

the LORDS of Midnight

THE WAR OF THE SOLSTICE



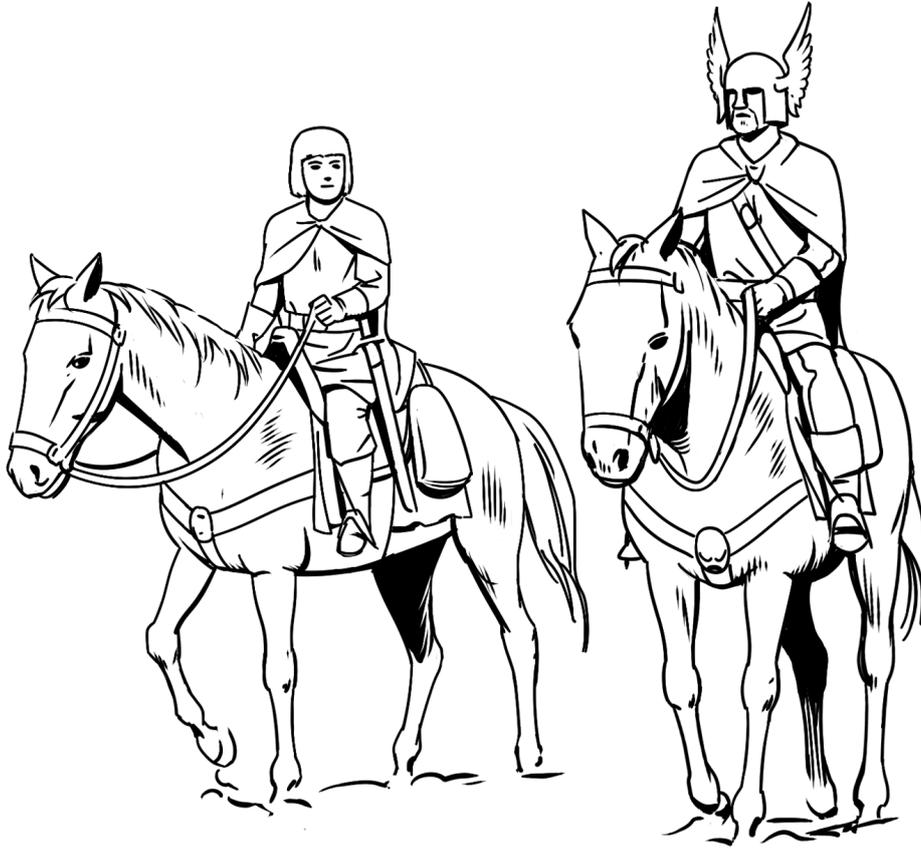
MIKE SINGLETON

the lords of midnight
the war of the solstice

By mike singleton

CHAPTER ONE

LUXOR AND MORKIN



Luxor stood at the doorway of the hut, gazing into the white gloom of the forest. A thin scatter of ersh, the fine powder-snow of the new moon, was floating down onto the frozen ground. It was time, thought Luxor, it was time. An icicle of fear touched him and shivered through him. He drew his cloak tightly around himself, as though it would warm the chill in his heart, and turned from the forest.

"You are troubled, my Lord," said Morkin. The boy looked up at Luxor, his face a mirror of the man's sadness.

"The world is troubled," said the Forest Keeper. He threw another log onto the fire and sent a flock of sparks flying into the smoky darkness of his hut.

"Come and warm yourself by the fire, my Lord," said the boy. He stood up and offered the stool he was crouched on.

"No, Morkin, we must go. The Solstice is nearly upon us and Doomdark is already waking from his slumber. We must reach the Tower of the Moon by tomorrow yet our ride promises to be long and hazardous."

"The horses, my Lord?"

"Yes, fetch them and let's be on our journey."

The boy scurried out. Luxor turned to the Forest Keeper.

"Your fire and shelter have been a precious gift, Keeper: I thank you."

"If you and your young squire can keep Doomdark's scum from my trees, you're more than welcome," growled the Keeper. Then, grudgingly, he added, "My Lord," and spat into the fire.

Luxor turned and strode out of the hut into the crisp forest air. Morkin was already astride his horse, waiting. Luxor swung himself up onto the saddle of his white war-stallion. Then, at a word to the horses, they rode off into the trees. Ersh was still falling and in an hour, there was no trace of their passing.

For many hours they rode in silence, Luxor lost in his thoughts, the boy watching the forest in a mixture of fear and fascination. He had heard the tales men told and couldn't quite believe they were only tales. Yet, the forest had its own vast and lonely beauty, its trees standing still as stones but each drinking a silent power from the earth that could thrust them, as tall as towers, towards the sky. Morkin felt smaller than he had ever felt.

As darkness neared, the boy grew tired of the forest and turned to speak to his Lord. Luxor was gazing into the distance as though in a dream.

"Why does the Solstice trouble you, my Lord?" asked the boy.

Luxor turned his head slowly towards Morkin. For a few moments he said nothing and then, as though he had suddenly remembered, he began to speak.

"Our world wasn't always white, Morkin. You've heard the legends of Summer when the land was green and teeming with life. Ten thousand moons ago it was, so long that men barely believe such a time ever existed. Yet the Wise remember. They have scrolls that tell of the first snows falling and the first carpets of ice covering the land. Suddenly, all the lands of Midnight were plunged into this winter of ours. Then came famine, a great famine that ravaged our people, and with famine came war."

"But the Solstice, my Lord," insisted the boy.

"I am coming to it, Morkin, I am coming to it. The Wise shut themselves up in their towers and let war take its course. They had not foreseen this winter, yet they knew that war was the only way, for the lands that had teemed with people in the long moons of Summer could not feed such a throng any longer. Only one of the Wise, Gryfallon the Stargazer, stayed with his Lord and gave him much counsel concerning war and conquest. Gryfallon was astute, his advice was well-measured, and soon the Lord he served was powerful throughout the lands of Midnight, no longer a mere Lord but, by conquest, a King."

"Was that Doomdark, then?" asked the boy.

"No, the King was not Doomdark. Lord Ushgarak reigned for but twelve moons before Gryfallon had him murdered and took the crown for himself. The people and the Lords were not displeased, for they knew Gryfallon had advised wisely and they knew nothing of his crime. They told each other that Gryfallon the Wise would see them through. So he did, after a fashion, but he ruled not through wisdom but through fear and slaughter and sorcery. As the years passed, an icy chill spread through the hearts of those not already enslaved to him. No longer did people call him Gryfallon the Wise but instead Doomdark, Witchking

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of Midnight. Even this was his own doing, for it pleased him to know so many trembled in fear of him."

"So Doomdark is one of the Wise!" said Morkin, in surprise.

"Who else but they could wield such power?" asked Luxor.

"You could, my Lord," the boy replied, fiercely.

Luxor smiled.

"Your heart speaks louder than your head, Morkin. I would not seek such power, even if I could wield it."

"But, my Lord, what of the Solstice? Why is the Solstice so important?"

"The Solstice, Morkin, is the deepest, darkest day of winter. The Witchking, by his sorcery, draws his power from the very winter itself; he sucks from its heart the cold that fills his own and turns its icy force to his own will. For many moons now Midnight has known a false peace while Doomdark waits and prepares for the Solstice. Doomdark's last full assault on the Free was moons before you were born, Morkin, and even then we barely held him at bay. When the Solstice comes and winter is deepest, Doomdark will draw more power than he has ever known from its icy heart. Then he will unleash all the hellhounds of Midnight against us and I fear we may not withstand him."

A stricken look passed across Morkin's bright face.

"How so, my Lord? We are the Free and you are the mightiest warrior in all of Midnight!" the boy exclaimed.

Luxor smiled wryly.

"Morkin, you do me more than justice, but even if I were as you say it will take more than swords and strong arms to defeat the Witchking. In the last war he made against us, I slew score upon score of his foul creatures yet always there were more to take their place. But worst was the ice-fear, the cold blast of terror he sent creeping over the land to stab at men's hearts and turn their blood to water. This time it will be as cold as the Frozen Wastes."

"Even they can be crossed, so the legends say."

"Perhaps, Morkin, perhaps."

Morkin was silent for a moment, as though lost in thought. Then, as gravely as one of the Wise, he said, "We'll win, my Lord."

"How so?" said Luxor.

The boy grinned, mischievously.

"This time you've got me to help you!"

Luxor looked at the youngster, smiled and then roared with laughter, not at Morkin's ludicrous reasoning but at the enormity of his innocent, affectionate conceit. Morkin, suddenly realising how boastful his words had sounded, burst into laughter too.

"Morkin," said the Lord Luxor, still laughing, "I doubt the ice-fear could ever touch you. There's not a chink it could pierce."

"It couldn't catch me anyway!" said Morkin, suddenly galloping ahead.

Luxor shook his head in disbelief and galloped after his runaway squire.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SKULKRIN



As darkness seeped through the trees, the skulkrin shivered and grunted. Still asleep in a nest of leaves and bracken, he cowered as he lay there and his tiny hands quivered in supplication.

"O Great One," he whimpered, "Fawkrin would not fail you. Fawkrin is your faithfulest servant."

The skulkrin's long tongue lolled out to lick an absent hand. A cold, crackling voice rang out in the creature's dream.

"Wretch! I would not trust you further than I could kick you!"

As if to demonstrate, Doomdark aimed the toe of his boot at the skulkrin's thin belly. Fawkrin, half-expecting such a response, darted away but not swiftly enough. The blow caught him on the backside and sent him sprawling. Doomdark sneered.

"Fool."

The skulkrin picked himself up and dusted the splinters of ice from his ragged tunic.

"You're too kind to Fawkrin, Great One. Fawkrin loves to be kicked around. Oh surely, Fawkrin loves a sore backside, oh surely, too kind!" said the skulkrin, adding under his breath, "Great mound of flatulence."

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In a withering voice, Doomdark whispered, "Go."

Fawkrin cringed as the Witchking's frozen breath rolled towards him, trailing a glittering cloud of ice as it clawed through the air. Fawkrin shrieked, shook and woke.

"Must find Luxor," he muttered to himself, "Surely must."

Shaking himself as he stood up, the skulkrin pawed at all his bodily parts to make sure they were still there, then scuttled off into the murk of the forest.

Fawkrin moved swiftly, skipping over the crisp snow where the ground was even, dropping to all fours when fallen trees and stray boulders made a mountain range of the forest floor. For a few moments, he imagined he was a young skulkrin again, dancing alone and carefree through the white wilderness, but presently he remembered, stopped and sniffed. The simmering breath of the trees streamed into his twitching nostrils but then a different warmth mingled with the resinous gloom of the forest: man-warmth. The skulkrin shivered and sniffed again. There was another warmth there too - boy-warmth!-His long tongue slavered out over his lips. A bite to eat would not go amiss.

Fawkrin found his quarry in a clearing. There was no fire, else he would have found them sooner, and the man and the boy were huddled under a makeshift roof of branches and ferns. Quiet as a snowfall, Fawkrin crept into the bivouac. He pawed around in his tunic and from the grubby depths he tugged out a small pouch of matted fur. From it, the skulkrin poured a heap of glowing white dust into his palm which he quickly sprinkled over the sleeping faces of the humans. Even so, Fawkrin felt a frosty numbness gripping his fingers like a glove of ice.

He muttered to himself, "Rotten Doomdark magic. Could make magic that don't hurt Fawkrin, surely could." Then he shook his clawed little hand until he felt the blood trickle back, whimpering softly all the while.

It seemed that stars had fallen from the sky to settle on the faces of the man and the boy. One by one, each glinting speck faded and disappeared as the sleep-frost melted into their skin. Fawkrin waited until the last glimmer had died, then edged closer to the man. He sniffed at the man's tepid breath, his nose wrinkling and twitching as he tested its warmth and texture. Then he giggled in delight.

"Khlee-khlee-khlee! The great Lord Luxor! Khlee-khlee! Now He won't kick Fawkrin on his backside, surely not."

The skulkrin knelt down, brought his mouth close to Luxor's ear and in a mellow, soothing voice that seemed absurd from such a creature, he whispered, "Lord Luxor, great Lord Luxor, brave Lord Luxor, why have you come to the Forest of Shadows, tell me, Oh tell me where you are bound!"

Luxor stirred. Eyes still closed, his arm rose mechanically and his hand wavered towards the knife in his belt. The skulkrin scurried away with a squeak of terror but Luxor's arm fell back, lifeless, to the ground. Fawkrin crouched in the darkness a full minute before he found courage enough to crawl back to Luxor. In truth, even this was simply the courage of necessity, his fear of Doomdark reasserting itself over his fear of the warlord.

"Great Lord Luxor!" sang the skulkrin, "Tell me where you are bound!"

This time, Luxor did not stir. He spoke in a faint, weary murmur.

"I have been called by the Wise," he slurred, "I have been called to their Council at the Tower of the Moon, summoned."

"But why, tell me why?" crooned the skulkrin.

"The Solstice. Doomdark grows stronger yet. We must act. I know no more. The Wise keep their own counsel."

Fawkrin guessed this was the truth. Though a great warlord of the Free, even Luxor would not be privy to the secrets of the Wise.

"Bah! Great war lump. Might as well tell Doomdark the sun will rise tomorrow. Sore backside for Fawkrin."

Then a thought struck the skulkrin and he grinned a jagged, twinkling grin.

"O great lord, how do you think of the Witchking? Is he not greater than you?" hissed the skulkrin.

"Doomdark is hag-spawn, a foul pestilence, a piece of scum adrift on the fair waters of Midnight. If he fought like a man, I would slay him in two breaths."

The skulkrin convulsed in tremendous giggles. Though he shivered at the thought of Him, there was nothing more deliciously exciting than to hear Him insulted. Suddenly, a cold breath trickled down Fawkrin's neck. His laughter stopped just as suddenly and he clenched his hands together.

"I wasn't laughing, O Great One, oh no! Surely I wasn't."

Only silence and the gentle whisper of the trees was the reply. The skulkrin sighed and smiled crookedly.

"Silly skulkrin. Can't hurt you here, can He?"

He swivelled round and turned to the sleeping boy. He snuffled at his face and shoulders and chest.

"Mmmm. Fresh! And so warm!" he declared.

Morkin was lying on his side, towards the skulkrin, with his bare forearm hooked in front of his face. Fawkrin tugged another pouch from his tunic and poured some more white powder into his palm. Sparingly, he sprinkled it over the boy's arm. No melting glow could be seen for this time the white dust was more mundane; it was salt. Fawkrin opened his jaws wide and ducked eagerly forward.

Just as the skulkrin's fangs were about to sink into the morsel prepared, Morkin opened his eyes. Had the skulkrin been turned to ice, an event not unfamiliar to Doomdark's servants, he could not have stopped in mid-bite more swiftly. For half a moment, Fawkrin was at a loss and could only stare in amazement and terror. Then, a half-moment more and his gaping bite had suddenly transformed itself into a broad grin.

"Hello, young sir!" the skulkrin gulped. He gulped again as a knife-point pressed sharply against his throat.

"If you so much as twitch, little furry one, you'll twitch no more. What's your business with us?" said Morkin.

"Nothing, young sir, nothing, surely. Fawkrin only seeks warmth and shelter. Gets fine hospitality too. Knife at his throat. Questioned like a criminal. Fine hospitality, surely."

"Oh!" said Morkin, mockingly, "Hospitality in your country stretches to

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becoming a meal for your guests. Fine hospitality that!"

"Oh no, young sir, oh no! Fawkrin is a good skulkrin. He would not eat such a fine, strong, handsome, kind boy."

"The salt, then, is for good luck, I suppose."

"So clever, young lord, surely. Yes, good luck. Course!"

"I ought to make your end now but I fear you have worked some doomish spell on my Lord. He sleeps strangely and has not stirred. Wake him and I'll spare you your skin and bones."

"Only the light of day can do that, young sir," whimpered the skulkrin.

"You're lying, fur-thing!" said the boy angrily. He prodded the creature's throat with the knife-point. Fawkrin winced.

"It's dangerous, young sir, dangerous, surely."

"More so if you don't," said Morkin, prodding more firmly with the knife.

"I think, perhaps, I should try to wake him young sir," squeaked the skulkrin.

With his knife-hand, Morkin waved the creature towards Luxor. Fawkrin took yet another pouch from his tunic and waved it to and fro under Luxor's nose. Languidly, the man opened his eyes. For a moment, Morkin's gaze left the skulkrin. The skulkrin bit savagely at the boy and, instinctively, the boy lashed out with the skulkrin clamped to his hand. The creature crashed through the thin branches that sheltered them. His jaws dropped open at the shock of impact but his flight continued, out into the forest towards a particularly prickly clump of brambles. He scrambled to his feet and raced off northwards, plucking out thorns as he ran.

"Armour," he muttered glumly, "That's what Fawkrin needs, armour on his bum. Rotten Doomdark magic. Don't even work on food. Fah!"

Morkin was gently shaking Luxor.

"Luxor, my Lord, are you hurt?"

"At peace, Morkin; I was only dreaming. What's amiss?"

"A furry creature was about to make a meal of my arm before I stopped it at knife-point. It had put you under a spell, my Lord."

"Did it speak?"

"Yes; it said it was a skulkrin."

"A skulkrin! Then Doomdark senses something. The skulkrin rarely come so far south. Did you tell it anything, Morkin?"

"No my Lord, but it was speaking to you when I woke."

Luxor sat up and peered at the folds of the cloak where his head had lain. A few specks of glimmering dust lingered on the dark fabric.

"Sleep-frost! Morkin, did you kill it?"

Morkin shook his head.

"No, my Lord. It escaped."

Come, we must ride! You did well enough to wake, though how you did that after sleep-frost I cannot fathom."

Luxor grasped Morkin's hand firmly. Morkin winced and Luxor felt the warm slick of blood.

"You're hurt Morkin."

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"It's only a bite, my Lord."

"A skulkrin bite turns foul in hours," said the man.

"Then must I cut it open and suck out the poison?"

Luxor laughed, "You listen to too many ale-tales, Morkin. No, a few leaves of sweet flame will clean the wound. We will ride now and gather some on the way, but we must find the skulkrin. If we do not, I fear Doomdark may get untimely warning that the Wise are awake."

CHAPTER THREE

CORLETH THE FEY



Upon the forest hung a sparkling frost. The air was cold and thick. If a twig snapped it would crackle for miles around but only the muted whisper of the trees could be heard. Above, the Moonstar hovered bright and clear in a deep dark sky. The Moon itself was not even a sliver, just a deeper darkness blotting out the glistening haze of the Roads of Light.

Near the forest's tangled heart lay a glade where the darkness moved strangely, dancing over the pale snow like mist in a squall. The skulkrin paused at the clearing's edge; though darkness was his daylight this was beyond his ken. Nameless fears urged him to turn and run but his muscles would not move nor his eyes unfix themselves from the dancing shadows.

As he watched, his fears seemed to drift away as though they were just brief clouds that had enshrouded him and were now passing into the far, far distance. The skulkrin edged forwards into the glade. He felt a beautiful, glowing glory shiver through him. He was completely bewildered; never, not even as a young skulking, had he been happy like this. Unaccountably, he felt good and kind and gentle.

The feeling gnawed at him like an aching tooth. In a daze, he wandered to the centre of the glade and as the shadows danced around him he peered up at the Moonstar. Its bright needles of light pierced him with wonder. His mind had never before grasped what beauty was and now the strange, intoxicating experience overwhelmed him. In a gentle, lilting voice, he began to sing a song he had never heard.

The forest filled with the skulkrin's fleeting song. The smaller creatures of the night hearing only the deadly burr of a skulkrin, however well-disguised, fled to the burrows and nests. The larger creatures paused, as bewildered as the skulkrin itself, and then quickly passed on their way, suspecting some devious skulkrin trap.

Yet there was one who heard and understood. Waking himself easily from his walking sleep, Corleth the Fey turned and made his way towards the strange singer. His long, flowing strides carried him swiftly to the glade. There, at the edge of the clearing, Corleth stood and watched the tiny man-thing as it sang from the bottom of its ill-used heart.

In a soft deep whisper, Corleth added his own voice to the refrain. Then, as if prompted, a breath of wind murmured through the trees and the whole forest seemed to hum with joy.

Gradually the skulkrin's song shrivelled to silence. The creature stirred from his dream and looked around himself. The dancing shadows had gone but across the clearing he spotted a tall, dark figure clad in a cloak that seemed to shimmer with stars. Corleth stepped forward, laughing gently.

"Now, little skulkrin, you know what it is to be a child of the earth, not just a spawn of the Ice Lord."

Fawkrin smiled foolishly. Not knowing what to say in reply, he scampered up to Corleth and stroked his cloak of midnight blue, gazing in wonder as tiny pinpricks of light glinted in the gaps between his fingers.

"Come, little skulkrin, tell me on what mischief you are bound!"

"None, my Lord," lied the skulkrin automatically. Then, having said so, he suddenly regretted it. A longing to be truthful stabbed so fiercely at him that he cried out with a squeal of pain. Even so, his skulkrin ways were not so easily abandoned and the most he could bring himself to say was, "None of my own, Fey Lord."

"I need not ask whose," smiled Corleth.

The skulkrin shook his head slowly from side to side.

"I have been bad, my Lord. I sprinkled sleep-frost on the Lord Luxor and found out where he was bound. And the boy who served him... well, I was hungry... even skulkrin have to eat, my Lord. He was a nasty boy anyway. He prodded my throat with his knife."

Corleth's eyes lit with sudden anger. The skulkrin realised his mistake and babbled away in fearful haste.

"I only gave him a nip on the hand. I didn't eat him. He was a kind boy, a nice boy, surely he was," whined the skulkrin.

"Be at peace, little skulkrin," said Corleth, "To each his own way. I know, in truth, you are but a tool in the hand that made you."

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The skulkrin began to fidget nervously.

"The Cold One will frostify me for sure. He sees thoughts, you know, sees thoughts. Can't escape him. Make me forget, Fey Lord, surely you can make me forget!"

The skulkrin looked up at Corleth with wide, pleading eyes. Corleth shook his head.

"I cannot save you from the beauty of the world. I can make you forget this forest, this glade, but you have tasted the sweetness of life and that is beyond my powers to dispel. Besides, how could I bring myself to steal such a remembrance from you? Better kill you than cripple you again."

"Very kind of you, surely, but I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble," said the skulkrin.

Corleth laughed.

"You have a wry tongue, skulkrin. It may save you yet. Here, a small gift for you before I leave."

Into the skulkrin's hand, Corleth dropped a small amber crystal. The sphere lay in Fawkrin's palm like a tiny sun, glowing with its own soft and soothing light. The skulkrin gazed on it and smiled; he felt it was very precious. A single tear trickled down his cheek. No one had ever given him a gift before and Fawkrin was sure this was peerless amongst all gifts that had ever been given.

"Thank you, my Lord!" he gasped and tore his gaze from the jewel to look at Corleth. Corleth was already disappearing into the dark of the forest.

"Wait, my Lord, wait!" cried the skulkrin.

A deep and distant voice called in reply, "Farewell little skulkrin, and begone swiftly; I suspect the wrath of the Lord Luxor will not be far behind you."

The skulkrin looked nervously around the glade, as if Luxor might burst out of the darkness at any moment. Then he clenched his fist tightly around the glowing heartstone and scurried to cover. Though he was fearful of his return to Ushgarak, return he must. This time, he had a glimmer of hope to comfort him: the marvellous discovery that there was another being in the world who cared about his fate.

Corleth did not resume his own journey but instead followed the skulkrin's old trail southwards. It was a difficult path to follow if you were not a skulkrin and Corleth made slow progress. At length, he emerged onto a forest road. His eyes quickly scoured the width of the pathway for hoof prints and finding none, he smiled to himself, seated himself on a nearby tree-trunk and waited.

It was not long before the riders he expected appeared. Luxor slowed his horse to a trot and approached Corleth with his sword drawn. Corleth stood and smiled.

"What's your business, tall one?" said Luxor.

"I know a skulkrin who shows me more courtesy than that," laughed Corleth.

Morkin reined in beside Luxor and drew his sword swiftly from its scabbard.

"He must be one of Doomdark's, my Lord," hissed the boy, in what he imagined was a whisper, "Let me slay him."

Corleth laughed again. a long languorous laugh that rolled through the

night air like a gentle mist.

"You may try, Morkin, if you wish," said Corleth. He tugged a cord at his neck and the cloak of midnight blue fell away from him, revealing a shirt of mail so finely woven it seemed like a skin of silver. Corleth rested his hand on the hilt of his sword and waited. Morkin looked astonished, but nevertheless he frowned, bared his teeth in an attempt to look grim and fearsome, and urged his horse towards Corleth.

As Morkin's sword scythed down, Corleth stepped lightly aside and caught the boy's wrist in his hand. Both Morkin and his sword tumbled into the snow. At once, Morkin scrambled towards his dropped weapon but Corleth was quicker. He took up the sword and held its point against the boy's chest.

"I will not yield." blurted out Morkin, red and angry, "You must kill me first!"

"Then it seems I must yield, for I would not kill you," said Corleth. Then he reversed the sword and handed it, hilt first, to the boy.

Morkin jumped to his feet and held the sword uncertainly against Corleth's shining shirt of mail.

"Will you give quarter, young knight?" asked Corleth with only a hint of a smile breaking on his lips.

"Only if you give your word that you will not try to escape," answered Morkin.

"Luxor, my friend, you have a bold squire!" laughed Corleth.

"Friend?" said Morkin.

"Friend indeed," said Luxor, striding up beside Morkin, "We fought side-by-side on the Plains of Blood in the last war against Doomdark. I did not recognise him at first, but this is Corleth the Fey. This prisoner of yours will fetch a hefty ransom, Morkin!"

Morkin dropped the point of his sword to the ground and turned towards Luxor, his face burning.

"How was I to know that? You let me make a fool of myself."

Luxor placed his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"No, Morkin, Corleth was testing your spirit: it is better to know your comrade's mettle before the real battle begins, is it not?"

"And you made no fool of yourself," added Corleth. "You did what any true warrior would."

Morkin frowned and sheathed his sword. "Truly?" he asked.

"Truly," said Luxor. Morkin beamed with pleasure. He turned to Corleth.

"You fought quite well too, my Lord." he said, magnanimously. Then the man and the boy and the fey all laughed together.

Morkin lent his horse to Corleth and sat afore Luxor as they rode north along the forest road. Luxor did not wish to lose more time than necessary and didn't mention the matter of the skulkrin until they were on their way. When he did relate the tale, Corleth remained silent until Luxor had finished. Then, at last, he spoke.

"I met this skulkrin but an hour past," said Corleth.

"Why did you not say?" asked Luxor incredulously, "We must find it and

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silence it."

"At peace, my friend; you must give some quarter even to skulkrin. Are they not creatures of flesh and blood? His only crime is knowledge and you cannot slay him for that alone. Who knows? Perhaps he will not tell Doomdark of his knowledge."

"Perhaps snow is not cold," said Luxor bitterly.

"Perhaps it is not," said Corleth, "Would you believe that I found this skulkrin in a glade of shadows, singing his heart out to the Moonstar? Would you believe that he told me truly of his deeds this night? Would you believe that when I made him a gift of a heartstone, a tear rolled down his cheek?"

"If any but you had told me, I would not," said Luxor.

"Then believe me when I say we must let him live and find his own destiny. If we do not, why are we fighting Doomdark?"

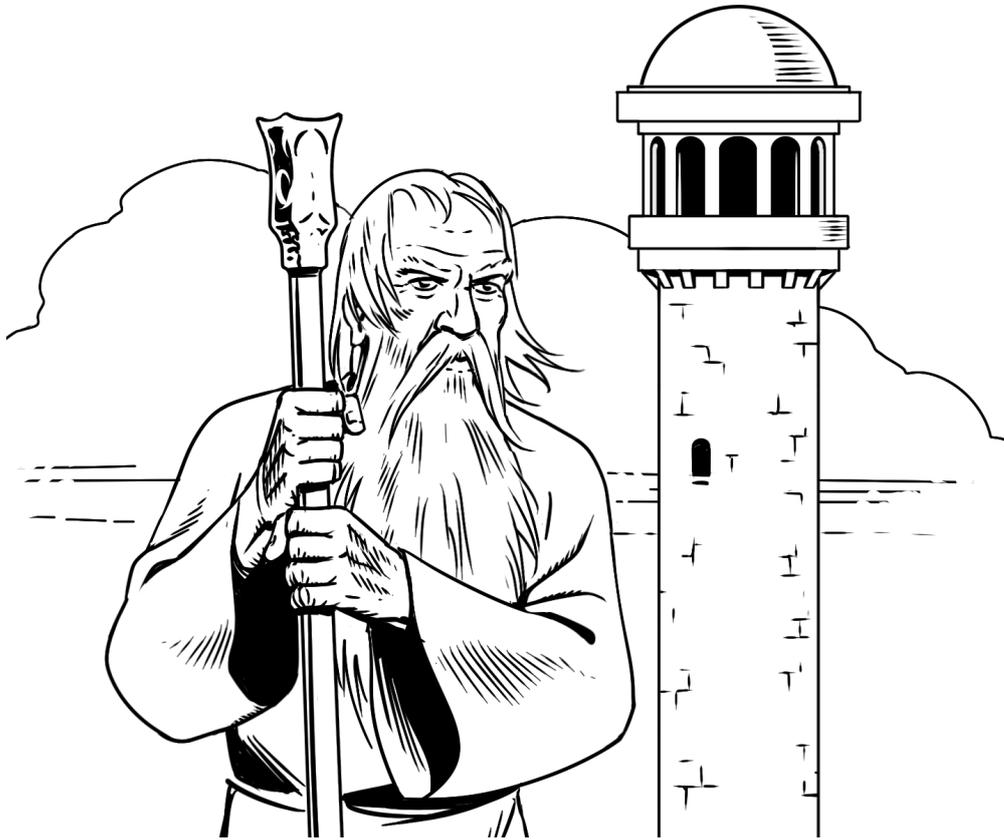
"Yes, you are right, my friend." said Luxor wearily. Then he added darkly. "The cold wears me down."

"Your heart is strong enough. Believe that too." smiled Corleth.

Luxor fell silent, remembering earlier days when they had ridden together across the lands of Midnight with cares that seemed as light as falling snow. He hoped his heart was strong enough. Then hearing the gentle snoring of Morkin asleep before him, Luxor seemed to hear all the peoples of the Free slumbering innocently while incomprehensible dangers gathered about them and knew he must be strong. He shrugged the coldness from him and rode on towards the Tower of the Moon a little more gladly.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE TOWER OF THE MOON



Dawn approached stealthily, running swift fingers of light over the Lands of Midnight. Far to the east, it touched the grim Keep of Utarg with a brief golden haze: the Targ sentries yawned and looked around only to see if the next watch approached to relieve them. The dawn moved on, trembling over the Downs of Athoril, cloaking them in scarlet and saffron. The hills which had seemed hunched herds of vast menacing creatures in the absence of light, seemed now to draw apart and unfold.

The daylight spread further westwards, painting the Plains of Dawn first crimson, then amber, then a deep glowing yellow so that they looked, for a fleeting moment, as they did at any noon of the Long Summer, clad in wheaten gold. In lonely hamlets scattered across the broad plains, villagers stirred and smiled to see the warmth of daylight return, then bent themselves to their daily tasks.

Over the Forest of Thrall sped the hand of the Sun, shooting bright arrows of light into the sepulchral darkness of the trees, and then further west to caress the sheer walls and tall towers of the Citadel of Shimeril. As the first blaze of

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sunlight fell into the Courtyard of the Kings, the great horn sang out over the city. Twelve times the great horn bellowed its simple fanfare, a short, deep boom followed by a longer, more strident note. A-wake, a-wake, it sang and then fell silent. The city roused itself dreamily, with creakings of shutters, rattling of doors and the growing murmur of feet on its cobbled streets.

The dawn did not linger but hurried on its endless journey, ever westward, ever westward till the world ceased to spin. Across the Plains of Blood it shed its own, brighter blood. What men moved there shivered in reluctant remembrance and did not pause to gaze upon the colours of the sunrise. Then, at last, the light grazed the edges of the Forest of Shadows, rose up and flew over a sea of mist-wrapped trees to touch the high stones of the Tower of the Moon.

From its crowning dome of Looking-Crystal, Rorthron was watching. Through the mists of the forest, he saw a wind of light blow away the darkness and speed towards him over the leagues and leagues of trees. And though he would not have cared to count how many dawns he had watched from his solitary post, he smiled as he always did when the sun rose in full glory over the green rim of the forest.

Rorthron turned and looked to the west where the light still advanced inexorably upon the dark army of trees. He sighed. Such a brief summer this starved Sun brought each day. He had been not much more than a boy at the height of the Long Summer. Then, the great disk of the Sun seemed to fill the sky; a day seemed to stretch forever as the languid hours glided by; and people sought cool shade, not crackling fires. It did not seem ten thousand moons ago.

Rorthron shook his head as if to deny that the Long Summer had ever existed. He roused himself from his memories and set his gaze beyond the horizon. He looked first to the north, to Ushgarak, the eye of his mind not seeing pictures but instead absorbing a crowd of thoughts that clamoured in the far, far distance.

There was much commotion in the great Citadel. Men, and fouler creatures, were preparing themselves for war. The captains of Doomdark were tallying supplies, marshalling their war-bands, bustling to and fro in the Winter Palace with last-minute orders and requisitions. Their thoughts were only of victory; already they were exultant at the havoc they would wreak, the vast slaughter that lay at their command.

The lesser minions of the Witchking were less sanguine. Though they too had no doubt of the final victory, they knew equally that they might not be granted the privilege of enjoying it, knew that their lives were the coinage of war to be spent wantonly as their cold master decreed. Some were filled with disgust at themselves that their weakness and abject fear had brought them to this, fighting in the service of the loathsome Doomdark. Others, more pragmatic, simply counted themselves lucky that they, at least, had a chance to survive whilst the enemies of the Cold One most certainly did not. And there were some, of course, who despite their fears for their own wretched lives took comfort in the knowledge that soon they would be reaping a rich harvest of death and pain across the battlefields of Midnight and nourished their uncertain courage with lurid visions of rape and pillage.

Rorthron turned away. He had seen nothing he had not expected to see, yet still it filled him with infinite sadness to see the people and creatures of Midnight used thus. The Wise had failed. So long ago, in the very dawn of the world, his race had been charged with its guardianship. Now, their complacent folly had allowed this to happen and all they could bring themselves to do was to lock themselves securely in their towers and choose to forget that the world still existed beyond the high stones.

At length, Rorthron turned this mind-gaze south-east to Corelay and the Citadel of Xajorkith. Here was a different commotion; children playing in the streets, waggoners foddering their horses. market-sellers calling out to early customers, inn-keepers pouring the first ale of the morning into great jugs, blacksmiths stoking their forges. The city was at peace, its people content. And if there were vague fears for the future itching in the depths of men's minds, they were forgotten in the brightness of morning, each dawn a new hope, a new beginning.

One day from the Solstice, Corelay still had an air of summer about it. The sadness lifted a little from Rorthron's thoughts. While Corelay was free, there was still hope and goodness in the world and he must bend all his powers to preserve it. Rorthron walked briskly to the stairway and descended from his eyrie to greet the riders approaching out of the Forest of Shadows.

Luxor, Corleth and Morkin were greeted warmly by Rorthron. They bathed first after their long journey and then joined Rorthron to break fast in the High Hall. A blazing fire was burning in the great stone fire place and they sat before it with Rorthron to eat and drink. There were many tales to be told but as the day grew older, Luxor turned to more serious matters.

"When does the Council begin, Rorthron? Surely, there is much to discuss."

"My friend, it has already begun. I am guilty of a little deceit; no others of the Wise will stir themselves. They think I am a foolish old man with a hopeless dream and will have no part in the coming war against Doomdark. They wait for better times, as if better times will appear by magic out of nowhere," said Rorthron wearily.

"This cannot be so!" cried Luxor, aghast.

"It is so, my friend; I am the Last Council of the Wise."

Corleth laughed. "Then at least we can hope for unanimous decisions. Besides, one of you, Rorthron, is worth a score of the rest. We should not be troubled when the hopeless desert us."

Rorthron smiled gratefully, Luxor nodded his reluctant acceptance of the truth and their talk turned to Midnight and the realms of the Free. In the east, the Targ still preserved a fiery independence. The Utarg of Utarg would suffer none to cross his lands, Free or Fey or Foul and though the Witchking was known to have sent embassies to him, only one ambassador had been returned, flayed alive. To the north of the Plains of Targ, Kumar had not been invaded for many moons. On its northern borders, the Forest of Whispers had swallowed many a doomish war-band and to the west the Marshal of Kumar kept a strong watch on the Mountains of Ithril.

West of the Targ, Marakith remained free, though war-bands had been

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spotted on the western plains scurrying for the cover of the Forest of Thrall. Further west, the Plains of Blood had become a dangerous place for the lonely traveller, though still passable by a strong troop. The Marshal of Shimeril sent frequent raiding parties north into the plains. Many of the Foul had been slain but with each passing day their strength grew and the Gap of Valethor could no longer be reached without an army to clear the way.

Around the Forest of Shadows itself, there was little to be seen of Men, Foul or Free, yet further south on the Plains of Gard, Doomdark kept a strong raiding band that had even ventured to the walls of the Citadel of Gard. Of all the lands of Midnight, only Corelay remained untouched by Doomdark's cold hand.

None of them doubted that Doomdark would deploy his main strength on the plains of Valethor and once again attempt to force a passage south across the Plains of Blood. To the east the Mountains of Ithril were too formidable a barrier for the numberless armies of the Witchking to be supplied across, let alone to march across. To the west, the bleak passage between the Mountains of Ashimar and Dodrak was too narrow a road for him to risk.

But could they hold Doomdark this time on the Plains of Blood, as they had done so many times before? If not, Doomdark could choose from many roads after gaining the Plains; he could strike out at his leisure in any direction and the armies of the Free would be caught running to one breach after another. Luxor was not hopeful.

"Doomdark is too strong. How can we hope to hold him now on the Plains of Blood when we so barely succeeded the last time?"

"Perhaps we should not try," said Corleth. "If we let him move his hordes onto the Plains of Blood and further south if necessary, that would leave the way open for us to strike at Ushgarak itself."

"To do that, we would need to pass through the Gap of Valethor ourselves," said Luxor. "We could not do that with Doomdark camped on the Plains."

"Have you forgotten Ithron, my friend? Is not the Citadel of Ithron still free?" asked Corleth.

"Tenuously so," said Rorthron, "The Marshal of Ithron is sorely pressed."

"From Ithron we could strike north without the Mountains of Ithril to block our way, then turn west at Droonhenge and approach Ushgarak by its back door."

"And what of Marakith and Shimeril and Corelay? Are we to leave them defenceless in the face of Doomdark whilst we ride off on a hopeless sortie? No, Corleth, I will not do that," shouted Luxor.

"Is it any less hopeful than defending the Plains of Blood? Either way, all may be lost, but if we should take Ushgarak, Doomdark would be finished."

"At what price?" asked Luxor, angrily.

Rorthron got to his feet and stood before them.

"At peace, my friends. All ways are perilous but we must not exclude any if we are to defeat Doomdark. His greatest weapon is fear and confusion. We must not think that any task is hopeless - and it is not! Even Doomdark was once flesh and blood. Now he is more ice and water, how much easier should it be to defeat him?" said Rorthron, smiling benignly.

Luxor was still bitter. "I know you are not senile yet Rorthron. If your words are meant to comfort us, they are ill-chosen."

"Perhaps you need more than words," said Rorthron calmly. He reached out his hand towards Luxor and opened it out, palm upwards. "Perhaps you need this."

There, in the palm of the Wise, lay a ring of red gold into which was set a single jewel. as round and smooth as a pearl but of a clear, sparkling blue that flashed and flickered like lightning.

"I have rings already, Rorthron."

"Not one like this, my friend," laughed Corleth. Luxor looked curiously at Corleth, wondering what joke this could possibly be.

"I never thought to see it. I'll wager no Man or Fey has seen it in our lifetimes. Luxor, this is the Moon Ring, the last of the Great War Rings of Midnight!"

Luxor turned his gaze again to Rorthron's palm and looked in wonder at the legendary ring that lay there. The mists of despair that had clung to his thoughts for many moons seemed to clear and fade away as he watched. Beside him, Morkin was craning his neck so far forward to get a better view that he almost fell off his seat. Luxor looked up at Rorthron.

"You know I cannot take this, Rorthron, it is not my right."

"Forgive me, Luxor," said Rorthron, "I have kept this from you too long, but with good reason. You are not simply Lord Luxor of the Free, you are the last heir of the House of the Moon. You, my Lord Luxor, are the Moonprince and this ring is yours by right, to be worn only in circumstances of gravest peril. Once slipped on your finger, it cannot be removed until you are dead or the peril has passed. It will give you the Power of Command and the Power of Vision over those lords and subjects loyal to you, even at great distances. With the Power of Vision you will be able to see through their eyes what they see. With the Power of Command you will be able to urge them to undertake any task they would willingly perform for you. And more than this, it will echo the warmth and strength of your mind and send forth a tide of hope across the cold lands of Midnight. It is yours. Take it, and use it with care."

Rorthron the Wise stepped forward and dropped the Moon Ring into Luxor's hand. Luxor was quite speechless for a while. Then, at length, he spoke.

"Thank you, Rorthron the Wise; this is a gift beyond gifts. Yet, I do not understand why you have kept all this from me so long. Surely, in the last war against Doomdark, this ring would have been a help beyond price?"

"Yes, Luxor, it surely would but the Wise have their reasons. The Solstice is the peak of Doomdark's power. Defeat him before that and he will return as surely as the snow will fall. Defeat him at the pinnacle of his power and he will never return, never blight the lands of Midnight again with his foul schemes. Nor could I tell any of your true ancestry for fear that Doomdark would gain the knowledge too and hunt you down like vermin. Even now, he suspects nothing and when the morrow comes, the Solstice itself, he will expect all its glory for himself. From Ushgarak will issue forth an ice-fear the like of which has never been seen, rolling its terror across Midnight like a plague. Tomorrow, at dawn,

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you must don the Moon Ring and send a blaze of hope winging across the land, melting his ice-fear, stabbing him with shock that a warmth still exists that can resist him and filling him with doubt. Then you must ride swiftly to Corelay and rally all the peoples of the Free to your banner. You must challenge Doomdark everywhere; leave one pathway unguarded, one chink open and a flood will pour through. The Moon Ring itself will lend you the power to guide the forces of the Free and under your guidance they will march against Doomdark as one. The Captains of Cold will be blind compared to those whose way is lit by the War Ring of the House of the Moon."

"And a plan?" asked Luxor, "Are we not to have a battle-plan?"

Corleth grasped Luxor's arm firmly.

"Of course, Luxor," he said, "But don't you see? This time, this war, the Moon Ring lends us the power to change our plans at a moment's notice. No longer must we stake all upon a single throw."

"Yes, of course," mused Luxor, still dazed at his new-found inheritance.

"There is one matter we have not yet considered," said Rorthron, a note of warning thrumming in his voice.

"What is that, Wise One?" prompted Corleth.

"The Ice Crown."

Even Corleth seemed to pale at its mention. Morkin tugged gently at Luxor's sleeve and whispered a question to him. Rorthron smiled and turned to the boy.

"Fashioned of the purest, coldest crystals of ice, forged in the Frozen Wastes on the bleakest of nights by Doomdark himself, the Ice Crown is the source of all his power for it enables him to suck from the heart of the Winter all the bitter forces of cold and bend them to his will. He keeps it in the Tower of Doom, north of Ushgarak across the Plains of Despair. Few have seen it and lived. yet all have felt its bitter touch."

"Do you think we could seize it?" asked Luxor. New hope had dawned in him now and he could almost begin to believe that even such a desperate folly as this might succeed.

"I think we must try," said Rorthron, "If we succeed and destroy it, Doomdark's power will be shattered. Even if we fail, the attempt will distract him and thus help our armies to prevail."

"We cannot spare more than a few for such a perilous task," said Luxor.

"No, indeed. And No more than one for the final journey to the Tower of Doom, one who can resist the ice-fear that streams from it as sunlight streams from the sun. It is your choice. Moonprince."

"I cannot lay such a task on another's shoulders. I must go myself."

"Bravely said," said Rorthron, "But that cannot be: the Moon Ring throws forth mind warmth -that is its boon and its bane. Doomdark would sense your presence before you got within fifty leagues of the Ice Crown. You must choose another. I would go myself but the Wise have too much knowledge of each other: I could not hide myself from Doomdark any more than he can hide himself from me."

"Then there is only Corleth." said Luxor reluctantly, "No other than he can

resist the ice-fear at its coldest, no other that I know of."

Luxor turned to Corleth. The Fey looked troubled. He turned his eyes away from Luxor, then rose silently and wandered towards the colonnade that circled the High Hall. He stopped by a slender column and gazed out through the Looking-Crystal over the Forest of Shadows. The others remained silent, waiting for him to decide. After a long while, Corleth returned and stood before them all in front of the great fire. His eyes were heavy and his face drawn.

"There is another," he said. "One stronger than I could ever be in the face of the ice-fear."

"Then who?" asked Luxor, puzzled and frustrated by the riddles of the Fey.

"If I could keep this from you, my friend Luxor, I would, but in truth I cannot. The old songs say that one will be born, half-fey, half-human, whom the ice-fear cannot touch. Armoured with the laughter and lightness of the Fey and the wild fire of Men, the ice-fear will roll from him like drops of rain in a summer shower."

Corleth paused and his eyes glazed over as he tried to imagine what such a summer, what such a shower would be like. Then he blinked and forced himself to continue.

"My Lord, my friend, Luxor, Moonprince - he sits beside you!"

The Fey bent his head and gazed at the floor: he could not bring himself to look Luxor in the eye. The silence was profound.

"Me?" whispered Morkin, "How can it be me?"

Corleth lifted his head and turned his deep eyes towards the boy.

"Tell me what you know of your father and mother, Morkin," said the Fey gently. The boy looked startled.

"I know nothing, my Lord. I was only a babe when my Lord Luxor found me, while hunting boar in the Forest of Thimrath. He gathered me up and took me home and cared for me, as he has cared for me ever since: he has been like a father to me all my life."

Corleth smiled and looked up towards the distant ceiling of the High Hall.

"It was many moons ago," he said, "We had prevailed over the foul hordes of Doomdark on the Plains of Blood, but the price was heavy. Many were slain, more were shattered in mind by the last tide of Ice-fear he sent against us. After the battle, a host of our faithful warriors wandered lost and demented across the bloody fields, their hearts empty, their minds full of horror. There were so many that those who had survived unscathed could not hope to find them all before they took their own path to peace or simply wasted away in the cold, bitter nights."

"Such a man, wounded to the quick in body and mind, found his way into the depths of the Forest of Thrall. It was there, exhausted and close to death, that one of the Fey, the fair Aleisha, found him. She dragged him on a trestle of branches to her tree-home and there she nursed him to health again. As his strength grew, so did his enchantment with Aleisha and so did her enchantment with him."

"When he was fully strong again, his mind healed by her comfort and words of peace, his body mended by her subtle, feyish skills, they made their

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love complete. Yet Aleisha was troubled. She knew their love, however strong, could not last, for he was a mortal Man and she a Fey. She said nothing to him but let the days and nights of their love linger on until she could bear it no longer. Then, gathering all her courage, she freed his mind of every memory of her, not wishing him to bear the pain of their impossible love. She led him to the southern edge of the Forest of Thrall and watched him dwindle into the distance as he walked out across the Plains of Iserath towards the Mountains of Morning and his distant home."

"Some moons later Aleisha bore a child, a rare child, his child as well as hers. Her delight almost overwhelmed the pain of parting but even in this moment of joy she thought only of him. Out of love had she made him forget yet she knew she would not forego her own memories, however painful. She was determined that he too should keep something of the harvest of their love. And so, barely a moon later, she journeyed south with her babe across Iserath and Rorath to the borders of Corelay."

"How many times had he told her of hunts he rode in the Forest of Thimrath, how many times had he pictured in her mind its winding paths and gentle glades. She knew where he would be. As dawn approached, she listened for the hoof beats of his horse and when she was sure, she bundled the babe in warm furs and laid him by the path. She dared not linger for fear that she would cry out as he approached and run to his arms. So, with a parting kiss for her child, she turned back to the north, never to see her son or her lover again."

"That son was you, Morkin. Your father is my friend, Luxor."

Rorthron the Wise sniffed loudly and dabbed at his eyes with the long sleeves of his gown. Luxor, for the second time that morning, was dumbfounded. But Morkin, brimming with joy, leapt to his feet and flung his arms around the Moonprince.

"You always have been and now it's true," he said in some confusion. Luxor smiled and returned his son's embrace.

"It is all I could wish, Morkin," he said, then added, "Save that all secrets were as happy as this when revealed - and revealed sooner."

Suddenly, Morkin whirled round on Corleth.

"Yes! Why did you keep this secret from... from my father? You are his friend."

"And yours too, Morkin. The Fey have long suspected that the House of the Moon still survived. The Wise are not the only guardians of knowledge. I could not be sure until today when Rorthron held forth the Moon Ring, but since I have known him, I have harboured a secret hope that your father was the Moonprince. I did know, as Rorthron did, that Doomdark suspected nothing. To have revealed your kinship would have placed you both in double jeopardy as it does even now. My words may yet be your death, Morkin. I pray you will forgive me. These are dark times."

Morkin looked subdued.

"I suppose you did right, my Lord Corleth. It is I who should be sorry, not you," he said grudgingly. "I hate Doomdark. He spoils everything."

"He does indeed, Morkin, my well-named son," said Luxor. "Corleth the

Fey, you have given me a hard choice. How can I send a boy, even if he is my own son, on such a perilous quest? He may be able to scorn the ice-fear - that I can well believe - but there are many other dangers on the road to the Tower of Doom."

It was Morkin who answered first.

"You must send me, Father. If you do not, Midnight might be lost anyway and then what would become of me?"

"The boy is right," said Rorthron, "We must take every chance. It has come to that."

Luxor nodded slowly. He clasped Morkin's hand.

"If you wish it Morkin, seek the Ice Crown and attempt its destruction. I will not send you, but you may go if you wish."

There was fire in the boy's voice and a gladness shining in his eyes.

"Of course I will go, Father! Don't wish me luck: it's Doomdark who will need it! "

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SOLSTICE



It was a strange dawn. The Sun seemed reluctant to shake off the shackles of night and soar over the rim of the world. When it did, the rays it sent spinning across Midnight seemed cold and pallid. From the north a frozen mist was seeping over the hills and forests and plains and the dawn was silent, the air empty of birds, the earth untrodden by the chattering creatures of day. Even to Corelay the coldness spread and a nameless chill gripped men's hearts as they rose to greet the new day. Old warriors, in dread, whispered of Doomdark, for they had been touched like this before, but the rest simply shivered and tried, with small success, to shrug off their unreasoning fear.

This was only the vanguard of the ice-fear that gathered in the north. Around Ushgarak, the mist was so thick and high that the city still lay in darkness, though the rest of Midnight was bathed in light. Then, like a storm driven by the winds of the tall sky, the great mist began to roll south over the Plains of Despair. Even Doomdark's creatures quailed and shivered as it passed. The mist fanned out as it moved ever southwards but it did not seem to thin or diminish: rather, it grew thicker and taller as it devoured the waking landscape.

From the Tower of the Moon, Luxor the Moonprince rode out to meet the dawn. At one side of him rode Morkin, his face eager and shining with the fire the dawn seemed to lack. At the other side rode Corleth the Fey, a hint of unbidden laughter playing round his lips. Luxor turned first to Corleth.

"My friend, we must part now but I will be with you. I know your people are loathe to fight but this is more than a war of Men. Ride north to the forests of the Fey and gather those you can to our banner: we will have need of you and

all your kin before this war is done."

"The Fey will fight, my Lord Moonprince, though at times you may not notice how. I will raise more than a war-band, I promise you. Fare thee well, my friend."

Then the Moonprince turned to his son. He placed his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"This parting has come too soon. I fear your task may be the hardest of all, Morkin: take no risk without need. You risk enough already."

"Have no fear, Father. I will return. You risk more than I and it is you who should take care: do not orphan me again."

Luxor smiled.

"I will try not to! Farewell, my son."

The Moonprince turned to the south-east, towards Corelay. He took the Moon Ring and slipped it on his finger. In his mind, the distant murmur of battle seemed to grow and a warm fire burned in his blood. Suddenly, the horizon seemed to expand and fly away into the distance as into his mind flooded all the hopes and fears of the peoples of the Free. He drew his sword from its scabbard and held it aloft, then spurred his white stallion towards the Forest of Shadows and distant Corelay.

"Arise, Midnight!" he called as he rode, "Arise the Free! Peril and doom lie at our gates. Waken your valour, arm yourselves with courage! We ride to conquer Doomdark forever! Arise Midnight, arise!"

His war-cry rang out across the still dawn, flying over the forests and hills, whispering over the plains, in the distant citadels of the free, in Ithron, in Marakith, in Shimeril, in Kumar and in Gard and in Xajorkith, men paused and looked about themselves, imagining they heard a faint echo whose words they couldn't quite catch yet which quickened their hearts and made their blood race.

Then, as if swept away by a sudden wind, though the air stayed as still as the mountains, the dour mist that lay over Midnight vanished northwards, shrinking back towards Ushgarak. The full dawn broke suddenly over the land, showering it in a blaze of warmth and light. A wave of hope rippled outwards from the Forest of Shadows across the country of the Free, to far Corelay, to the Plains of Dawn, to the Mountains of Morning, warming chill hearts and bringing a glimmer of gladness to Midnight that had too long been absent.

In the Winter Palace of Ushgarak, the frozen mist that should have been flowing out in an endless stream was rushing back in. Doomdark flailed his arms through it as it thickened about him.

"Back!" he cried, "Back! Fly out, out!"

It was to no avail. The ice-fear rushed homewards and sank back into his cold flesh. When all had returned and the air cleared, there was worse, a warmth, an inexplicable warmth seemed to touch his mind. The Witchking grimaced. He had almost forgotten what pain was like. A spore of doubt buried itself in his thoughts and like a canker, began to grow.

"A Moonprince?" he mused, "No! It cannot be."

But far to the south, already Luxor the Moonprince sped through the Forest

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of Shadows to rally Corelay and the Free. The War of the Solstice had begun.

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