

Kroll: Magnificence

By
Alex James

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Part One
The Orthodoxy

1. The Stranger – Forging Plans

Kroll was in the dungeons, his sword on an enchanted anvil. Glowing green shavings flew off as he sharpened it. The green glow made his iron-armour appear in stark relief.

Behind him growled the beast he had forged.

The most highly trained warrior of Kroll's Army had been melded with the Berserker-armour. He was no man or beast: he was now a Berserker, a monster bred to lead Kroll's Elite Berserker Company into battle.

The Berserker roared, yanking and heaving at its chains. It would have broken free if it had not been for the connective green spell that bound the chain-links together.

Kroll was finished. He stalked towards the Berserker, and lifted its cumbersome grey-boned skull, which had tusks to either side.

The Berserker growled threateningly. It was imbued with such destructive power and pain that it was virtually unstoppable. The only thing that made it obey was the promise of blood, which it could attain by wiping out Kroll's enemies. That and the sharp staff set into its outer grey-boned spine, which made the Berserker spiritually dependent on Kroll for its life.

'You have done well. You have shown everyone your might and vigour. However, you are now a Berserker. Your explosive force is ready to be unleashed upon the world. I free you of your chains that you may feast upon the blood of my enemies.'

Kroll raised his heavy sword with two hands, and cast it down onto the chains keeping the Berserker attached to the stone wall. The Berserker screeched and yelled ferociously, waving its impressive grey-bone armoured arms and white claws.

One more chain was sliced into pieces by Kroll's unbreakable sword. The bindings were cut. The Berserker roared, raising its head at the black orifice in the ceiling above.

'Go!' Kroll goaded.

The Berserker used its strong arms to propel itself upwards, along the slippery stone wall.

Kroll kept his sword held out to the side, while green glowed along its length.

'Go, my creature!'

This time you shall be my secret.

Kroll remained seated in his iron Throne. His iron-armour felt heavy and sharp after all these years, but he still felt strong.

In came Darius, one of his most intelligent dignitaries.

'Magnificence, the seizure of assets has been reported as successful. Every Petty King or Queen has been disposed of, and all treasure is now under our control. Their greedy influence is now at an end. It seems the meetings to discuss their prominent positions worked. They were lured in by the promise of greater power.'

'But did every Petty King and Queen attend?' Kroll's deep voice rumbled in his armour.

'We don't have a register of every Petty King and Queen,' Darius admitted. 'However, we do have a register of every King and Queen we have disposed of,' Darius informed, on a more pleasant note. He took out a scroll, opened it, and started reading the names.

'How many have been disposed of?' Kroll interrupted harshly.

'In total three thousand...'

Kroll smashed his heavy iron fist onto the implacable arm of the iron chair, making a noise that shattered the semblance of the air.

'There are more than three thousand Petty Kings and Queens out there! They didn't fall for the bait! You call this successful?'

Darius was known for his cunning and his ability to stay out of Kroll's wrath. This was pushing it.

'To rid the world of three thousand is still a success, and overnight as well.'

'And what do you suggest for the others?'

'We could go to war?'

'I can't afford to leave the Temples unguarded. Ravaging the country will do no good; the Petty Kings and Queens will fall through my clutches...' Kroll lamented, tightening his iron fist for emphasis.

'We may have to release the Berserker,' Darius suggested helplessly.

'Last year that failed.'

'Nothing can kill a Berserker. It must have been an accident last year. If magnificence trains and forges another one...'

'The Berserker is good for specific targets, be they large or small. Every Petty King and Queen is too general a target.'

'We could bribe them with wealth.'

'It won't work. Too many of them have their own sources of wealth and their own discreet systems of trade and now they will distrust us.'

'The bandits!' Darius exclaimed.

'They are a problem as well, I am aware of this.'

'No, they can help us. Put a bounty on every Petty King and Queen and they will hunt them down and kill them.'

Kroll put his finger-armor to his chin and pondered. The bandits could not be trusted to return the treasure *unless* they were accompanied by a few trusted officials. They could be promised a very small share; a share much smaller than that currently owned by the Petty Kings and Queens. It would supplement Kroll's forces if the bandits agreed, and it would narrow down the number of Petty Kings and Queens significantly.

'Yes, and ensure they return most of the treasure by sending a few officials with them; officials who can defend themselves,' Kroll agreed.

Bandits and Petty Kings and Queens needed to be dealt with. There was a greater threat out there that could kill a Berserker. Before Kroll combated that threat he needed to be rid of his usual enemies, who were growing in strength and number.

'I want every Petty King and Queen immediately hunted. Their manpower, assets, trade routes, and goods will be targeted and brought to the attention of our soldiers without delay. If you need to conduct a survey prior to the hunt then do so, but be sure you don't allow our intentions to be clear to them, else I shall be immensely angry. This can't fail! Put the bounty out at the same time, through our other channels to ensure they have no forewarning of our incoming attacks. Secrecy is essential. We don't want the Petty Kings and Queens to forget to conduct business as usual because they fear too much for their lives.'

Darius was astounded at Kroll's solution.

Two good minds could solve much.

King Wencelet walked out of his timber hall, and folded his arms, surveying the mounted detachment that was stampeding fast up the hill towards him. They were his men, all twenty-four of them. He didn't possess many soldiers or loyal men, couldn't defeat his neighbours in combat, or have hopes of conquest. In fact it was why he was a *Petty King*, he reminded himself.

The banners of the soldiers were then relaxed, and they saluted their King.

'We have brought a messenger with us,' Heriot spoke, the Captain and his most loyal soldier.

Twenty-five then...

'Come in and keep warm. I shall speak to this messenger.'

They made their way into the timber hall. The men un-strapped their armour, and lay down their possessions, keeping warm by the fire of the hearth. King Wencelet could see them rub their hands together, and cast grateful glances towards one another.

They are my men!

'King Wencelet, my name is Trimmodol, and I come with tidings.'

'Tidings from whom?'

'I come on behalf of Kroll.'

'Everybody comes on his behalf. Where did you actually come from?'

'I am not at liberty to say, but I come to make demands. Your treasure and all of your possessions are to be seized and taken to the Temples. I am not asking this of you, this is a demand.'

King Wencelet gazed at the other man; short, and clad in black leather.

I could crush him.

'I don't have any possessions. I am a Petty King for a reason.'

'Kroll the Magnificent knows Petty Kings and Queens live off their riches. How else would they even have been elevated to their position?'

The impudent man was taking off his black leather gloves, as if ready to dispense punishment.

King Wencelet put his hand on his sword's hilt, and manoeuvred his belly so that it was facing the smaller and younger man.

'Are you going to conduct a search? I consider this timber hall to be my property. Trespass on my property, and I shall take matters into my own hands!' The King threatened, glaring at the official ... or messenger, whatever he was.

'You will set the treasure before me, or Kroll will take action.'

'Kroll does not own all treasure!'

'He does now,' the young messenger stated.

There was a pause as King Wencelet pondered whether to gut the messenger and hide the evidence of wrongdoing.

This demand is a step too far and I'm not going to submit my treasure. I'm a pauper next to the wealth Kroll possesses. He's encroaching upon our sovereignty one step at a time. Is this a step too far?

The King sighed.

'Heriot, provide this man with the treasure he desires,' he commanded his loyal soldier, before Heriot abruptly disappeared behind him.

Unexpectedly, a painful thud in the King's lower back shocked him, and blood gushed out of his mouth. In Heriot's hand was a dagger with blood pasted onto it.

My blood!

His men had drawn swords, but not to defend him. They surrounded him, along with Heriot, falling in line behind the messenger, who had a rather uncompromising look on his face.

'Heriot?'

King Wencelet collapsed on all fours, his vision becoming blurry.

'Was this for greed?' he grunted.

He moaned and fell onto his chest and stomach, losing consciousness. A black glove grew larger in his vision, falling to cover the last images of his prized timber hall.

Darius beheld his Magnificence, absorbed as he was in the recurring crystalline flashes emanating from the palm-sized seeing stone he grasped.

He sees so much, beyond what our eyes can see. It scarcely seems possible that the world has so many gates and portals into dimensions that cannot be seen or accessed by mortals.

Is he really a tyrant?

Having known about the temples and soldiers that were present everywhere, it was hard to see how Darius could not have seen this earlier. Conquest and control were all his Magnificence sought and his raids on the petty kings and queens were the first tangible evidence he had gained, apart from the tome he had brought with him.

How much further will he tighten his control over the realm? Am I, and by extension, all mortals, potential targets of our ruler's omnipresent sorcery? He has ruled for two thousand years of what could be seen as peace and stability, but the winds are changing now, and what Magnificence was satisfied with is no longer enough.

Now that his helmet and the seeing stone had been raised so that his eyes appeared as if they beheld Darius, His Magnificence gave no sign that he knew or could hear Darius' thoughts, yet his still unnerving posture seemed to look past Darius, seeing into and then through the core of his being.

Kroll wore an old iron great helm that was dented and rusty, presumably because he liked to cling to his old warrior ways, but Darius had done his research into the matter, or what research he could get away with without questions being asked. His armour and his heavy two-handed sword Forever Sword were worn and used because he apparently believed the elixir of life on his body was being protected. For some unfathomable reason, Magnificence would not replace it for newer and stronger armour. Perhaps he thought his sorcery could make up for his disintegrating armour, or somewhat compensate him. However, it was reasonable to assume he would deliberately want to wish his enemies to gauge his armour and then underestimate him, which was something Darius was not willing to do.

The tyrant was hidden and elusive to most mortals. Maybe he thought he could command more respect if he wasn't seen to be intervening personally in mortal's lives, though it could also hint at cowardice. Rumours from his enemies suggested he was afraid mortals would see his face and he would be recognised as mortal or weak. Darius had an inkling that it had more to do with Kroll's departure from his youth, thousands of years ago, when he was famous or earlier when he had suffered much mistreatment at the hands of the Ancient Sect of Desert Alchemists.

By keeping his great helm, he was comfortable. It had a single horizontal band for a visor, which seemed to radiate a detached emotionless regard or a self-loathing so deep it had twisted his inner-self into spiritual deformity that could not be revealed. Either way, Magnificence was not known to have ever taken off his helmet.

What I am about to do, might not end well, but questions must be asked if there are to be answers. My days of being an amateur historian are over, and I need real evidence from Magnificence himself, if I am to learn the truth. The truth, after all, may yet save all mortals from further tyranny.

For all Darius' boldness, his body's physical processes were betraying him. His bowels and bladder were pushed forcefully by something unseen, as if willing a release. His heart palpitated with violent tormenting thuds, while his skin had a sheet of sweat plastered onto it, sticking his body to his clothes.

The entire room seemed to shrink, as if eyes or phantom presences were watching and closing in on him. The chamber was stifling with suffocation, with poor illumination hiding away the luxurious patterned tapestries and carpets, and the frescoes Darius remembered seeing last time could not even be seen at all in the growing darkness.

The figure of his Magnificence shuddered, and then broke free from the seeing stone, and Darius almost choked. He summoned a courageous breath, before swallowing deeply, and prepared to give his reports; and ask his crucial questions.

Kroll retracted his battered armour-hand from the seeing stone.

'Magnificence, I have several reports,' Darius spoke solemnly.

'Speak!' Kroll commanded.

'The bandits have done well. They have taken the bounty seriously against the Petty Kings and Queens. There is open warfare in the land, but most of the Petty Kings and Queens have been dealt with, and we have recovered substantial treasure, which we have collected at the Temples. The

good news is that with the deaths of many bandits during these raids, their promised share has dropped dramatically.'

'Excellent,' Kroll hissed.

'The customary hunt for the Blood Warrior has commenced as well, I thought I would just notify you.'

Kroll nodded and then inquired:

'I assume all is proceeding as planned?'

'The Blood Warrior is not yet dead, but his choices imply that he soon will be. The land is all but rid of your enemies, Magnificence.'

Kroll nodded in satisfaction.

'Magnificence?' Darius broached, a worried look wrinkling his forehead.

'Speak!'

'There have been rumoured sightings of a monster in the land. The High Mages have done their utmost to reassure the acolytes and townsfolk that the monster is the Berserker. Is it true, Magnificence?'

'It is true,' Kroll confirmed.

'May I ask why he has been forged?'

'I have my own reasons.'

'And what is the target?'

'He will lure my true enemies out. Now I have eyes where I did not before. Those responsible for the death of the Berserker last year must be found and destroyed.'

Darius nodded in agreement, then he rifled through the bound book he was holding, searching frantically for something.

'Darius, is there more to report?'

'There was this ancient tome that had me worried. It details the Prophecy and the Blood Warrior. It also has information about a Stranger. It is foretold that a Stranger will come at the end of time and will create a system where he may control ... time. The similarities between these texts and the world we live in are remarkable...'

'Pass the tome to me Darius!'

Darius did as was commanded.

Kroll searched the pages of the tome with amusement. Most were unaware that he had authored most of the books available in all Temples. Those other authors had to approach him to have their discoveries recorded because he controlled the printing presses. This particular tome was not one he had authored. It was a tome dating back over two thousand years ago, called The Prophecy. Kroll thought he had eradicated every such tome, but it appeared some still existed.

'What worries you about this tome?'

'It is ghastly if the world were subverted to the will of one individual.'

'You speak too boldly Darius,' Kroll spoke, not really paying attention to the pages his eyes purportedly scanned. 'Have you told anybody else of this?'

'No, Magnificence, I thought it would be best to show it to you.'

'Have you found anything else that perturbs you?'

'No, Magnificence.'

'Since when did I assign you the role of investigator, Darius?'

Kroll's steel gaze fell upon the weak demeanour of his dignitary.

Darius looked hesitant and terrified.

There was a brief pause. Kroll summoned green ethers around his fist. Darius knew something was afoot and panicked. He ran, stumbling and hastily grabbing his dark-blue robes in an attempt to regain his dignity and escape with his life intact.

'Rraah!' Kroll roared, sending a luminous green blast from his fist. It crashed into the opposite iron wall, causing metal splinters and deadly shards to rebound.

'Aaah!' Darius screamed in pain as he continued his rush to the staircase leading out. The shards had sliced into his leg, which he clutched while limping.

Kroll had missed!

He promptly stood up from his iron Throne in pursuit, but awkwardly slipped and then fell down numerous long iron steps. On the tiled iron floor, he laid supine and gasping in exhaustion, shock even.

I'm a mess.

Failure to eliminate one of his subjects would soon be the talk around all Temples. Darius wasn't even a sorcerer.

Up in his Grand Observation Tower, Kroll was studying the stars. There were scopes everywhere, positioned directly at the heavens. The transparent glass above gave him a sense of peace and security. There was such space available to him here.

The next frontier is the stars.

His heavy armoured arms were folded. After two thousand years of rule he had grown wearisome and weak. The sorcery he had used to make himself immortal was wearing thin, and the muscle he had grown in his youth was gradually degenerating. There would come a day soon when he would not be able to wear this armour. He hated weakness. It would make him a despicable sight, and his enemies would multiply. He could not hide in the shadows either, could he?

In the centre of the Grand Observation Tower was a seeing stone, placed on a plinth.

He strode towards it and grasped it, closing his eyes and breathing heavily, allowing the aura to travel through him.

Mountains and mass lakes passed through his mind. Deserts, rocky cliffs, and great exotic forests passed. Tremendous seas, islands, and grassy farmland appeared. They were all marked by his Temples. He had conquered all. The seeing stone could not allow him to look further, beyond this world and everything...

He needed to reach further, to escape the confines of his mortality and ascend. No sorcery he could muster or practice had yet led him there. He was the Grand Mage of the Kroll Order of Mages. Nobody knew more than he did of sorcery. It was not even enough to achieve his dreams of conquest. He wanted to battle again to feel the energy of his youth.

The adventure must continue.

There must be a way.

He would hire *free-riders* if he had to. He would hire anybody who could make his dreams come to pass. Ten thousand years ago, kings and leaders of every generation sought immortality, and they hired people to find it for them. It had never been enough in the past, so why would it be for him?

I forged the Forever Sword and the Berserker. I founded the Orthodoxy. I have ruled this world for two thousand years. I am striving to control every aspect of life on this simple world and it's not enough!

What was it that Darius had told him a few months back?

'There are those who believe that the Desert Alchemists can do things with their sorcery that we could not dream. They possess arts that are often unconventional and always stigmatised. They are shunned by all apart from those who are desperate. If you want to make further gains with astrology then I suggest approaching them, Your Magnificence.'

Darius knew little, though since the destruction of the Berserker last year Kroll was willing to reconsider his words.

I must have missed something. What is the unknown factor?

Could it have been the Desert Alchemists who destroyed the Berserker? They were the best equipped group that could cause problems.

Alchemy, why did I keep it in the Orthodoxy?

He retracted his hand from the seeing stone and the stars above blinked innocently, as if wary of his future plans.

The Desert Alchemists must be the unknown factor. Therefore, they are who I need to discover who destroyed the Berserker. Then they must be eliminated, but I can't eliminate them unless ... unless I modify the Orthodoxy...

2. The Fortunate Stranger – Temple Karthaak

They streamed vertically down the sky, from the heavens above, tens of them. They carved fire-streamed scars in the firmament, scoring a sure path to their distant destination.

Dacron was mesmerized by the beauty. His eyes were firmly attached to them. He had forgotten that he had come here to buy a horse. The horses beat their hooves impatiently, and the owner was still hushing them and rattling his keys.

'They have gone now,' the horse-trader told him.

'I know, but they were ... something else.'

'Everybody says that, but when you stand out this long every day selling horses they only remind you of the cold,' the man complained.

Dacron's head snapped back to reality, seeing the brown horses with black harnesses, nickering gently to one another. They were beautiful tall beasts, with velvet fur, silky black manes, and deep brown eyes.

'Did you really want a horse?'

'I don't know. I wanted to explore, and to travel.'

'They are the same thing,' the small tan-skinned man chuckled.

'No, they're not,' Dacron disagreed.

'Where have you come from?' the man suddenly asked, scrunching his right eye in suspicion.

'A small village. Ever wanted to break free and experience something?'

'I would say *you* already have,' the horse-trader chuckled again.

Dacron nodded quickly, acknowledging the man's perception.

'Which village did you come from?'

'Does it matter? I would think it mattered more where I was going,' Dacron countered.

'You don't know where you are going either?' the horse-trader boomed in laughter, and probably mockery.

'I want to visit a Temple,' Dacron thought aloud.

'Is there not a Temple in your village?'

'No ... I want a big Temple; one of those with observatories.'

'You're dreaming. Only skilled soldiers, alchemists, and astrologers can go there. What skills do you have?'

'I know farming.'

The horse-trader scoffed and looked away.

'Well, what do you know?' he retorted.

The horse-trader looked back with kind eyes.

'I know how to trade horses,' he answered simply.

It was a reply that only depressed Dacron further.

Dacron was quite tall, with bulbous shoulder-arm muscles and a lean long back. Physically fit, strong, and youthful, he liked to think he had potential.

Why do I have to continue my dead uncle's and aunty's mundane work keeping the farm?

'Here, take this!'

'What is it?' Dacron asked, examining the circular golden coins that had been placed in his hands.

'They are coins. Pay the guards at one of the Temples, and they might let you in.'

'Will they?' he asked eagerly.

'Either that or they will imprison you and steal your coins. It's your choice if you want to take the risk. Those Temples are fortified like castles.'

'Thanks, what is your name?'

The horse-trader had gone, likely to the black cave shelter behind his modest collection of horses. Dacron got the hint that he needed to leave.

Dacron could see the black pyramid rising in the distance, from the hill he stood on. He had not bought a horse, hoping to save his coins for a bribe to get into the Temple. He still had quite a journey, across the darkening plains, before he would reach his destination. Pinpricks of stars twinkled at him invitingly, too insignificant to guide him or uncover the thick choking blanket that made him blind to the plains.

If I can't reach for the stars, then what can I reach for?

He took his time on the way to the Temple. Squat dots grew larger in the distance, even blacker than the fading horizon, but in this lightless abyss they could have been riders. His assumption was correct. Their torches were lit, illuminating the plains like scurrying beacons of activity on an otherwise desolate landscape.

They surrounded him without further ado, riding on lean grey chargers and clenching the unseen harnesses roughly to adjust direction. To Dacron, they were barely perceptible under natural concealment, but all the more agile and predatory for it. They circled him with the speed and manovereability that were their favoured tactics for responding to all dangerous or rebellious situations. As with many of Kroll's soldiers, out of the sanctuary of the Temple they were mounted and rode in company. They used a combination of swiftness supplemented by plate armour, which made them difficult for enemies to counter, especially when they rode in numbers, and they almost always did.

Their armour made them look fearsome, but was not formidable, leaving the biceps and thighs bare; presumably to help with movement and catching thieves, Dacron thought wryly. The black-and-gold armour of Temple Karthaak soldiers was not very strong, as an armourer had once shown him in an experiment by throwing heavy stones upon it in succession. The armour's vulnerability also left them vulnerable to horizontal slashes or attacks from the side. Indeed, in the past Dacron had used a sleek curved dagger and a careful thrust attack to take them on as individuals or when they were few in number, or otherwise not alert to his presence. However, as with the current situation, when the soldiers were mounted and riding in an armed unit, their steel long-swords and shields made them impenetrable.

Dacron could see their domineering expressions through the black barbute helmet that was moulded smoothly around their heads all the way from the dome-shaped top and down to protect their cheeks; and it so had a y-shaped opening with extra space for the eyes to help their visibility. It was evidently important to be able to see and sense enemies in a realm where attacks could come from numerous directions.

Soldiers from Temple Karthaak were fiercely loyal to Kroll, because the temple was in close proximity to Temple Kroll, which was the main temple and the centre of Kroll's realm. The soldiers were more cruel, ruthless, and relentless in delivering justice, sometimes with a liberty that had not been ordered. They had more coin and promotion to gain compared with the soldiers of distant Temples, and more to lose if they failed their duty in any way.

He knew to expect suspicion from them, terrified as the soldiers were of Kroll's sorcery and punishment. Their terror made them afraid of everything: mages, alchemists, free-riders, bandits, petty kings and queens. They even feared lone strangers wandering the night, such was their paranoia and ignorance.

Divided from them by a gulf of darkness, he could not clearly understand how they knew of his presence.

'Hand over your purse, thief!' they commanded.

Dacron took out his purse, opened it and passed it over.

'Now be on your way.'

And that was it. No questions whatsoever, just in case they learned of something they would rather not have. They left, with the urgent stomping of the horses' hooves receding into the night, and the fading light of their passage dimming the brief reprieve from suffocating night, which was ever-encroaching.

Suddenly Dacron realised that he had no idea where the Temple was, the pyramid.

I'm lost.

I should have asked for a torch from those men.

Something was glowing on his body, beneath his clothes. He searched the pockets of his brown pants. And there, the gold coins given to him by the horse-trader glowed luminescent orange. They had been too bulky to fit into his purse, but he hadn't been stupid enough to put them in there anyway. The life of a thief was the only way a man could make a living in this wretched land, with guards always taking whatever little was earned.

The life of a thief was the life he had really lived while feigning to carry out the mundane farm work he did when he had been younger, because it felt so expressive. In hindsight, he had always been at odds with authority.

He walked further forward. The coins allowed him to see well enough around him, but was he still walking to the pyramid?

Something bright flickered in his peripheral vision. He glanced in the direction he thought it had come from. It disappeared. Then it appeared again like a reminder, but he was sure it had now moved.

This time the bright apparition remained where it was, and he could make out its contours. It was a woman, half-naked, though adorned in silvery necklaces and dressed in a short quilt over her lower half. She held her hand out, beckoning him.

Was this some trick of the coins he had been given? Dacron doubted it. He followed the woman, entranced. He continued, staring open-mouthed at her beauty. As he continued walking forward, as if to run after her, she began to dissipate. In the air he could hear a whisper, as if a ghost was trying to get him to listen. What did the woman want? Did it really matter?

'Hey! What are you doing? Come closer that we may see you!' the guardsmen bellowed.

He had arrived. A mega pitch black structure rose high into the sky, blocking out most of the faint stars that peeked around the edges. It stunned him, and he couldn't keep his jaw closed. Dwarfed by this megalith, he stood dumbly.

That puts my life into perspective.

Dacron was one brick, staring at many thousands. The Temple didn't even deign to consider him, as if staring grimly and challengingly into the distance.

This ... is might!

I have not lived before this day.

Distracted by the apparition of the half-naked woman, he had not noticed it.

Perhaps I had been close all this time.

'I come with trinkets. I want to go inside,' he told them with a loud and clear voice.

'You need to be of the Temple to be allowed inside. You look like a village boy, or a thief. Be gone!' the soldier on the right yelled, raising his arm.

'Wait, we could have uses for a man such as him. He is young, and looks strong,' the other soldier protested.

'The more food and coin and women he has here, the fewer we have. I say we cast him out!'

A woman dressed in white robes materialised behind the guardsmen, placing a gentle placating hand on the right soldier's arm.

'We should welcome this guest. The stones tell me he can be of use to us. There is a Stranger's Moon.'

'I don't see any moon,' the soldier replied dully.

She reminds me of the apparition, though dressed.

'Stranger's Moon dictates we welcome strangers and befriend those we would not usually, especially if they appear in strange places, as this young man does,' the woman.

She gazed admiringly at Dacron, feasting on the sight of his muscles and arms.

She was a Priestess, or a sorceress of some kind, but most likely a Priestess. She had brown curly hair, dark-brown eyes, and a young supple body. Dacron had been truly blessed with the sight of curvaceous females tonight, and wondered what he had been doing right in life to deserve them.

'All right, but keep him out of my sight,' the right soldier said in compromise.

'That we will,' the Priestess cooed.

Her lithe feminine form receded back into the shadows.

Dacron walked forward to meet the guards.

'Wait, there is taxation to gain admittance! We require three gold coins.'

Exactly the number the horse-trader had given him. Dacron handed them over.

The guards seemed pleased, weighing the coins in their hands and momentarily forgetting Dacron was even there.

Taking the initiative, he entered large doors beyond them, his cold feet slapping against the stone floor of the entrance. Inside was a high and long narrow corridor, inlaid with grilled bars at both sides. There were cells for prisoners, in the entrance?

A new test for my bravery.

If Dacron had a weapon, he would be feeling for it now. Instead, he walked cautiously, wondering what kind of situation he had got himself into, and whether he would ever be permitted to go to the observatory.

The prisons to left and right were blocked mostly by black rusty bars, and were noticeably devoid of habitation. The only signs of their use were dull lumpy bloodstains etched onto the inside surfaces of the bars and the cells within. It must have been Dacron's perception being distorted, but he thought he heard the wind gusting through creaks in the walls.

The walls of this massive pyramid must be immensely thick, so it doesn't make sense.

Spooked and trying to suppress the chill working its way through his bones, he made an effort to move forward.

When he reached the end of the corridor, more guards obliviously passed him, waving torches about and ascending up the spiralling stone staircase.

Inexplicably, he decided to go down, instead of up. Maybe it was to avoid being seen.

On his descent, he passed sconces on the walls, their flames guttering in rhythm with an ethereal wind.

He was going down to the dungeons, he realised, the opposite direction to the observatory. He had been too fearful of the guards. He turned around in panic, but heard a voice, which made him stop and look back down the staircase.

Curiosity drove him onward. He continued down the broken steps, one foot at a time.

The voice was a higher pitch this time. It was that apparition of the woman, he was sure of it. Then, he thought he heard her call his name.

'Dacron ... Dacron?'

He slipped. His foot shot forward, and he fell onto his behind. He then proceeded to skid painfully down the broken steps, banging his bones. His descent didn't stop. The stairs had been broken, and he crashed and slid down every angle of this curving doom.

After the dizzying experience he thudded roughly onto the ground at the bottom. His body was wracked with aches, pains, and bruises. He could even feel blood trickling from somewhere.

He tried to move by lifting himself up on his hands and arms, but he couldn't. He heard something slither nearby. He shivered violently, causing himself more pain.

'What's that?' he shouted, to the surrounding blackness.

He couldn't see further than a few paces before him.

The slithering became louder. It sounded like a snake. He heard a hiss as well, and could almost picture the forked tongue emerging. Was this his mind's abominable creation, or was there really a snake?

Dacron pushed himself hard, and he managed to sit up, amid much pain and a sharp headache. The pain he felt standing up was just as bad, worse because his legs had been severely battered on the way down.

The snake was right in front of him, he was sure. He could hear its hiss. He knew it was large, because the sound of its body was more potent, or was that just the soundless pit he was in magnifying the noise?

He stepped back, into a pool of slick liquid. His leg fell fully under, and he panicked, grasping forward. His hands felt something; it was the slimy tubular body of the snake, and his fingers only just met at the other side of this slimy body. The hiss was very loud, and threatening. Eyes with a ghostly green luminescence bulged open, illuminating the scene. It was a snake, reared up, ready to strike.

He screamed in horror, and preparation.

It lunged at him. He threw himself away, falling back-first into the pool of thick black water. He struggled and thrashed, trying to break free of its thick constriction. His face reached the surface, and he breathed. A skull popped up out of the liquid next to him. Shocked, he swam the other way, but more skeletons and bones appeared.

The snake was preparing to lunge again. Dacron picked up a long bone, getting over his disgust. It lunged. The long bone in his hand shot back, dislocating his shoulder. The angry hiss of the snake deafened him, but it recoiled in pain. The bone had lodged into its throat.

Emboldened, Dacron swam forward to escape the black pool. He made the edge, and pulled himself out using his left arm. Weaponless, he stood facing his enemy; his doom if he did not act quickly.

The snake veered to the left, and then snapped at him. Its teeth got caught in his left leg. He grasped it in agony. The snake bit harder and harder, really digging those teeth in. Dacron grabbed the snake's neck and tried to wrestle it off, but it was futile.

Sweat drenched his body, and the snake was relentless. It tossed him back into the black pool with its powerful jaw. Dacron's body splashed onto the slick pool, among the bones and decaying entrails of the snake's last meals.

He was drowning, and passing out because of the sensations. He felt something sharp with his left arm. He was about to give in to the darkness when the connection became apparent to him. He could use the blade to fight the snake!

He emerged again; tired, weakened, and aching all over. He swam slowly to the shore of the pool yet again, his muscles fatigued by the effort. The snake was nearby, he could hear it.

He looked up, guided by instinct. It was there, its illuminating green eyes staring with malevolence and possession. It fell from the ceiling, slapping against the black pool. In a moment it had reared up while black water blinded Dacron.

Dacron spun out of the way, and then crouched protectively. The dagger in his left hand was poised.

The snake veered left, and then veered right, trying to trick him into making a move. He let it attack, anticipating that the feigned attack would be slower, and it was. The snake's head went for his right leg. Dacron swept to the side and stabbed down, into the core of the snake's brain. There was a fading croak. The snake's head thumped against the ground. A moment later, so did Dacron.

3. The Blood Warrior – Free-Rider

It had been last summer when the Berserker had been found dead. Lacos had found him. He had been travelling the forests, hunting with a group of his soldiers, when they had stumbled upon a surreal sight. The trees had been cut down, allowing large gaps where the sun poured through, flooding the clearing with light. A light mist had swirled around the scene, enshrouding it in an eerie setting. It was witchcraft, of a kind they were unfamiliar with. The Berserker Company had been slashed to pieces; chunks of body parts dotted everywhere on the ground. The trunks of trees were stumped, the rest of them having been removed and moved elsewhere. There were many feet and ankles still rooted to the spot, exactly where the individuals who had walked on them had likely died.

It had not been just that. There were burnt carcasses, smouldering into purple bones and ash, deteriorating at a rate much faster than was normal, as if scorched by an unearthly fire. The ashes looked like leaves; purple leaves. Lacos remembered rubbing the leaves between his fingers and feeling their veined and soft texture. The leaves had felt as Lacos imagined a moth would feel.

And in the centre of the devastation, the Berserker: the outer grey bones of its shell had still been intact. Smoke had been emanating from the recesses, where the human had been alive. The outer bones and white tusks existed as a suit of armour would, being attached to the human's inner bones.

When Lacos had tried to look deeper inside the Berserker a shrill sound had flown out, causing him to recoil and stumble back in fright. Something dark had existed there; something had replaced the Berserker's human occupant. They had tried to move it, but none dared touch it. The best thing to do would be to report it to the Temple Commander. And so they had left the scene, utterly bewildered that their world had been turned upside down. Nothing had ever killed a Berserker.

Lacos stood in the same clearing now, but there was nothing. There were no body chunks or Berserker and he was on his own. Some would call him foolish. There were things out here in this forest that could kill a Berserker, and here he stood, one man, a country detachment commander.

Kroll had sent thousands upon thousands of his best from the Temples. They had found nothing. There was no enemy that they could see in the Arlen Forest.

Lacos often wondered if Kroll had been responsible. Kroll was a powerful Mage and warrior. He controlled the Berserker. Perhaps this Berserker had outlived its usefulness?

Lacos shook his head. Blaming the ruler of the world would not achieve anything.

He made his way out of the forest, the bones crunching under his feet. Only they were not bones; they were bits of bark and mud. He shook his head. The horrifying memory was still etched in his mind. It haunted him sometimes; that ghostly image coming out of the core of the Berserker. Most people feared the Berserker, but Lacos felt he feared the unknown that had nearly come out of it that day.

He trudged out of the forest, found his horse, and then rode towards his homestead. He rode what felt like a long way, across soft flat green stretches of land, until he saw the familiar wooden thatched homestead on the horizon. He passed a few nondescript farm animals on his way, as he usually did. In the distance great blue and white mountains with glaciers framed the view. He tied up his horse to the post, and then made his way inside with relief.

Betha, his wife, was waiting for him. She had her hands clasped, beneath the brown apron that she usually wore, but today she had a strange look about her.

'Betha, what's wrong?'

Her blond curls seemed to flex, and then expand.

That's strange.

The dog was behind her, staring at her back. Was there something behind her back?

'Where are Solde and Salien?'

Betha continued to stare emotionlessly at him.

'Betha? Has something happened?'

'They're gone!' she screamed.

Lacos panicked.

'What are you talking about?'

'The children!' she yelled, tears streaming copiously down her face, her hands pleading in prayer.

In some kind of empathy or understanding, the dog started barking, adding to the noise and stress that combined to overwhelm him.

Something happened...

'Where? Has somebody taken them?'

'The Temple took them,' she sobbed, sitting down in the shape of a ball, the dog rubbing its nose into her and sobbing. It was such a sad sound.

'Why would the Temple take our children? They wouldn't. I work for the Temple.'

'You don't do enough, they said. Every homestead is *now* to be owned by the Temples.'

Lacos didn't know what she was talking about. When he looked closer, he noticed that there was a pink bruise on her pale skin.

'Did they touch you?' he asked, outraged. He grabbed her hand with one of his and took her face in his other hand. 'Did they put a finger on you?' he insisted.

She must have known he was desperate and that he would act irrationally if she confirmed, so she lied.

'No.'

'You lie. Who was it, anybody we know?'

Lacos' teeth were already gritted together, his muscles inflamed with rage. He stood up and unbuckled his black leather scabbard. From it he drew his sword. It sliced out, flashing from the light of the hearth.

'Don't do it Lacos, they'll kill you!'

Lacos shook his head. He was going to the Temple, and he was going to punish those who had defiled his wife and stolen his children.

'Will they come back?' he asked calmly.

'They punished us because I refused to let go of the homestead. They'll be back to take it by force,' she moaned, despondent.

I have to stay...

Lacos' sword dropped, and he slumped down, in defeat and dismay. There was no way he could fight against the Temple and the soldiers they would send. He was a country detachment commander. He could ride to the other homesteads and rally support, but he doubted they would fight with him. The Temple was their life, and if the Temple made a rule then they would obey, whatever the cost.

I just have to wait for them.

No other thoughts or ideas came to his mind, as he held steady, his sword gripped with such force that it now felt like an extra appendage.

It was dusk, and the dog was now content, sat by the fire while Lacos was rhythmically sharpening his sword with the whetstone.

He had ridden out before, but to no avail. The other homesteads had been suspiciously empty, as if the other free-riders knew what was afoot or had fled like cowards.

Now it's a waiting game. They will return, and I hope it's the same people, so I can kill them.

His wife was lying among some sheets and fur in a corner close to the dog and the hearth, resting. Nobody wanted to be alone at a time like this. She had obviously been through quite an ordeal, and she was lucky to still be alive.

He heard the pattering of hooves outside and some commotion. Lacos stood up, dropping the whetstone. He went out, limbs tense and aggression contorting his face.

They were here, six of them, mounted. They reined their horses back to slow down, and then stepped from them.

Three of the men were tall and had a dangerous look about them. The other three were of average size. The first stalked forward.

‘We’re here to take your homestead or to burn it if you refuse,’ he declared in a deep surly voice.

The other men were already drawing swords and taking shields from their backs. Their dented aquamarine helmets had the crest of a serpent sculpted out of the iron at the top. It was a common decorative fancy, sometimes symbolic, for soldiers; but none Lacos had seen at the local Temple Karthaak when he made his reports.

Lacos only had chain-mail and leather. He raised his sword all the same.

‘The homestead isn’t the issue here,’ he boldly declared. ‘An evil has been committed unto my wife and my children. I hope to correct it.’

One of the men snickered.

‘Were you here before?’ Lacos asked, his temper flaring to the peak.

The first soldier came further forward, his nose almost touching Lacos’.

‘What if we were?’

That was it. Lacos’ sword swung high and wide, missing the soldier’s head by a few inches. They all jumped forward. They were onto him now. He had attacked in rage, and had missed, foolishly.

Swords clashed as they converged on him. He stumbled, trying to defend himself from the blows. He fell back, falling through his own door. He got back up, but the first soldier kicked him down again, and he harshly returned to the ground. His wife was up now, and was cowering close to the dog.

‘We’re sick of you free-riders, taking more than your fair share. You have a wife, children, a homestead, and you get paid double what we get. All you do is rove the country and explore. We have to do all the dirty work!’

The first soldier hacked a table into two, and then disarmed Lacos, the sword flying to the other corner of the room.

‘Take her! Burn the homestead down!’ the Commander ordered.

His wife screamed and protested. The dog ran and bit the offending soldier. Two other soldiers came, restraining his wife and chucking her outside. One soldier had a wooden stick, which he ignited on the fire. He waved it at the dog to keep it away. He even tried to kick the dog a few times, but he was too frightened he’d get bitten. Lacos tried to rush to help, but the sword pointed at his shoulder pierced his skin, and forced him back. He bit his lip, which gave him a lot of pain.

‘We’re tidying up this world, one bit at a time. Kroll shall have a world free of enemies and thieves,’ the Commander told him snidely.

The Commander then jabbed his sword into Lacos’ shoulder. It penetrated. Lacos yelled in agony. A big boot then stomped onto his face, and he was stunned.

A short time later, Lacos came around. There was fire everywhere, and the dog was barking incessantly.

He sat up, grabbed his sword, and grabbed the dog by the collar. They ran out together. As they met the cool air from outside, the roof of the homestead slid off, wreathed in flame as it was.

Lacos’ life, as he had known it, was over. He stroked the dog, to try and soothe it, for it was still whimpering.

4. The Blood Warrior – Seria

'Where did he go?' Lacos asked the horse-trader.

'He went to the Temple.'

'You said that, but how do I find this Temple?'

'You were a country detachment commander, you tell me!'

'I can't go to *that* Temple.'

'Why not?'

'I told you, I had a disagreement.'

'Listen,' the old man said patiently, 'go back to your family.'

The old man led his horses away, as he retreated into the recessed cave opening and the darkness within, despite it being sunny around the rocks, grass and sandy dunes.

The old man refuses to help me.

The old man had told him another had passed by, who may be able to help him. It had been somebody with influence at a Temple. Lacos had the impression the old man just wanted him to buy a horse, but Lacos had already found a horse.

Who would have ridden to this forsaken dwelling...?

Lacos' throat was parched and he didn't know how to proceed. He could try another Temple, but what difference would that really make if Kroll had commanded every Temple to seize all outlying homesteads and lands?

What had that Commander called him, a *free-rider*?

It all came down to jealousy. They had been jealous of his freedom, payment, wife, children, and home. That was what had motivated the soldiers. What had motivated Kroll?

Lacos couldn't determine what was happening. His loyalty to Kroll had been bone-deep. Now, he was uncertain. He thought he would have proved himself to be one of Kroll's most loyal by reporting the devastation that had befallen the Berserker, but now that he reflected on it maybe Kroll wanted him out of the way because of that. Maybe the soldiers had lied.

Lacos pulled his horse onward, down the sandy hills, towards the plains below, where he hoped to find a town to replenish his supplies. He had no friends anymore. His friends and fellow soldiers had disappeared from his homeland, rather mysteriously if he thought about it. Soldiers would hunt him down if they recognised him, but only those at the Karthaak Temple recognised him. He would head towards another Temple after finding a town. He believed there was a marketplace town two kots from his position.

He left the horse-trader's abode behind, wondering how the old man made a living serving outcasts, thieves, or even bandits. Perhaps the old man was all three himself?

Lacos guided his horse down the cobbled marketplace town. The markets were noisy and busy. There were little children running across the thoroughfare, screaming, and chasing one another like devils. While traders were selling meat, flies buzzed everywhere all over the produce. Lacos could see children drinking from pipe fountains, which spurted water into their mouths.

Thirst and hunger are prevalent here as well.

He slowed his horse down and veered to the left.

'Amulets to ward off evil, half price just today!' an old haggard woman yelled at him.

He passed her by, and looked further on, at a collection of copper and bronze pipes arrayed in stacks.

'What are these for?' he asked the middle-aged man.

'They're pipes that run under your home. They take your waste down to the nearest stream. Do you have a home?'

'Not anymore,' Lacos replied with a bitter edge.

'Why are they bronze and copper? They look too fancy for such dirty work,' Lacos continued.

'That's because I hand-made them myself, and only customers who want quality purchase from me,' the vendor told him, pride opening on his face.

Lacos nodded and moved onward. Here was an alchemist, a type of sorcerer obsessed with archaic arts. If they were charlatans then they would offer to predict the future. Lacos usually avoided such people. They didn't have a positive reputation. After all, they practised arts contrary to the Orthodoxy perpetuated by Kroll.

'What are you, a witch?' he asked, more harshly than he intended.

The lady was pretty, with black hair falling in curtains down her head. She had great bulbous rings on her fingers, and black tattoos of snakes covering her from wrists to shoulders.

'I am a seer,' she replied sternly, as if the truth of it was obvious.

'Can you tell me my future then?' he asked mockingly.

'Only if you are prepared to listen,' she replied, glaring at him.

Her look of steel wiped the grin from his face and her penetrating black eyes were unmoving, like dark pools waiting to suck him in. He felt a bit entranced.

He nodded, as if in shame.

'Come forward...' she gestured, picking up some cards and turning them over.

He came closer, as if reluctantly.

'Sit down.'

He sat down on the wooden stool facing her.

A practised smile broke the corner of her mouth. She moved a few more cards.

'Give me your hand!' she commanded, not unkindly.

'Are you going to draw blood?' he asked in worry.

She shook her head.

He passed his hand over. Her hands grasped his right hand, trapping it. Her black eyes held his.

She breathed a few times. Lacos' gaze almost dropped to her breasts, but he could not defy those eyes.

She sighed.

'You're the Blood Warrior.'

It took a moment for Lacos to realise that she wasn't holding his hand anymore, and that she had turned one of the several cards over, though without even looking at it...

'What does that mean?'

'It means tragedy will mark your life forever. You will become vengeful, taking the path of the warri-'

He stood up in disgust. 'Tragedy has already marked my life,' he spat.

She looked away from him, and busied herself tidying some dark-green gems.

'I need some water,' he added, as if to excuse his behaviour, but the alchemist wasn't listening.

Lacos moved away from her stall, and drifted further down. He needed water for him and his horse. Then he would find another Temple.

Lacos couldn't help it. After he got his water, he went straight back to the alchemist. Maybe she could help him. There was a corner of his mind telling him he was being foolish; that he wanted the company of a female to ease the discomforts wrought by the loss of his family.

She didn't look happy to see him.

'You again?'

'I never paid you.'

'My services are free.'

'I don't understand. Your work is not the work of a charlatan?'

'You can't work out why I bother telling people their future,' she surmised. 'Would it surprise you to hear that I find it interesting? I can see glimpses of peoples' futures. They are always on the road to somewhere.'

'You are not on the road. Why don't you live your own life?'

'There are not many lives open to a person with my skills. Besides, there are not many lives to live.'

Lacos had the feeling she said this with knowledge of the future.

'I ... I need help,' he confessed, hating himself for having asked it.

'You miss your family, and you don't know how to get them back. The ordeal ahead is too much for you. You think my words can help you, but not because you believe in them, rather because you require the strength of them to guide you.'

'How do you know all this from a set of cards, a few gemstones, and some jewellery?'

Her black eyes held his again.

'You think my trinkets are the true source of my power?'

Her eyes said otherwise. Suddenly revelation dawned upon him. 'They help you with your power; to guide it through certain channels, to give you tools to render your services to others.'

'Very perceptive, it is easy to tell you are used to living with a woman. I am sure she misses you.'

'You said my life was on the road to tragedy. Is there any way I can avoid it?'

A smile cracked her face.

'That does cost.'

He didn't have to do much. What was sacrifice next to the sacrifice his wife and children had had to make?

The alchemist Seria, was probably crazy. Lacos felt he couldn't do it by himself. He didn't know when he had become a coward. Ever since entering this town he had felt stuck, unwilling to go anywhere for fear of failing. For all he knew his wife and children were already dead, but he must try to persevere, must attempt to save them. He owed them that much. Tears came down his eyes as he remembered selling the dog to the horse-trader. The dog would get looked after, he reassured himself.

'I use this compass, and it will guide me to the Temple. That sounds fine, but what do I do when I get there?'

'You must climb its exterior. Get to the very top, where the observatory is. If you can do that then you will find a seeing stone. Use it to search for your wife and children. If you can find them, perhaps you can find a way to save them.'

'What will you do for me?'

'I will scratch a stone and give it to you. It will delay the tragedy bound for you. It will, in a sense, retell your future.'

'How can a scratched stone do that?'

'Take it with you, and you will discover its uses on your mission.'

'If you want rid of me, is it not kinder to just tell me?'

'Go to the Karthaark Temple and use the seeing stone. Return to me and tell me what you saw. Together we will save your wife and children.'

'And in return you want me to hunt it, the Berserker?'

Lacos had told her that it was dead, but Seria insisted that there was another one. She needed its blood for some reason.

'There is not a high chance I can kill it.'

'You won't be able to,' she confirmed 'but extracting its blood will prove less of an ordeal.'

'What is stopping me from refusing, when I have saved my wife and children?'

Seria came close, and gave him a look he didn't understand.

'I control the future,' she said mysteriously.
At that moment, Lacos believed her.

5. The Blood Warrior – The Mage

Lacos scaled the exterior of the black pyramid of the Karthaak Temple. He threw another hooked rope up, and it latched onto the curved outcropping above. He levered himself up again, preparing to use another hook. He grunted and stretched his arm, ready to throw. He launched it skyward, only to hear it rattle its way down to where he was and nearly hit him in the face.

I must do this.

He tried his best not to look down, but sometimes he couldn't help it. It was sunset, and the ground was becoming darker, and further away. He was about forty or fifty feet high, maybe more yet he had much more distance ahead to cover. Temples stood at between one-hundred and twenty to two-hundred and forty feet high. He assumed this was one was either one-hundred and twenty or one-hundred and fifty.

Sweat was building on his forehead, and his wrists were aching.

More than once he contemplated why he engaged in this folly. Seria probably wanted to kill him. If she really was privy to the future then she could have any of a number of reasons for telling him to look into the seeing stone. What made him think her interests really did coincide with his?

He shook his head. It was the only plan he had, and he couldn't think of another that wouldn't get him killed in a heartbeat. What he was doing could be senseless, but at least he was doing something. He would have to keep a close eye on the alchemist. It was clear she had more reasons for her actions than she let Lacos in on.

A hundred feet more of outcroppings and Lacos had made it. The face of this black pyramid was scaled with outcroppings for a reason, Lacos was sure, yet he didn't know what the reason was. He was just thankful that there were no windows looking out at him on this side. It had been almost too easy to approach the pyramid and start climbing.

It's as if fate is on my side...

Soon enough he came to a balustrade at the very top. He climbed over, onto the balcony. He set himself down, or collapsed would be a more accurate description. Sweat drenched him, and his hands felt completely numb. Ahead was the bright yellow light of an arched opening.

I made it.

'Well done!' a voice boomed from the interior, frightening the living daylight out of him.

'You have done well,' it praised. 'You were too easy to ensnare this time. I must be getting better.'

'Who are you?' he demanded, stricken, standing up and shielding his eyes from the growing power of the yellow light.

Dark-green slimy serpents emerged from the yellow light, and grasped his arms and legs before he had a chance to move and draw his sword. His sword was promptly taken away, along with his hooks and his spare dagger. He had been outmanoeuvred very fast, and he was now raised aloft, the serpent tendrils squeezing his limbs and constricting his body tightly. From the yellow light a figure materialised, dark and foreboding, and very large. It wore heavy iron-armour, of a dark-grey shade. It shifted out of the light so that half of its body bulged outward. The yellow light was a portal, Lacos realised.

'Kroll ... Magnificence!' Lacos spluttered.

The Forever Sword hung at Kroll's side. It swung horizontally in one sure strike, green embers spreading from its sides. The sword was coming closer. It all seemed to be happening in slow motion. Lacos was about to have his head chopped off. His jaw opened, and he closed his eyes.

A flash of white light appeared, so bright it forced Lacos to reel from it. The serpents holding him hostage dissipated. The yellow light subsided, disappearing. The portal became an arched entrance once again.

I have a saviour.

Lacos stood up, dusting himself off and trying to shake his disorientation away, after witnessing what he had only moments ago believed to be his impending death. Gradually he felt able to muster

enough courage to regain his bearings. He walked forward and stepped into the room beyond, illuminated by yellow sconces, their flames licking the edges of the walls. He had his sword out, in case anybody attacked him. The room was large with a staircase set apart by a low wall. In the centre of the room was a pedestal.

Lacos removed the faded grey cloth covering the seeing stone, and looked at the dark-green crystal ball beneath, veined with gold and silver channels.

He took out the scratched stone Seria had given him, and regarded it. He accidentally dropped it onto the grey stone floor. It flashed white, and disappeared.

‘What the hell was that thing?’ he voiced.

He ignored it and lightly placed his fingers onto the seeing stone. Spirals of images appeared, flickering into life. Lacos became entranced. He saw grassy knolls and storm-ridden lands. The spirals then faded into nothingness and Lacos felt disappointed. Seria must have betrayed him. It was the only conclusion that made sense, he reasoned.

‘That thing was a scratched stone,’ some voice hissed from the staircase.

Lacos lifted his sword and pointed it towards the soldier, but it was not a soldier, it was a Mage. In the Mage’s hand was a large wooden staff with an eagle at the top; its wings spread, mouth agape, and claws resting on the base. The eagle’s eyes were red rubies. The Mage himself wore a black cape fastened with chrome clasps and a gold and black helmet, carved into the shape of an eagle’s golden head. He was adorned with golden chest-armor, and a black quilt. His imposing form advanced menacingly.

The Mage’s arms rose, revealing golden bracelets. It looked like he was going to cast some spell. Lacos prepared to strike. He jumped towards his adversary and slammed his sword vertically down. It clashed with the wooden staff of the Mage, which obviously wasn’t wooden...

The Mage booted Lacos in the mid, and Lacos fell back. The Mage spun his staff, aiming for Lacos’ head, but the blows went wide.

They stood a little distance from one another.

‘How did you know I would be here?’

The Mage didn’t reply.

‘What is a scratched stone?’ Lacos demanded.

The Mage ignored him though, and waved his staff about suspiciously. The flames in the sconces guttered, sweeping high and wide in dangerous arcs. The room became a fiery chasm and Lacos felt overwhelmed. The Mage waved his staff about in an arc and the flames spread in a circle, enclosing Lacos.

Lacos glared at the Mage. He might have been betrayed, but he wasn’t going to go down without a fight. He stampeded through the fire in a rage, screaming as he raised his sword to meet his adversary. The Mage had moved with a wave of his cape, and was stood at the other corner of the room, then started to wave his staff again. Half of Lacos’ face was burnt, but he wasn’t going to let that stop him. He carefully rounded up on the Mage, using his right eye to see while the left side of his face wasn’t responding to his commands.

Lacos assessed the Mage’s movements. The Mage lifted his staff high, from the bottom, and then struck downward. The golden eagle at the top collided with Lacos’ skull, and he yelled in pain, but he still stood eye-to-eye with the Mage. The Mage looked surprised at his vigour. He spun to deliver a side-kick to Lacos. It was artfully done, and Lacos felt the kick in his ribs, but the kick had not moved him. He stepped forward and hacked at the Mage’s head.

The Mage disappeared into grey fluffy dust. There was an evil laugh coming from somewhere.

‘Not bad Blood Warrior, but you will need more than that to survive,’ it taunted in a reverberating voice.

Lacos cast his gaze to every side of the room. The circle of fire in the centre guttered out, leaving a black scorched circle on the floor.

Lacos’ sword dropped. He grasped the left side of his face, burnt and mutilated because of his folly.

That witch will die!

