE: I saw my future. I failed to believe it. Love unwinds life's compass.

Tothtartan nods, then speaks plainly.

TOTHTARTAN: I've only known lust.

SERSEE: And it will be your undoing.

The demon uncrosses his legs and reclines in the dirt, studying the mysterious eyes of his teacher.

TOTHTARTAN: You've seen this?

SERSEE: Lust has been the ruin of many a great man.

TOTHTARTAN: But you've seen me undone?

SERSEE: As I said, I no longer council on my craft.

TOTHTARTAN: Some time, I will fall. You know this. Yet, you continue to instruct me.

Sersee takes a long sip of cider.

SERSEE: I would not believe in magic if I was certain of it all.

TOTHTARTAN: So... I could be like love. A force of chaos. A natural anomaly. It is written that I will be unwritten.

She cradles the cider cup in her hand, the brew swirling within. She places the cup on the unrefined wooden table beside her chair of bones. A silk covered casket seems out of place on the rustic table, and Sersee's hand gently glides across it.

She bows her head, clutches the protruding ribs of her chair and sings in a low brogue.

SERSEE: Spindle forth, restless spirit. Honor me with your presenssss.

Tothtartan seizes in excruciating deliverance, the red mist swimming from his being and taking the form of a small, skull apparition.

The casket begins to glow from the inside out. Sersee opens the gift box, reaches in and pulls out small, silver chips danced upon by streamers of lightning. The air burns, leaving a smoky shadow of the lightning's lifetime, but the witch feels no pain.

The light is reflected in the mist of the Red Death. The demon skull caws at the lightning, but respects it enough to retreat back into Tothtartan.

The would-be sorcerer rolls to his knees in the fetal position, heaving violently. Sersee enjoys her cider.

SERSEE: The Red Death resists you because you are not its

master. This spirit was broken by another.

TOTHTARTAN: ...the barbarian.

SERSEE: The one of legend.

TOTHTARTAN: That was no god.

SERSEE: I never insinuated he was.

TOTHTARTAN: That oaf holds the secret to unlimited realms while  
I -

SERSEE: He knows nothing! And that is to your advantage. Or are  
you so far removed from your humanity, dark one? Did not other  
humans tame the beasts you rode into war?

Tothtartan coughs, spittle dangling from his lips, choking on his own  
rage. She *does* enjoy her cider.

TOTHTARTAN: Witch... To control this devil... I simply force my  
will upon it?

SERSEE: Is there a beast you haven't?

Miranda attacks Rohet with her sword, and the barbarian stumbles  
back, using his own sword to deflect her speed and power while throwing  
heated strikes of his own. There is nothing in the open field to encumber  
any of their swings, the blows landing in pure, fierce fury.

Harse watches from the safety of the throne room, Dr. Zarmond beside  
him, torn between watching the battle rage and her king squirm.

The two warriors are evenly matched, until Miranda's brief show of

pride, letting her guard down, leaves her open to the thrust of Rohet's blade, cutting into her arm, severing veins and revealing the marble of muscle. The consolation that had Miranda not turned, the blade would have punctured her lung, is little relief to the poison lemon sting of such a cut.

HARSE: I find this exhibition unsettling.

ZARMOND: I have faith in her.

HARSE: He's the Lord of Lightning.

ZARMOND: She's your daughter.

Harse says nothing.

Rohet easily knocks the sword from Miranda's hand. He reels back for the killing stroke, unprepared for Miranda lunging for his lips. The suddenness, the kiss, and the wrath behind it, stuns Rohet. Harse springs from his chair.

HARSE: Enough!

Miranda pulls back from Rohet's damaged lips, savoring the moment, and bemused enough to wink. She quickly turns her back to him, grabs his sword arm, twists it, and plunges the sword apparently through the twain, though only Rohet bellows a guttural moan.

Harse is dumbfounded, frozen at the scene.

Rohet falls lifeless to the grass, exposing the trick of perspective that the sword only sunk into him, alongside but not through Miranda.

HARSE: Remove those contraptions!

Miranda and Rohet are in the throne room, outfitted with eye-covering

helmets attached by wires to empty hilts shining harmless light beams.

Rohet, still smarting real pain from the virtual battle, squirrels out of his helmet and slides it far away from him across the floor. He rises to his feet just as Harse storms past him towards the exit.

HARSE: I want those things destroyed!

MIRANDA: This could be a valuable training tool for our soldiers.

Harse turns, angrily pointing at his daughter.

HARSE: My soldiers. You don't have soldiers. We don't have soldiers. I have soldiers!

MIRANDA: No, you don't!

The king throws his hands in the air and stomps into an adjoining room.

MIRANDA: You have unreliable mercenaries, but no standing -

Miranda throws her helmet to the floor, shattering it. She storms away in the opposite direction of her father's tantrum until she, too, disappears into another room.

Dr. Zarmond reaches down for Rohet's helmet.

ZARMOND: Two of these are a breakthrough. One of these is a paperweight.

Rohet politely smiles, rubbing the spot of his imaginary fatal wound.

ZARMOND: Your mind told you that you were stabbed. It'll pass.

Besides, she cheated.

Rohet signs his response.

ROHET: <No. She is my better.>

The barbarian hobbles off along the path of Harse's exit.

ZARMOND: Rohet. Aren't you going to tell her that?

ROHET: <Does she not know?>

He continues on his way, leaving the befuddled doctor alone in the throne room. Zarmond looks around, then drops the second helmet, shattering upon the ground.

The shadow of the palace infects the disapproving silken people as they make their way into church. The stained glass windows of Rohet have been removed. The side windows have been bordered up with wooden planks, but the primary windows now depict a golden chalice.

During service, the Cleric ensures that silken citizens drink from such a chalice to receive purification, while the lost people are forced to drink from an earthen bowl.

Pregnant, humid silence fills the air above the full length of the dinner table. Miranda stabs at her meal, while Harse has no problem giving the food his complete attention.

MIRANDA: You did not congratulate me, father.

HARSE: Mm, well. Wasn't actual combat.

MIRANDA: I see.

HARSE: You know, any woman in the Shimmering City would be content to be called princess.

MIRANDA: Not lately, father... By that, I mean you have lost a great deal of favor with your subjects.

HARSE: I never wanted the crown, they never wanted me to wear to it.

MIRANDA: But what are you going to do about it?

HARSE: I've half a mind to let them choose their own leaders. My only immediate plan was to enjoy a nice dinner, which is proving nigh impossible.

MIRANDA: Princess is nice, father, but this one longs to be a general.

Harse lets out a deep, rumbling sigh.

MIRANDA: I was *born* to be a general.

The king's silver fork slams against the gold-trimmed plate with a sharp clang.

MIRANDA: You can't protect me from the world forever.

He offers an exhausted smile.

HARSE: At least until dessert?

She returns the smile with some affection and, like a proper lady, pats her lips with a folded napkin.

MIRANDA: And after dessert, it will be breakfast.

Miranda rises and walks with graceful poise to the ominous twin doors leading to the hall.

MIRANDA: And after breakfast, mid-meal. And after that, and after that...

HARSE: Maybe I'm protecting the world from you!

Miranda's smile fades as she closes the heavy doors behind her. Not two steps from them and she hears the disharmonious crash of fineries crashing against the stone floor.

She opens the door, and by the evidence of sharp and shiny plate shards comingled with sauces and chicken bones, King Harse has indeed cleared the table.

But it is the man himself which grabs Miranda's concern; silent, solitary, leaning over the pile of debris as if he were frozen in midmotion. His eyes are open, but all she sees is sadness. Her father's sadness now her own, Miranda glides toward Harse, standing before him.

MIRANDA: I'm sorry I grew up.

He smiles, responding in a wise and tired voice.

HARSE: It's not your fault. Just took me by surprise.

MIRANDA: You've been surprised for the past twenty years?

HARSE: Every day. Not always pleasantly...

Miranda's laugh brings the room aglow. He reaches out and holds her hand.

HARSE: Why must things change?

MIRANDA: I don't know, Poppa. But they do.

HARSE: Never would have had you if they didn't.

Harse still hasn't raised his head to look at her. She goes to her



knees to look into his wounded eyes. She smiles, a sympathetic balm.

MIRANDA: Hope I was worth it.

But Harse lacks the patience for such humor, instead embracing her, shuddering out a torrent of tears.

The royal court bustles with visitors impatient to tell the king their troubles, and growing more impatient as the Crystographer finally readies his equipment for the royal portrait. The petitioners release a collective hiss when Harse holds up his hand to stop the cloth atop the apparatus from being pulled back.

Proud King Harse insists Rohet and Miranda stand by his side at this crystography sitting. This honor was unexpected, and both are proud to oblige.

The royal portraits line the court, and each ruler has been crystallized alone. John of the Tap is one of the exasperated petitioners, and all too eager to whisper offenses to any around him.

JOHN: He just does whatever he wants. A king's only job is to uphold tradition, and he can't even do bloody that. I'll take that kind of work! Instead of bustin' my back so he can get fat off my taxes. You lot come to the Tap tonight. Maybe we'll enjoy some tax-free imbibing.

By the jagged mountain range in the distance, Rohet is certain he is

standing where Smith's shop once was. Miranda's steed gallops toward him.

MIRANDA: There you are.

She is smiling until he responds in heartbroken gesture:

ROHET: <What has happened to my people?>

Rohet stands there, lost in the overgrown field. Miranda watches him, suddenly overwhelmed. She looks to the Shimmering City.

The edge of Smith's anvil has been hewn smooth by time, but it looks magnificent in the museum's display.

MIRANDA: At some point, historians disagree on the date, the robber barons pillaged the villages in the region. They plundered the minerals, salted the farmlands... Historians seem to agree that *you* stopped them.

Rohet cannot believe that. He shakes his head, "No."

MIRANDA: Well *something* stopped them. At any rate, the fields were so ravaged that our ancestors went in search of more habitable lands on higher grounds.

She knows Rohet is only half-listening, fixated on that anvil, so she stops talking. He doesn't notice. He reaches into the display and runs his fingers over the anvil top.

Miranda fights with herself, but finally coils her arm around Rohet's arm, and leans in to whisper.

MIRANDA: ...she's gone. They're all gone.

He nods, though remains trained on that anvil.

ROHET: <We could have lived with the devil. They had, for years. Maybe that was the natural course of things. I tried to save them, but you're right. They're all gone anyway. Only me and the devil remain.>

Miranda bows her head.

ROHET: <That's wrong.>

She looks up, hopeful, only to realize Rohet is pointing to the carved stones in the display.

ROHET: <These are not hers. The craftsmanship is abysmal.>

MIRANDA: It's meant to be an approximation of what a smith's shop might have looked like.

ROHET: <Not like this. Where is the workbench? And why are there forks on that table? We didn't know what forks were, we ate with our hands. And, and ->

MIRANDA: Rohet.

ROHET: <But this is ->

MIRANDA: *Rohet*. Tell me about them.

Rohet's eyes are heavy and have a rare quality of desperation about them. Miranda's voice is soothing, and the caress of her hand upon his craggy face settles his anxious fears.

MIRANDA: Tell me all about them. And then let's tell the world.

Gratitude fills his heart, which she sees in his smile.

The winged apes celebrate the banana bloom with dances and bonfires throughout their village in the trees.

The festivities end when Airbo flutters down in the middle of a performance. Chief Tice immediately ambles over and confronts him.

CHIEF TICE: Airbo! You not welcome here! You banished, now you upset sacred ritual!

AIRBO: Airbo should not be banished. Airbo should be chief!

CHIEF TICE: Airbo not chosen to be chief. Tice chosen to be chief. Tice banish Airbo! Now you must die! Remove his wings!

A mob of angry apes converge on Airbo and begin plucking his wings.

AIRBO: Wait! I prove why Airbo should be chief! You will make me chief once you see!

CHIEF TICE: You have nothing we want.

AIRBO: Airbo have your daughter.

With that, the frightened apes release Airbo. Chief Tice curls his fist and thumps his chest, which heaves in measured breaths.

CHIEF TICE: Airbo blaspheme?

AIRBO: Make Airbo chief. Tice get daughter.

CHIEF TICE: Daughter gone. Too many blooms ago.

Airbo jumps on the railing and thumps *his* chest.

AIRBO: Airbo bring daughter, Airbo made chief!

The superstitious flying apes warily agree.

CHIEF TICE: Don't listen to fake! Airbo perish for lies!

AIRBO: Airbo call friend Tothtartan!

The bonfire crackles with a bomb of red mist and blue light.

Tothtartan emerges from the smoke billowing from the flames. A simple magician's trick, but one that still impresses; the winged apes shriek, and wildly take to the air, howling as they leap through the trees.

However afraid, though, they must bear witness.

CHIEF TICE: Bad magic! Bad magic!

AIRBO: Bad magic bring daughter.

Now for the actual magic: Tothtartan waves Dragon Tail and creates a portal from out of the ether. A few swirls and revealed before believing eyes are the Forever Trees, too many blooms ago.

TOTHTARTAN: There. Is that not your daughter, at play with her friend, young Airbo?

Chief Tice trembles, so overwhelmed at the sight of his missing girl that he is unable to speak or even reach out to her.

AIRBO: This... right before she perish. Can't look, no, can't look.

Tice's frozen frame thaws for a familiar hatred.

CHIEF TICE: Now! Now all see how you kill my daughter! Show me, devil. Show me what no father should see.

TOTHTARTAN: I know nothing of your daughter's demise, Chief, only her disappearance. Look at them. Two children, playful, eager to spread their wings. Look at the leaves, Chief Tice. The unexpected upcurrent of the wind you worship. That is the

culprit who took your daughter away.

Tice begs off, trying to avert his eyes, but Tothtartan grabs him, much to the shock of the villagers.

TOTHTARTAN: You wanted to wallow in morbid fascination, so wallow. Witness the fate of your daughter you begged this devil to see!

The Chief crumbles into a sobbing heap. Tothtartan roughly grabs Tice by the jaw and makes him watch the events in the portal unfurl.

TOTHTARTAN: Her frail, young feathers caught in a whirling wind. She's scared, frightened for her life. She falls.

CHIEF TICE: Hannaw!

Young Airbo makes a desperate grab for his friend, but it is too late. Hannaw plummets.

Tice joins in the audible gasp of the villagers as they witness Hannaw helplessly fall. Yet, she appears to be falling *nearer*. The simpering Chief takes tentative steps towards the portal -

- Hannaw falls through the portal, into her father's arms! Tice convulses with joy at her embrace.

Airbo leaps with heartbreaking joy, tears streaming down his blue-grey cheeks.

TOTHTARTAN: As I said. Not demise, but disappearance.

CHIEF TICE: She has returned! My child has returned!

Hannaw is panting and trembling. Her eyes dart about, over her father's shoulder, but find nothing known to her. Airbo's wide grin soon

eclipses her view. He keeps wiping away a steady stream of tears. Hannaw's eyes widen at the sight of him.

HANNAW: Who are you?

Airbo's chest sinks, and the tears of joy wither away. Hannaw's eyes now fill with tears, of confusion, of fright. She buries her head into her father's neck to avoid facing the world.

Nevertheless, the village clamors in celebration. Without a second thought, Tice removes his chieftain headgear and casts it all to Airbo. It is insignificant to the prize he has won.

Tice carries Hannaw to his hut. Airbo takes a step to pursue them, but feels the cold hand of Tothtartan pulling him back.

TOTHTARTAN: If that is what you want, we can bring your younger self through the portal.

Airbo looks into the rift and sees his delicate younger self panicking and crying, alone on the branch.

TOTHTARTAN: All those years of rejection and pain. They would cease to be just as you would cease to be. You can start again, as you were then, and be at your best friend's side.

Airbo curls his toes into the bark.

AIRBO: You need Airbo lead army.

TOTHTARTAN: They will follow me now, regardless. You saved my life. Decide which life you will choose for yourself and consider my debt paid.

Airbo's eyes are trained on the hut, and his breathing quickens

toward a decision. His coarse hand grabs Dragon Tail and pushes it downward, forcing the swirling portal to close.

AIRBO: The bananas have bloomed.

To the approving din of the jungle, Airbo crowns himself chief. The winged apes shower him with banana tributes.

AIRBO: They follow you because I say so.

The three oily members of the learned council sit behind disheveled piles of papers at their elevated desks, which are horseshoed around a stage. Rohet begrudgingly sits before them, Miranda by his side.

SNEDLY: But Strovil! Strovil's chronicle - B7, section Q - it clearly states that the Sunken City was doomed by divine wrath.

MALLON: And that is the only mention of the Sunken City in all the histories, and was recorded centuries after the, after, well, I hesitate to call it -fact.□

Rohet rises with a huff and heads for the exit. Snedly whispers vinegar to his peers.

SNEDLY: Annnd, we've lost him. Did I not say he had no mettle for heady matters? He all but eviscerated the Cleric.

QUAN: Eh, now, restraint is a form of some intelligence.

SNEDLY: Limited.

MALLON: Rohet. I'm sorry if the council has wasted your time.

The big man turns to them and signs, which Miranda translates.



MIRANDA: I don't know why you bother to ask me questions when you all obviously know the answers. You academics are... as worse as zealots.

The councilmen shift in their seats.

MALLON: You may take your leave.

ROHET: <Another council of men writing history to suit their own reflections.>

SNEDLY: And does our wounded friend have a problem with men or with reflections?

ROHET: <My problem is historians with no quality of inner self.>

Snedly smiles and rises.

SNEDLY: I think I shall take *my* leave, as well. The inevitable end to any debate with this one will be him snapping our necks.

ROHET: <You write the future as well as the past?>

SNEDLY: If you'll permit me to leave, Princess Miranda, I have a busy day of proselytizing.

ROHET: <And will you write of Princess Miranda one day?>

SNEDLY: Such is my duty.

ROHET: <But she has not been raped or murdered. I have read your so-called histories and they strain to include any woman who does not meet that criteria! Where are the chronicles of the great women-nations; who sings of their legend? Where are the accounts of Abony, a day's westward journey from the wooly rhinocs graveyard, where I took refuge after the disillusionment

of war? An imperfect place, same as yours. But those I met treated me well and without judgment, concepts new to my suspicious soul, and, apparently, many of yours. They were the first mapmakers, the Abonese, and showed me the path to the muted land.>

Rohet pauses, overcome with the burden of memory.

All eyes turn to the furious scratching of quill across parchment.

Meek Quan realizes everyone is observing his hurried scribbling.

QUAN: Please continue, son.

Rohet, satisfied, takes his seat in the center of the room.

ROHET: <He will need more paper. I have many dead friends.>

HARSE: Do you have that crystal developed, yet?

CRYSTOGRAPHER: I'm afraid, Your Highness, as you'll see, it isn't going to develop.

The Crystographer hands the King the crystal, but when Harse sees it, he is dejected.

HARSE: Bring this to Dr. Zarmond. And don't show another soul.

CRYSTOGRAPHER: Yes, Your Grace.

The Cleric stands before the alter, his fat fingers digging in to the leather cover of a hefty tome he waves about, for all his worshippers to

see.

CLERIC: The charlatan posed as a god, and when he could not win our favor because we saw through his ruse, he took his act to our schools, trying to infect the minds of children and turn them against us, and against the one, true way.

The Sunken City was damned to the sea for their sins. Not according to Rohet and the laissez-faire, who would have us believe that the erosion caused by so many years of war simply made it crack from the firmament into the sea.

John of the Tap, slightly drunk, laughs, but most of the assembled shake their heads in righteous indignation.

CLERIC: He claims to have been there! Yes! I will read you the lies so you will know the truth. "We had more than our share of shiny baubles and could see no benefit in risking our lives for another campaign. The chieftain coveted the land upon the sea for its strategic possibilities, though when he realized we would not win it for him, he claimed voices from the sky told him to, and that if any of us died in the quest, the phantoms would reward us with riches beyond any we knew. I thought this a poor trick against we who gave so much, and considered running my sword through him, but my compatriots were either that gullible or their greed extended into death. The war was waged, the land was won, but the dead looked no gladder for it, that I could tell. Another leader from another tribe also lusted for

the well-placed real estate, and, seeing the fury in which my bloods had fought for it, claimed that he, too, had heard voices from the sky. And that is how I came to loath endless war waged for abstractions. I saw the world for what it was, and I wanted something better.”

The Cleric closes the book with theatrical solemnity.

CLERIC: According to this, we are all fools.

A somber mood hangs over the throne room. King Harse is sullen and Dr. Zarmond is pensive by his side. Rohet and Miranda are dumbfounded by the crystal. The images of Harse and Miranda were captured perfectly, but Rohet is a blur.

ZARMOND: This really isn't my field, but from what I've gathered, Rohet, you're either not truly here, or you're in many places at the same time. It would certainly account for your occurrences throughout our history.

Rohet signs and Miranda translates.

MIRANDA: He has no memory of those.

ZARMOND: I regret to say you may have no memory of your time *with us* once you disappear again... and I believe such will come to pass.

Rohet remains still, then nods his head in agreement.

MIRANDA: No! No - why does it have to be this way? We can help

you. Father, tell Rohet we will help him!

She doesn't have to wait for the King's slow and somber response to know his reply.

HARSE: I wish I could, love. These are forces beyond our understanding.

MIRANDA: Then we'll learn! We'll fight! We'll adapt! Isn't that who we are? Isn't -

Rohet embraces her. She claws into him, not wanting to let him go. He gently pulls away and signs.

ROHET: <I'm sorry. It is for the best. You see? I wanted to spare you, but I am a curse to all who love me.>

MIRANDA: Well you're too late -

Without warning, Miranda screams and falls to the floor in a seizing fit. They are baffled by her intense failing, and even more so when it abruptly halts. Her eyes open, but are without pupils. Her voice is monotone.

MIRANDA: Jakob.

HARSE: ...Loreli?

MIRANDA: Kube is under siege by Tothtartan. He wields a magic beyond my understanding. I cannot stave off the attack. The truth that binds all realities will be shattered. I cannot...

Miranda's eyes close and all the tension from the seizure escapes her body. She slowly stirs back to consciousness.

MIRANDA: What happened?

HARSE: Our days of peace are at an end.



## WAR THROUGH THE AGES

A histrionic crowd of silken citizens and lost people hold congress outside the church where King Harse, Miranda and Rohet sit high atop their steeds, all in battle dress.

HARSE: Our very existence is in jeopardy! Tothtartan the man nearly unlocked the secrets of the Red Death. Rohet, our Lord of Lightning, fought for a generation to defeat the traitor. Now we face Tothtartan the warlock. I am not here to conscript you. I am here to *ask* you to join us in vanquishing this evil!

The rallying cry does little more than inspire tepid whispers and smug looks, until a husky voice booms over the crowd from a large woman of lost people stock, Turna.

TURNA: I will join your fight. When I was weak, you gave me bread. When I was cast outside, you invited me in. I will stand by you.

Vicious giggles follow among the silken people regarding how much bread she must have been given to consume. Harse hears the insults, as well as the silence of no other voice raising to join him. Finally, the young man with a lopsided smile pipes up.

SPES: I'll go!

The crowd laughs, and John stokes the flames.

JOHN: The horse should ride him!

Spes hobbles toward the horses.

SPES: I'm a good fighter. An, an I want to do my part.

Harse watches the silken people reel back their heads in laughter, their chattering jaws drooling sarcasms.

HARSE: Suit him up.

The crowd is stunned, but upon seeing the royal guard dress Spes in ill-fitting armor, their laughter is even harsher than before, the idea that their King could be serious about such a thing.

HARSE: There is more bravery in this child than in the lot of you. Where is your courage? A time ago, we defended this city!

CLERIC: You have your God now, Your Highness! Why should I risk my life when *he'll* protect us all?

*These comments the crowd is inspired by. Rohet signs and Miranda translates.*

MIRANDA: We are all gods. Can you not see that? We of the flesh and blood are one with the spirit and stars. Can you not see we are all divine?

SNEDLY: What a clever act! Is a juggler next?

The people roar with laughter, and some even mock the sign language gestures.

CLERIC: We are nothing but insignificant mortals. You have convinced us it is gods who shape destiny, and kings who shape maps, so let us not keep you from your work! We no longer possess fear or love for you. That we offer you no praise and no obedience is because you gods and kings have conditioned us!



Since you have taken away our choices, we shall drink from our golden cups and watch your world fall where it may.

HARSE: You people. You are prisoners of your own apathy! If Tothtartan succeeds, the world *will* fall. Heed me, though, instigators. If, through some cosmic mistake, we return triumphant... there will be a reckoning.

CLERIC: What judge would convict us, when there is no crime in doing nothing?

HARSE: You misunderstand, friend. There will be no judge.

The Cleric covers his throat.

With a crack of his whip, Harse leads Rohet, Miranda, Turna and Spes riding out of the gate of the Shimmering City.

Turna had never seen Kube, but she certainly never expected to see the upper sides of it splayed open over the skull face, a staircase of bricks floating in midair and leading to some manner of library/throne room where a cube-headed sorcerer was holding court. There's also the matter of the winged ape men circling above. Good thing her band is safe from the disturbing business of that, hiding in the edge of the woods. Safe for now, anyway.

Rohet and Miranda scout the scene from a few yards ahead, nestled behind the last tree before the great stony expanse.

ROHET: <I expected traps, not an invitation.>

She places her hand on his shoulder and offers a hopeless smile that weighs upon him.

ROHET: <Let me go alone. There is no need for this loss of life.>

MIRANDA: <And if you perish, we'll be subject to the same fate or worse. You're not alone, Rohet. You never have been.>

Rohet softens his gestures -

ROHET: <I know.>

- before returning to his precise, disciplined delivery.

ROHET: <And I repay you with almost certain death.>

MIRANDA: <Yours was the better end of the arrangement.>

He'd laugh if he could.

Miranda and Rohet return to camp. Harse opens his mouth to speak, but it is Miranda's voice that forcefully cuts through the fear in direct and succinct authority.

MIRANDA: We're going to ride two in front, two in back, with Rohet protected in the middle. We'll deflect the apes from you as best we can, until you reach the floating stairwell.

HARSE: We need to save Loreli.

MIRANDA: *Father...* Rohet will tend to that once Tothtartan is slain. From the looks of it... I'd say she is chained to that throne by... I don't know, shackles of light? Energy bands of some design. But she's alive, at least.

She pats Spes' helmet.

MIRANDA: How about you, soldier? Is everything clear?

SPES: I ride in the back flank, alongside the King.

MIRANDA: And what do you do with your sword?

SPES: Keep swinging!

MIRANDA: That's right. You're a brave lad.

Turna tilts her head and whispers from the side of her mouth to her king.

TURNA: Your Highness. The lad...

HARSE: Should I have patronized him, instead? He knows well enough. If he didn't, I would not have brought him here.

Turna bows her head, assuming the king had concluded. She is surprised he offers more.

HARSE: That wasn't always the case. To my great regret.

Miranda sighs as she spies the vast breadth of cracked and barren land from the edge of the woods to the base of Kube.

MIRANDA: We all have no choice but to run these horses as fast as they'll go across the stony land if we're to ensure Rohet arrives at that stairwell.

TUNRA: Well, I'm as fighting ready as I'll ever be.

MIRANDA: Then saddle up.

Tunra, Spes and King Harse walk to their horses, but Miranda pulls Rohet aside, and kisses his lips in a brief and intense embrace. Their eyes stay locked on the other as they walk toward their steeds.

Airbo climbs down the library shelves to join Tothtartan, who stands without a concern in the center of the stone floor.

AIRBO: Why no bad magic?

TOTHTARTAN: Patience, my friend.

The five riders thunder from the forest. The horse hooves chip off bit by bit as they mercilessly gallop over the stony land.

AIRBO: There your prey, flock!

MOTOO: Motoo wanted army!

AIRBO: Motoo fight what's there! So say chief!

Airbo grabs Motoo and throws him from the ledge of the stone floor. Motoo tumbles in the air, rapidly flapping his wings to stay afloat. He gains his bearings and flies toward the riders.

Airbo looks over the ledge and grunts.

The flock of flying ape men eclipse the sun.

MIRANDA: Father! Aim for the cluster!

King Harse reaches over his shoulder and pulls a small meteor powered missile up a track on his armor. He presses a button on his breastplate and the missile corkscrews through the sky. The flying apes try to scatter, but too late. Scores of them suffer the explosion, from which

smoldering corpses plummet to the hard earth.

Miranda aims her fire pistol at the disorientated survivors.

MIRANDA: Turna!

TURNA: Aye!

Miranda and Turna send a torrent of fire pistol beams into the sky. Some beams effortlessly burn through ape wings, setting the beasts ablaze; other rays pierce scalding, fatal wounds through thick ape hides.

Still, more apes attack and the ever-unreliable fire pistols expend quickly. Instead of fatal wounds, the wounds the weaker beams inflict only bubble up blisters, and for creatures as exposed to the elements as ape men are, such burns barely register.

MIRANDA: Pikes!

The riders raise their pointed spears to keep the apes from swooping down. Unable to adjust his flight path, an overzealous ape flies to his own demise, impaled on Turna's pike. The impact sends him over her head, until the body slips off the spear and tumbles to the ground.

Motoo picks up one of the smoldering ape corpses and chucks it at the legs of Turna's horse. The horse trips so quickly that Miranda loses sight of where on the stony land Turna was thrown to.

Spes eyes the carnage his horse is directly headed to collide into -

SPES: Up!

The horse leaps over the detritus -

SPES: Whoo hoo!

- and keeps running. Spes swings his sword without restraint, keeping the apes at bay.

Turna scrapes across the stone, rolling over and over until her rag of a body finally comes to a bloodied halt. She strives to make it to her feet, combating searing pain and dizziness. A group of apes land around her and club her to death.

Multiple apes swoop toward Miranda and Rohet in tandem, but the humans' swordplay proves swifter than any simian formation.

Two apes bring their clubs to bear against Spes, overwhelming him. Harse sees this and flings his pike through one of the attackers. Before Harse can find another weapon on his armor, Motoo tackles him out of the saddle and onto the unforgiving earth.

The flying ape warrior continues his attack on Spes. The ape deflects the boy's wildly swinging sword with a solid crack from his club, grabs Spes' arm and rips it from the socket. The young man's shrieks are drummed under by the sounds of his skullbeing fatally clubbed in by his very own limb.

A league of apes toss corpses in Miranda and Rohet's obvious path to the floating stairwell, but their horses expertly leap over the obstacles.

At last, the first brick of the floating stairwell is within distance. Rohet stands on his saddle and leaps from his galloping horse,

only to be immediately intercepted by a winged ape man.

They struggle in midair until the ape is dispatched by Dragon Claw. Rohet splats against the first step. Though jarred, he wastes little time leaping to the next, and the next, toward calm Tothtartan waiting above him. Ape men try to stop Rohet, but he slices them away.

Miranda battles a gang of apes from horseback. Amid the flurry, she sees Motoo carrying her injured father to Airbo.

AIRBO: Put him with witch.

Motoo drops the ailing King against the throne Loreli is chained to. Loreli wonders how, even in the delirium all around them, Harse can still look upon her with such wounded affection. Her long, white hair and their wrinkled faces tell the tale of years apart.

Rohet continues his ascension. Almost there. With a strong leap from the final step, Tothtartan will be within reach of a killing stroke from Rohet's Dragon Claw sword. Rohet reels back his blade and leaps toward his enemy -

- yet, with a wave of his hand, Tothtartan creates a portal that Rohet plunges into. And with that, the barbarian hope for this world is gone.

MIRANDA: NO!

Miranda is stunned, but she also sees the brutalized dead. She sees her maimed father and the helpless Priestess.

MIRANDA: Tothtartan! I surrender!

Airbo laughs.

Rohet crashes to a familiar stony land. He is outside Kube. But all is still. No bodies. That deafening hum is the same, and the giant skull face continues its dispassionate gaze over the wasteland, but no signs of more dead friends.

He sees the mountains in the distance and heads toward them.

What is this? These trees. Even at night, he knows these trees. He knows this path... the *old* path. The path home!

Rohet bounds through the woods and into *his* village.

It is quiet at night, and save for the candle in Smith's window, only touched by moonlight.

A calloused hand pulls back the door to her house... it is Smith. They see each other. This is real. They rush into each other's arms! They kiss in furious passion -

- what's this? She is gone.

That's it. Simply vanished from his side. No, no, this is madness! The house is right there, the village is... *somewhat* the same. Candlelight shines through the window. He walks to it and peers inside the house... *Smith*. But she is old. And she is dying. At her bedside are witches



dressed all in white, caring for her and praying.

Though weak, she sees what must be the ghost of him through the window. She reaches out for him as tears roll down his face. How he loves her.

She smiles a final time. She is at peace.

Eviscerated, Rohet stumbles back to where he came. He brandishes his sword. Kube will pay -

- but he is nearly trampled by... robber barons? Night is now day. A village, someone else's village built over his own, is being raided and plundered. Hysteria surrounds him. The innocent cry for help.

And then he remembers the stained glass. He is the Lord of Lightning! He stabs his blade into the belly of the sky and electricity consumes him! He slays the invading robber baron horde and looks to the direction of Kube - lightning races underfoot and propels him into the air and safely back to land miles along the path.

Airbo floats Miranda down to the stone floor. She muscles her way from his grip and stands defiant before the skull face of Tothtartan.

MIRANDA: You have won. You will kill us all, of that I have no doubt.

Harse leans in and holds Loreli's hand.

MIRANDA: As I have surrendered, I have but one request. You allow me to choose my manner of death.

After a disconcerting pause, Tothtartan motions for her to continue.

MIRANDA: Both my father and the barbarian spoke of a swordsman who was better at the art than any living creature. That is the death I choose, demon. Put away your conjuring, put away your spells. If you have any humanity left within that husk, pick up your sword - and *fight*.

AIRBO: Airbo kill her?

MIRANDA: You can *try*.

Tothtartan bays laughter.

TOTHTARTAN: *This one* has spirit!

Loreli's eyes burn with hate.

Tothtartan holds out his hand. Through unseen forces, Dragon Tail snaps into his palm.

TOTHTARTAN: Her blade, Airbo.

Airbo lets out a low, rumbling growl, but offers Miranda the hilt regardless. She swipes it from the ape, then focuses solely on Tothtartan. The apes perch along the ledge of the open walls of Kube as the fighters circle. Tothtartan's cube head turns to the side bearing his human face.

He smirks. They fight!

Riding the lightning, Rohet makes hundred year leaps from one pitched battle to the next, with Kube growing ever nearer.

The Plant People that seek to smother the world are cut down like

weeds.

Rohet may only be the size of Eldric the troll giant's massive finger, but his lightning powered sword decapitates the terror.

The AutoMantons, a warring race so dependent upon technology that they fused with it, rupture apart, bolt-by-bolt, sinew from wood and metal from flesh, under Rohet's wrath.

Swords continue to clash and Miranda discovers why Tothtartan truly is without equal. He is unparalleled in swiftness, strength and strategy. Rohet told her that when he faced Tothtartan, he was unable to mount any offense - and the same is true for Miranda this day.

Tothtartan notices that when Miranda takes a step back, there is a slight hesitation. He allows her to advance only to exploit this flaw. Within seconds, he has her retreating, and at the moment of hesitation, he swings an intense blow that knocks her off balance and to one knee. She can do nothing now but hold the sword above her and deflect the deluge of strikes he hammers down. He sends more and more, faster, more reckless, feeling the rabid adrenaline rush of final conquest.

Loreli and Harse can no longer look.

Just as Miranda wants it.

She has lulled Tothtartan, and all watching, into a cadence. She allows *his* offense to become *her* offense. In the brief second it takes Tothtartan to draw back his sword, she pirouettes from her crouched

position and shoves her sword up through Tothtartan's gut, and into his heart.



Illo. 4

Tothtartan drops Dragon Tail, and the mystic bands imprisoning Loreli vanish. His lifeless flesh slumps to the ground, while his cube head rolls as a die from its invisible hold toward the throne.

The apes stand upon their perches in disbelief.

Before Miranda can recover Dragon Tail, Motoo swoops in and grabs it. He waves it above his head.

MOTOO: Motoo bad magic! Motoo bad magic!

Lightning rips above him, and from it falls Rohet - who cleaves Motoo in two.

AIRBO: Away! Away! Cause lost!

Yet, while the other apes take flight, Airbo hesitates. He leaps down to the stone floor. Rohet and Miranda stand ready to engage him with swords, but the winged simian ambles along without making eye contact. He grabs the leg of Tothtartan and pulls the fallen, headless corpse near him. Airbo tosses the body over his shoulder and mutters as he takes to the air.

AIRBO: Bury friend.

Exhausted, Miranda and Rohet allow a moment to catch their breaths. They look into each other's eyes, and she can only see his distance. She closes her eyes.

The bandaged King Harse sits up in his bed. Seated around his bed are Rohet, Dr. Zarmond and Priestess Loreli, who examines the cube head of

Tothtartan.

LORELI: These other panels. Kube hovers over our landscape. But is it arriving or leaving? And this one, the broken planet. Is that the Kube homeworld, is that why it came here?

HARSE: Or is that what will happen to our world if it stays?

Rohet signs and Zarmond translates.

ZARMOND: This world will never be at peace as long as Kube is among us.

Rohet rises, and signs with finality.

ZARMOND: I have made this my burden, and I will see it through.

HARSE: I wish there were another way, my brother.

ZARMOND: I am grateful you have made me welcome here. But I do not belong here. I cast my lot with the wind and stars.

Rohet smiles his warm smile and exits.

Loreli pulls her chair closer to the King's bedside, and Dr. Zarmond knows well enough to take her leave.

HARSE: I, hmm... I am done with ambition. That vow has been made and met.

Pause.

LORELI: The more I learned, the more there was to learn... and still I yearn for more. My vow remains unbroken.

He bows his head.

LORELI: Though... the faith that I was married to no longer exists.

He quickly looks up.

LORELI: I will never tire in my quest for knowledge. Will you tire of me sharing it with you?

They smile, bittersweet.

Alone in the throne room, Miranda weeps. She hears the commotion in the streets and looks through the telescope.

Rohet sullenly makes his way through the silken citizens. Some jeer him, other laugh, and some even throw food. An agitator throws a dragon scale mat before him. The design is of a broken crown. Rohet spits on it and storms toward the gate of the fortifying wall. The antagonizing crowd sings mocking songs as they shoo him out of their city.

This time, the soldiers have the gate open well in advance of Rohet. The moment he crosses the threshold, the gate to the Shimmering City creaks to a close.

Rohet intended to begin his journey, but he notices that, once again, the lost people have been relegated to caravans outside the fortifying wall.

His sober face distorts in rage. He calls forth the lightning of heaven into Dragon Claw and annihilates the gate!

Strong Rohet and some others pull wagons full of saws, ploughs and

seed, and even the occasional elder too sickly to walk. Rohet leads the lost people, all of them, to the site of his former village under the view of the jagged mountains. Timber for houses, renewed earth for food. He leaves them to their work.

A despondent Miranda sits on her father's bedside. He watches her, then gently holds her hand.

HARSE: Don't lose the years.

She slowly turns to him, bursts out a smile full of tears and embraces him.

Rohet arrives at Kube.

Miranda pushes her horse to breakneck speeds through the woods!

Inside Kube, Rohet brings Dragon Claw and Dragon Tail to the throne... and beside it, what he soon deduces is some kind of panel, similar to the ones used to control pulleys and measures. Rohet brushes the dust from it -

- lightning captures Rohet in its living net, and sparks shoot



through the swords, his collar, and the controls. The terrible hum of energy that reverberated through the expanse pulses within the strange cubed structure.

Miranda's horse thunders over the stony land.

Rohet is seized to the throne as lightning synapses and red mist storm around him.

The mist forms the demon skull, and the apparition envelopes Rohet's mighty arm. The barbarian struggles to resist, but the ghost puppets his arm above the controls and depresses a combination of symbols.

Red mist and blue lightning swirl in the pitiless eyes of the red brick skull, and soon encompasses the entire Kube.

For the first time since the planet was young, the single corner point of Kube balanced atop the stony land... rises. \_\_\_\_\_

Wide-eyed in pain, Rohet remains manacled by lightning to the throne, his hand continuing to manipulate the control panel as the Red Death wills it.

Unbeknownst to him, Miranda is watching in horror from behind the stairwell wall.

Days become night, seasons become years as the energy mist continues to engulf Kube over the stony land. The alien hum grows louder with it -  
- it is gone.





**BONUS MATERIALS**  
**OTHER STORIES OF MONSTERS AND FATE**

**“OEDIPUS”**

**Adapted from legend**

The baby was damned, so the barbarous King bound its feet and left his son to die. The boy was a miracle to the childless couple who found him in their fields. They loved their Oedipus, little “swollen feet,” and raised him to be Just.

As a man, he reached a crossroads, and collided with a driver enraged – a manic old man who screamed of a beast which held kingdom Thebes under siege. Oedipus defended himself, and the driver died by his hand. However Just Oedipus’ defense, the brutal burden haunted him as his crooked feet carried him down the road.

Oedipus arrived in Thebes to confront the beast who would devour the world. Yet, for every lock a key; the selfish beast bartered it would relinquish its hold over Thebes if Oedipus could answer its riddle. No fat and clever mind from the city knew what had four legs at dawn, two at midday and three at twilight, but Oedipus had reaped and sown for many seasons and knew life cycles well: “The answer is man.”

The beast, surprisingly, kept its promise, and left a jubilant Thebes crowning Oedipus as successor to their mad, departed king.

The Queen was a young widow, but still had twice the years on the monarch who now shared her bed.

She was soft and kind. She was warmth, and he loved her. With fury, Oedipus had taken the life of a man. By her tenderness, he felt his own life restored.

For the first time in years, the Queen, too, felt free to open her heart and balm old wounds that

scarred it. She spoke of the child she had lost, and the stabbing measures grief compelled her to render her womb thereafter barren. "I was robbed of my child, so I robbed all others from taking any more."

By moonset, they drew their breaths in cadence.

It was innocence until the light of day, and she noticed, "Your feet bear the brand of a binding."

Stubborn, damnable fate. The curse upon the child she had forsaken, the one who would kill his father and marry his mother, had indeed come true.

He protested, but she could not. He begged the love of now was no less true, but she was hollowed by incontestable fact. Oh, the ache of it all; a mother robbed of her baby, and now her heart tortured by a farce. The only comfort she could find was in the silk that snapped her neck.

There was no Justice in Thebes, not for a good-hearted king.

Oedipus gave up his crown, his kingdom, and with two gouging, wooden stakes, his sight. "I was blind, and blind I shall remain."

He grew old, blind and alone, settling his debt with fate. Yet he wondered, forever wondered, "If it is written, can it not be erased?"

**“ANGEL W/O MERCY”**

He crept into the sleeping child’s room, knife in hand.

Wisps of her chestnut brown hair gently rested on her pudgy cheeks. She’d washed before bedtime, but blotches of food coloring still stained her mouth and chin. Grape Popsicles will do that.

The friction of his flesh against the wooden hilt growled softly into the room as his calloused workman’s hand clenched tighter.

The familiar, wide-grinning faces of cartoon characters that dotted her bedsheets seemed garishly out-of-place in the quiet dark where the little soul rested in vulnerable repose.

What would happen to that soul if he plunged the knife into her heart at this moment? Would she be caught between worlds; the half-life of sleep and the abyss of death?

He knelt beside her. The floor creaked and his cartilage strained. His heart pounded against his ribs. This was *not* a heart attack. He knew that feeling well enough. This wasn’t a stabbing glitch. His heart was a’racing. This. This was *life*.

Should he wake her, for a final breath? Is it cruel to let her hold the gift before revoking it forever?

And what of that little soul? That little, innocent soul? Is it possible to know peace when one’s last moment is of abject, brutal terror?

God, she’s a beautiful creature.

*God...*

The tears collected rapidly, and within moments his face was awash under the salt. The sinuses opened -- such a strange machine -- and snotlets dripped, drool strung from blubbery lips, oh, we are unseemly in the ugliness of grief.

Amid his snorting and hacking and stuttering gasps, she stirred.

God!

GOD!

It must be *now*. The knife must act now. The heap of him coiled, save for his hands, joined in prayer with the knife between them. What is he to do, oh, Lord? What is he TO DO?

"Daddy?"

"...hi, sweetheart..."

"What's wrong?"

He breathed. At last, he breathed. His heart returned to pace.

"We're going away."

"Now, Daddy?"

He nodded. He sat her up in bed, and could do nothing more than embrace her. Would that she were clay, he would have pressed the whole of her into him.

"Should I pack a bag, Daddy?"

"There's no time, Sweetie. Just get dressed. Get your shoes on."

"Where are we going?"

"The forest preserve."

\*\*\*\*\*

That old jalopy could still hit 80.

"Daddy, aren't you supposed to stop at stop signs?"

"Not tonight, honey."

She looked out the window at the mini malls and gas stations and apartment buildings blurring into empty lots and lakes and trees.

"Why did you bring your knife?"

He drives.



"Daddy?"

The forest preserve entrance sign... finally within view.

"You know daddy loves you, right, Sweetie? You know I'd do anything for you?"

She offered a meek, "Yes."

"There's --"

An angel sheared the roof off their car with a golden, shimmering sword possessing a blade so fine the windshield and window glass didn't even shatter.

The car spun out recklessly down the road until it crashed head-on into the forest preserve entrance sign.

The angel tread on broken glass and shredded tires toward the wreckage, where the bloodied father desperately hacked away at the seat-belts and deflating air bags.

"Daddy... I'm hurt."

"As soon as I cut through this belt, you run into the forest preserve and don't come back."

"I'm *hurt*..."

"RUN!"

Terrified, the chestnut-haired girl opened the car door and raced toward the trees, helplessly sobbing.

"I don't. Want. To go. Alone."

The ache of the accident plucked the bow of her spine as she turned to see her father --  
-- unable to escape the accorded folds of metal, or the methodical approach of the heavenly wraith.

Daddy blew her a kiss.

Little Chestnut cried, and disappeared into the woods.

"Your master has a foul sense of humor, angel. It's a *miracle* we survived the crash. Only to

be cruel'd."

The angel raised his sword.

"I couldn't sacrifice my daughter. I couldn't kill her. Not even for God."

The fine blade made no sound as it divided flesh from flesh, muscle from muscle, life from death.

The angel looked to the forest he could not enter and sheathed his avenging sword.

There will come a reckoning for this insolence. The girl will pay for the debt of her father's love; in this life, or chased to the edge of oblivion.

BACK COVER TO PRINT EDITION

“Conan is king, but Rohet is a barbarian unlike any other;  
a willing hero and reluctant god forever at odds with fate.”  
-Pop Culture Times

