

Prologue

LETTER XXXIV *THE ACCOUNTS OF THE WAR OF TEARS*

I was tense as I sat in the command tent. Though I tried to relax in the uncomfortable chair, my hands of their own accord kept squeezing the armrests. I forced my hands to let go and rubbed the cramped muscle of my right thumb.

Beside me sat Lolen. Her long copper hair spilled down the side of her face and across the shoulders of her dark blue robes. She sat sedately in her own chair with her hands resting upon one another in her lap. But I could see her worry. I saw it in the tightness around her eyes and the stiffness in her back.

Lolen noticed me looking at her and tried to give me a reassuring smile. But I knew it was for her benefit as much as mine. I returned the smile with a slight nod of my head and looked away.

I kept wondering how the information I, Syboll and Lolen had discovered on Maulkarbaal would be received. Eight years it has been since the dark god of shadow and blood fell onto this world of Asterioth. And four years since he has made war upon my homeland Altera, grinding down the land and stomping the will of the people into dust.

I knew some would embrace the information we had gathered and learned, while others would reject it, calling us fools for dabbling in the dark ones domain. But how better to fight the darkness than to carefully use its own secrets against it.

“His majesty Gidban, High King of Altera!” shouted a voice.

I scrambled to my feet as my King entered the tent. So deep I was in my thoughts. I had not realized the tent had filled up with the advisors and representatives of the worlds.

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High King Gidban's armor was dull and dented by sword and claw. His long beard more gray than brown was stiff with wax. Following close on his heels were his two Sword Generals, Salvlo and Tilson. Their armor was buffed to a fine sheen and unmarred. Salvlo looked at those assembled and dismissed them with an arrogant look, while Tilson gave everyone a mocking smile. His flowing locks of pale hair floated out from his back as he followed my King.

I looked at my King, the man I admired and had long given counsel too. But no more. I and Pratchen, the hands of the king, extensions of his will had been tossed aside for the vermin that now followed to grovel at his boots.

I looked away unable to bear the sight of Salvlo and Tilson standing before their chairs behind my King. High King Gidban sat down and adjusted himself. When he was comfortable he waved a hand for us to sit as well.

"I am here," my King said. I winced inwardly at his tone. "Instead of polishing the plans I and my Sword Generals have conceived that will finally wipe out the blight that has plagued this land with war and death in one master stroke. Instead I am told there is an urgent meeting to take place. Where I alone," He said, tapping himself on the chest, "can only decide the fate of its outcome."

My King looked around the room, until finally his eyes settled on me. "What is it that my right hand knows that he thinks is important enough to interrupt me. Speak, Chambrom, so that I may know your thoughts."

As I started to rise, Lolen stood in a rustling of silk to look full on High King Gidban. I tried to grab her attention but she ignored me. "I will be the first to speak if it pleases his Majesty."

"So it is to be you... first," my King said. His eyes looked long at Lolen then slid off her to glare at me. "It pleases me, speak."

"Your Majesty," Lolen said, pausing to draw a breath to steady her nerves, "we-Syboll, Chambrom and myself- have studied long in how the Dark One was allowed in our world and how it is he stays."

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“I know this,” my King spat. “It was I who commissioned the search you speak of.”

“Yes Your Majesty, I know,” Lolen said, licking her lips off balanced by Gidban’s outburst.

I prayed for Lolen to be cautious. Since taking on his Sword Generals as his advisors, High King Gidban had changed. He refused to heed or entertain the words of reason or wisdom if they contradicted the counsel of the two Sword Generals.

“Have you finally come forth to tell me you know how to rid this world of Maulkarbaal’s presence?” my King asked.

“Yes Your Majesty,” Lolen nodded.

“Then tell me how to kill a god,” My king demanded, leaning forward in his chair. “No other do I need hear.”

Lolen nodded her head. I could see her squeezing her own hands in the folds of her sleeves.

“To kill a god,” she said, looking the High King full in the eyes, “you must have the power of a god. To achieve that you must harvest the life essence of a nation and place it into a willing vessel.”

I heard a gasp of surprise and mutterings all about me.

“Madness!” someone shouted. “Blasphemy and madness is what you speak, witch.”

I turned to look as did everyone else and saw Pratchen stride up to Lolen.

“How dare you speak those words to us!” Pratchen, pointing a finger at Lolen. He then turned to look at me and I saw hate and sadness from my old friend for the first time as he gazed upon me. “That is the domain of the very thing we strive to conquer. Yet you suggest it.”

Lolen held her head up. “I do. To break the hold that is keeping him upon this world of Asterioth, another equal in power must face him.”

“No being upon this world or any other was meant to wield such power,” Pratchen declared. He looked at High King Gidban. “Such power if unleashed would have unknown consequences.”

“How so?” My king asked. His eyes narrowed as he regarded Pratchen.

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“I... I can't be for sure. No man could. They are unknown,” Pratchen said struggling to speak what his mind refused to contemplate. “The very thing we create could turn back on us. Or the very act could well end all of creation. Or if we are successful and the creature does destroy the dark god, it could in turn make itself rule over us. And be a greater terror than even Maulkarbaal would ever be.”

“That is unacceptable,” my King said cutting off the quiet murmurs around the tent.

I stood up and stepped into the center of the tent to stand beside Lolen. “The dark god, Maulkarbaal was never meant to be in this world.”

“Go on,” Pratchen said, taking a step back, as did Lolen. “I would like to hear your words,” he spat.

I nodded my head and looked around the tent. My eyes fell first on Syboll, King of the Elderitch. Tall and straight, his alabaster skin seemed to glow against his black silk robes. His long hair the color of the deep blue sky was braided and wrapped around his neck. His War Master, Yonell sat on the floor before him. A wreath of holly sat upon her brow, giving the only color to her bleached white hair. Her armor the color of the sun reflecting upon a still pool seemed to glow with a soft light.

Borthok, speaker of the nine clans of Dwarf, watched me with eyes as red as embers. His coal black skin stood as a stark contrast to the Elderitch beside him. His body, save his head and arms, were encased in living rock.

Corcone, Path Leader of the Felonians, sat crossed legged on the floor. His jade green eyes held strength and wisdom. His black fur was striped in silver as a tiger. He wore a red sash tied around his waist and leather breeches tucked into open toed calf boots.

Darian, a Morisian and Lolen's lover, sat in a far corner. His eyes glowed deep amber as he watched the events unfold. We made eye contact and he gave me a slight nod.

Almon, King of Donjor, sister continent of Altera sat beside Darian. He leaned against the armrest with his chin resting upon his fist. His long legs stretched out before him with his feet

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crossed in an easy manner. His chain mail shirt showed rips and tears in it. He watched the proceeding with narrowed eyes.

The last was Baron King Urdel, Last of High King Gidban's Baron Kings. His Barony was the first to be swept under by the dark god's armies. He wore a simple robe of unbleached cloth, brown breeches and calf boots. The right sleeve of the robe was pinned back upon itself at the elbow so it would not flap. A wicked scar ran down the front of his face under a black eye patch. A gift from the dark god's War Leader.

"The dark god, Maulkarbaal was never meant to be on this world," I said again. "It is known to us all. Only through terrible workings of Amensie did his Death Priests bring him forth. We all bore witness of his arrival," I pointed to the top of the tent. "Punching through the heavens as a great spear of light, his essence slammed into this world causing earth shakes and burning mountains to spew forth from the oceans.

I looked to my King, then to Pratchen. "I, Lolen, Syboll and various others have found evidence to explain how he can remain here."

"And how is that?" Pratchen asked me. His head cocked to the side as if to see trickery in my words.

"His Death Priests have taken a willing sacrifice and constructed a living vessel to house the dark one's essence." My mouth went dry speaking those words. "This vessel is the anchor to keep Maulkarbaal here in this world."

"The only way to rid Asterioth," Borthok said to me, his voice like boulders scraping against each other, "is to destroy this vessel?"

"Yes," I said. I looked deep into his red eyes to show him I believed my own words.

"How are you to achieve this? Pick someone at random and take their life essence?" Sword General Salvlo demanded. He looked to Sword General Tilson. "Pardon me but since you're not using your life essence at the moment, can I have it?" he asked Tilson mockingly.

"Yes, you may my dear man," Tilson replied laughing. "But only after I have a tumble with the kitchen wench first."

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I watched both men and my King howl with laughter, each pushing to outdo the other with a steady stream of outlandish remarks.

“Peace upon this tent and upon this council,” Urdel said. His voice was soft yet it cut through the rancorous remarks being made by my King and his Sword Generals like a well-honed sword. “The remarks and arguments,” Urdel spoke as he stood from his chair, “for this uncommon plan are mighty. I have listened, and not even the stones of this world have heard a more important debate before this day. Never in my worst nightmares would I have thought to contemplate the value of life as we do this day.”

Urdel was quiet a moment as stood in the center of the tent looking into each face, measuring and reading something in each person. “Yet,” He spoke, holding up a finger, “it is a debate justified to be argued in these dark times, this War of Tears. And rightly it has been so named. For I know no one in this tent who has not lost a kinsman or good friend or his homeland. We have all shed tears in this war.”

Baron King Urdel pointed at Pratchen. “You are a priest of God and leader of his Dragorian Monks. You believe life to be a precious thing. To be nurtured, helped, and enjoyed. For life is precious and we, unlike the Elderitch, have so short of one that it must be cherished moment by moment,” He turned to me. “But we forget Maulkarbaal, dark god of shadow and blood cares not for life. The smell of blood is sweet in his nostrils and he drinks deep of it from a goblet. The sight of death fills him with unnatural lusts for he hungers to hear the last ragged breath of a dying man.”

Urdel looked around. “And we here in this tent,” he said, pointing at everyone “be it man, woman, Felonians, Elderitch, Morisian, or Dwarf, believe we are fighting this War of Tears to preserve life. To fight with tooth, claw, Kryock, sword, hammer and axe so we may live!” he yelled. “And not be made into bondage so that life could be sacrificed to appease the lustful appetites of a sadistic god!”

Urdel looked High King Gidban. “But I say this of every person who dies in a skirmish we fight, every person who dies in

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the battles we wage and every piece of land we give up,” he said, his voice just above a whisper. “In truth, we are making them a sacrifice in a war we cannot win.”

Salvlo Sword General of the Southern Armies stood up. His face was cold and his dark eyes seemed to burn from within. He glared at Baron King Urdel. “Your words are sacrilegious hidden by the flimsy vale of wisdom. We,” he said spreading his arms and turning around in the tent to see everyone, “have struggled to protect this land.”

“Here! Here!” Yelled my King nodding his head.

Salvlo continued his slow turn, his arms out in supplication. “We have bled, soaking the earth to protect those who could not protect themselves.”

“The truth he speaks!” yelled Tilson.

“We,” Salvlo said, stopping his turning to look at Baron King Urdel, “have watched as you say, friends, brothers, sisters, fathers, and mothers swept aside by waves of steel, many of whom stood upon the battlefield unwavering and unquestioning to defend your right to live. And what do you do with such a precious gift paid in full by blood, pain, and death. You mock their bravery, their honor, and their sacrifice.”

“Here! Here!” Yelled my King standing up and pumping his fist in the air.

“Here! Here!’ You say,” Urdel said bitterly, glaring at High King Gidban.

My King stared at Urdel in surprise.

“You cheer the words of imbeciles,” Urdel said, pointing a finger at High King Gidban. “You have turned away from your advisors and allies to listen to fools!” he looked at my King. “I ask you... nay I beg you. Consider the words of your advisor and Right Hand. It is a desperate plan thought up in desperation. Yet it’s the only chance we have to stop the spreading of darkness.”

“How dare you!” my King shouted at Urdel, his face red with rage.

“I dare because there is nothing left. We are but four leagues from the southern seas in a war that started in the north!” Urdel yelled back. “Come back to your senses and listen to your advisors.”

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“We are in desperation because of my advisors’ foolish council,” High King Gidban said, looking down his nose at Urdel.

Salvlo stepped up to my king. “I name him traitor.”

“As so I,” Tilson said, joining Salvlo.

“Indeed,” High King Gidban agreed. He pointed a finger at Urdel. “You are no longer a Baron King. You are here by stripped of all lands, titles and ranks.”

Urdel laughed a loud and mocking chortle that filled the tent. “My lands along with my titles and rank were the first to be sacrificed in this War of Tears.”

“Guards,” Salvlo called.

From the front of the tent four guards ran in and stood behind Urdel. I could tell by their faces they had been listening and they liked not what had transpired.

“Escort Urdel to his tent,” Salvlo said. “He is to stay there until High King Gidban decides his punishment. If he tries to leave, he is to be beheaded on the spot. Is that clear?”

“Yes sir,” they said in unison.

Urdel did not protest or resist as the soldiers grabbed him and drug him from the tent. Most of those in attendance followed the soldiers and Urdel.

As I watched Urdel disappear, I felt the last bit of hope for this world turn to despair.

My King looked around the nearly empty tent. “Does anyone else have business with me?” he asked.

“High King Gidban,” Syboll said, standing up and walking up to my King, as did Borthok. They both bowed as they stopped to stand before Gidban.

“What is it?” My King wanted to know, eyeing the two warily. Ever since Tilson and Salvlo had gained his ear, he had started treating Syboll and Borthok coldly. Recently he has gone as far as indirectly accusing them of sabotaging some of his war plans.

“The plans you and your two War Generals are working on,” Syboll said, looking deep into Gidban’s eyes. My king, unable to bear the gaze, looked away. “Will Borthok and I be needed to help in formulating a stratagem?”

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“No,” my King said, shaking his head. “The plans are finished. All that’s left is hammering out the small details.”

“Your Majesty will inform us of the plans to be put into action and our role to play within them?” Borthok asked, crossing his big arms across his chest.

“In due time,” High King Gidban snapped at Borthok. “Now excuse me. I have urgent matters to attend to.”

“High King...,” Syboll started.

“Enough!” High King Gidban yelled as he slashed a hand across his body. “By the Treaties of Golgothus, written by Haythor, I, as King over these lands threatened by the god of shadow and blood, have the right and the authority to dictate who may advise me and who may sit among my war counsels!” He pointed a stern finger at Syboll. “Do I not?”

Syboll bowed his head. “You do, High King Gidban,” he said, spitting out the name as if saying my King’s name left him a bad taste in his mouth.

High King Gidban’s face turned dark with anger. “Then you...,” he said, baring his teeth in a snarl, “will be told in due time.” With that my King stormed from the tent with his two Sword Generals following close behind.

I walked up to Syboll and Borthok. I felt cold though it was midsummer and my shoulders felt as if a mountain sat upon them.

“Your High King has doomed Altera to shadow. There will be no songs of celebrations,” Borthok said, shaking his head. He turned to look at me, putting a hand on my shoulder. “For there to be a true victory my friend, the hand must choose. Will it follow its master to death or cut itself loose and choose one anew?”

I stared open mouthed at Borthok. Never had it crossed my mind to betray my King, let alone plot his demise. “I... I...”

“You must understand,” Syboll said, gently. “If it were not for the World Gates being closed, Borthok’s and my people would have left your world.”

“But... the Treaties?” I asked. “They...,” I was saying but Syboll cut me off.

“We followed the Treaties to help your High King to defend his lands and people,” Syboll said, grabbing the sleeve of my

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robe. “Not help him bring forth its destruction by foolish decisions and disregard.”

With that Syboll and Borthok walked out of the tent, leaving me so shaken, all I could do was tremble as icy fear gripped my body.

LETTER XXXVI

THE ACCOUNTS OF THE WAR OF TEARS

Four days later, I looked upon the battlefield in horror. Bile rose to the back of my throat as I become light headed.

I watched as two of our greatest Sword Generals cast away their oaths and honor and drove their forces across the back of our own ranks. Our lines, made up of men, beasts and sorcerers broke like dried twigs between the enemy and the renegade Generals.

As I peered down upon the fighting, I tried to deny what my eyes beheld. I tried in vain to make sense of the chaotic writhing and seething that was the battle below. But I couldn't. We had been betrayed and only slavery and death lay in our future.

Too disgusted to look any longer, I tore my eyes away from the fighting to look over at High King Gidban. He stood at the very edge of the sheer fifty-foot drop looking down over the battlefield. His head and back once held high in determination and pride were now bowed low in humiliation and despair.

As I gazed upon my King I could not help but notice his armor was bathed red by the dying light of the sun, as if the metal was now coated by the blood of all those who had been betrayed. I could only wonder if the armor reflected when I would soon stand before the dark one of blood and shadow covered in my own blood.

High King Gidban looked up at the cloudless sky and closed his eyes. “It's over.” He turned to look at me and the others that stood with him on the cliff. “The truth I should have seen, before my eyes it was. I ignored it like the great and prideful fool I am.”

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With that my king howled like a beast as he dropped to his knees, pounding the cracked earth with a gauntleted fist. His mouth twisted into a snarl as bitter tears flowed from his eyes.

“My King,” Pratchen called, rushing to Gidban. Pratchen put his hands on the sides of Gidban’s head, forcing my king to look upon him. “My King, the field is lost and this day is lost. Save those who can be saved and sound the retreat. The shadow’s forces will not follow. Though they may have won, the shadow’s victory was gained at a terrible price. Should they try to follow, my Dragorian Monks will form a rearguard giving our forces the time they need to leave the field.”

“High King Gidban,” King Almon of Donjor said, his voice bitter, “the shadow won’t allow his War Lord to follow. Their forces are too spread out. For fear we may be up to some trickery, the shadow will have his War Lord pull back his army and reorganize.”

“My King,” I said. “The shadow knows we are beaten.” A wave of nausea swept through my being at speaking those words, threatening to empty my stomach on the ground before me. I put the back of my hand to my mouth swallowing the rising bile. “He will do as King Almon says.”

High King Gidban, for fear his speech should betray him, bit his lip until blood flowed into his beard before nodding his consent.

King Almon looked at the signalman. “Make it so. Give the call to retreat.”

King Almon and Pratchen helped my King to his feet. Even as the signalman blew a great horn, a sound only our forces could hear thundered across the sky.

Without a word, my King stepped back to the edge of the cliff. I followed his lead, once again looking down at the battlefield so I could watch the retreat with my own eyes.

Our forces suddenly broke away from the enemy, leaving the followers of the shadow and the twisted creations of the Death Priests to gape in confusion at the retreat. Pratchen’s Dragorian Monks quickly formed up behind the retreating forces, slaughtering and being slaughtered by those who chased after our fleeing men.

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A great cry rose up from the host of the enemy. As if of one mind the whole of the shadow's army gave chase, swarming toward the pitiful small force of Dragorian Monks, who stood firm against the oncoming avalanche of steel, bone and muscle.

To my surprise, the whole of the army of shadow suddenly stopped not ten feet from the lines of the Dragorian Monks. The monks looked their fate of death full in the face without flinching. The shadow's soldiers backed away from the brave monks before following their allies back to their own lines. A great cry rose up to the sky as the shadow's army cheered their triumph.

My king hung his head in defeat and turned away from the cliff edge. I saw fresh tears well up in his eyes before rolling down his cheeks. At the sight of my king weeping, I too felt my own tears slip down my face.

High King Gidban walked to his waiting horse, held by a young soldier who was no more than a boy. He mounted the great stallion and wiped his eyes. My king looked down at the young boy, wearing too large a helm and chain mail that stooped his back, and reached out and laid a gentle hand upon the boy's head. "I have failed you and the people of this kingdom."

"Are we... are we to die?" the youth asked, staring up at Gidban. As the words of my King settled upon the lad's shoulders, the light in the child's eyes faded away.

My King smiled down at the boy. "No, lad. Come with me and I will protect you from the coming long night." He reached down to help the boy climb up behind him. My King looked at me, Almon and Pratchen. "Don't tarry long in this place of misery. We have much to do before the dark god sends his messenger."

"Tonight... as we sit in the command tent, waiting for the inevitable," King Almon spat, watching High King Gidban ride away. "Every face we look into, we shall see hope and strength die with them." King Almon shook his head and looked to Pratchen and me. "Yet we still have a faint spark of hope left."

Pratchen's face lost all color. "You can't be speaking of the plan you, Chambrom and the others conspired behind the High King's back," he said, taking a step back. "The very idea goes

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against God and creation. Life was never meant to be used in such a way.”

Almon glared at Pratchen. “Damn you, priest. Would you have the whole world enslaved by the dark god of blood and shadow?”

Pratchen stood tall and glared fiercely back into King Almon’s eyes. “Never! But... there must be another way than to sacrifice an entire nation? We all have friends who are Felonians.”

“A fate they all chose eagerly to take part of,” Almon growled. “If you see another, speak it now. For your High King has taken it from us.”

Pratchen looked at me, then back at King Almon. “I... there is....”

I looked at Pratchen as the words died upon his lips. He looked to me pleading with his eyes. “Come with us back to camp,” I said. “Together we must reason with Gidban to permit Lolen to implement the plan. We have lost this War of Tears. But there is still hope left in the world of Asterioth. The long night can still be avoided,” I said. I went to my horse and climbed up onto the saddle.

Pratchen was still looking at me. He looked away walking to his own horse as he wiped unshed tears from his eyes. Pratchen climbed onto his horse. “I am with you. If it takes damning my soul to Hell to save our Altera, then may God have mercy upon me and you as well, my friend.” With that Pratchen kicked his horse into a gallop. Almon and I followed close behind.

When we returned to the camp there was a great gathering of men, women, children, Eldritch and Dwarf. I dismounted and found a sergeant I knew. His arm was in a sling and blood still oozed from a cut on his face. I walked up to the sergeant, followed by Almon and Pratchen.

“Gorso,” I called, grabbing his shoulder. “What takes place?”

“My lord,” Gorsio replied, bowing his head at us. “It’s his Majesty. Upon his return he ordered us to gather.”

Almon, Pratchen and I pushed our way to the front of the crowd. Standing in the center was my King with the lad in front of him.

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“As most of you now know,” Gidban was saying, looking at the many faces gathered, “Sword Generals Tilson and Salvlo have betrayed us, foregoing their oaths and murdering those they had sworn to protect.”

I heard cries of lamentations and dark mutterings from the assembled crowd.

“But I tell you, I can still save you,” my King shouted above the rising voices. “I, High King Gidban can save you from the approaching darkness. I alone can save you from the long night that now envelops you.”

“How?” Someone called.

“I will send you to God,” Gidban said. With horror I watched my King pull his sword and plunge it into the boy’s back.

“No!” I screamed, running out of the crowd. I saw everything with great clarity, as if time had stopped. In perfect detail I saw the blood drip from my King’s sword. I could see the boy’s eyes widen in pain and shock as they stared at me. I could see a single tear fall ever so slowly from his face and dash itself upon the hard ground.

“Stop this madness, Gidban!” I screamed, pointing my Kryock at my king.

“Madness?” Gidban yelled. He jerked his sword from the boy’s back. The lad fell to Gidban’s feet with a gurgling sigh. “How is it madness to save my people from the darkness?”

“When Tilson and Salvlo turned traitor,” I spat, “they stole your sanity along with your reason.”

“How dare you speak to your High King in that way!” Gidban screamed, pointing his bloody sword at me.

“You are no longer High King,” I proclaimed. “You are unfit to rule this land or lead its people. You have violated your sacred oaths.”

“I so agree and judge,” Pratchen said, stepping up beside me.

Gidban let out an insane laugh. “You poor fools, you must have a Baron King to cast me off. And I had the last put to death this morn....”

Suddenly a blade punched through Gidban’s throat.

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“I so agree and judge,” Urdel said in Gidban’s ear. He yanked the dagger from Gidban’s neck and pushed him away. Gidban collapsed upon the ground struggling to breathe.

Urdel stepped over Gidban and knelt down hugging the lifeless body of the boy. “To all who can hear my voice,” He said, tears flowing from his eyes, “as the shadows stretch forth to engulf us, as madness swallows reason and wisdom, I tell you now,” Urdel shouted, looking at the great mass pressing forward to hear, “hope remains.” He stood up cradling the boy to his bosom. “If these breaths are to be my last, then I shall gladly use them to speak. And boldly proclaim hope remains!”

Urdel turned to look at the gathered mass. “We may have lost the battle this day. We may be exhausted and bloodied but we are not beaten!” he shouted.

The massive crowd let out a mighty cry of ‘We are not beaten!’, repeating the phrase over and over as they pumped fists in the air and pounded on each other’s backs.

Urdel stopped his turning and looked at me. “Is all prepared?”

I nodded my head. “All is prepared. Lolen stands ready for my signal. The entire race of Felonians waits to give their life essence.”

“Give Lolen the signal,” Urdel said. He looked down at the lifeless boy in his arms.

“Pray our own foolishness hasn’t destroyed us,” Pratchen whispered.

I raised my Kryock heavenward and sent a ball of Amensie into the air. The ball rose high into the darkening sky where it exploded into a brilliant blue light.

“And pray,” Pratchen said, looking at me and Urdel, “we are not damning the world with our own actions.”

As the blue light faded from the sky, the darkening sky lit up with a blinding brightness. The wind suddenly howled through the trees. The gale was so fierce it bent trees over and uprooted others. The ground heaved and lurched throwing everyone down.

A beam of iridescent radiance streaked across the sky and slammed into the camp of the dark god. I climbed to my feet as did Pratchen and Urdel.

I looked over at Urdel. “So it begins.”

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Urdel nodded. "So it begins," he repeated looking in the direction of the dark god's camp.

On the dying breath of wind, I heard faint screams and cries from the camp of Maulkarbaal. And I closed my eyes at that awful noise.