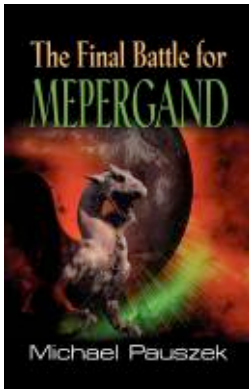


# The Final Battle for MEPERGAND



Michael Pauszek



*For more than one thousand years, the dragon, Scaarab, has slept. During its last wake cycle, Scaarab and its followers, the Fallen, were in a great battle against the forces of man, dwarf, and elf. A dragon victory seemed certain but the most unlikely of heroes, a Hotran, wounded Scaarab, driving him back to his lair. At midday on the summer solstice, Scaarab's long sleep will end and his revenge will begin.*

# **The Final Battle of Mepergand**

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# **The Final Battle For Mepergand**

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## Chapter 1

As the two teenagers were returning to their bikes at the toe of one of the foothills, Gerard, thinking ahead to their next hike, had stopped to look back at the hills. It was his habit to look back at the end of each outing. Every time they left the hills, he paused to paint a mental landscape to feed his soul until his return. As Gerard scanned the canyon walls for that last time, before jumping on his bike and pedaling home, he noted a subtle change.

“Christen, look at that!” Gerard grabbed the shoulder of his friend’s wet shirt just as Christen was walking past him. As he grabbed him, Gerard pointed to an area back up the left side of the canyon from which the two had just descended. “I do not remember that dark spot. Was that there before?”

He was pointing back up the stony canyon strewn with rocks of every size and decorated with only sparse, scrubby brush. The feral goats in the area kept this series of hills well-manicured and the rocky surface was therefore easily visible.

Christen, in typical post-pubescent response, jabbed Gerard in the ribs as he spun around to look where Gerard was pointing. It was his way of asserting his physical dominance over his best friend that stood 5 cm shorter than him. Shielding his eyes by placing his sweaty right hand on his forehead, Christen gazed back up at the small canyon that the two knew so well.

In his first visual sweep of the canyon wall he saw nothing new. He shook his head side to side.

But Gerard was insistent. “Look right there!” He pointed again.

Christian still did not see what concerned Gerard. He stepped behind Gerard shoulder. Only when he looked up Gerard’s arm, using it like a gun sight, did he see what his friend had noted. It was a dark spot, adjacent to a large rock about half way up the left canyon wall. It appeared almost black, darker than any other shadow.

Christian agreed. “I do not remember that, at least I have never seen it before.” As fate would have it, it was not in an area that they had walked this day.

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Gerard dropped his arm once Christen had finally seen the spot. But then he pointed again for emphasis as he spoke. "Is that the rock's shadow or is it a hole in the ground? Do you think someone has been digging up there? Maybe they buried a treasure or hid a body." He looked at his watch. "It's not yet five pm. We have time." He started to walk back up the hill. "I won't really be expected home for another hour. We need to take a look."

The date was Wednesday, October 14th, 1967. Seven days earlier a 5.1 magnitude earthquake had rocked this area of southern France.

Today the two fifteen-year-old friends, Gerard and Christen, were hiking in the foothills of the western Pyrenees Mountains. They had been coming to this same area since they had been old enough to ride their bikes and cruise the country lanes alone. They had intimate knowledge of every boulder and every ankle twisting rut of these hills. They had spent much of the last summer here. Now that it was fall and they were back in school, their visits were less frequent. That was surely why they especially enjoyed coming to the hills after school. It also gave them a chance to shake off the cobwebs of sitting still in classrooms. Today was one of those perfect fall afternoons when the air was cool with a subtle hint of the coming winter but still sunny, preserving the memory of the school free summer.

Today was also their first trip back to the hills since the earthquake.

After two hours of scrambling up and down the landscape both the young men's slender frames were soaked and their long hair was plastered to their heads and ears.

Christian watched as Gerard started back up the trail. He looked at his watch. Gerard was right; it was already nearly 5pm. It really was time for home and homework.

"I think we should go Gerard."

"Nonsense, you are being a baby. It's still early. I want to see what made that spot."

Christen should have protested more passionately, his parents were expecting him. But instead, he gave in to Gerard's belittlement and followed. With Gerard still in the lead, they climbed back up the trail on the floor of the canyon.

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To call it a canyon was a bit generous. It was really a long, gradually descending ravine formed by the approximation of two gently sloping, adjacent hills. The floor of the canyon or ravine was washed by runoff from the hills from regular rains. The residual sand left on the floor by the running water had created a natural path that was soft and smooth. It was marked now only by their footprints mixed with the hoof marks and droppings of the wild goats.

After reaching that point of the path, which was directly below the dark spot, they veered off the trail to the left and climbed the hillside up to the area.

As they neared the site, Gerard noted. "Look at it Christen, it looks like some of the rocks have fallen away from that dark spot like an avalanche. I wonder if the quake moved the rock."

Growing eager as they neared the site, they moved more quickly, clamoring over and around the loose rocks that were strewn about the area below their goal. As they climbed, they dislodging several of the rocks but did not stop until they reached what they had seen from the distance.

"No one has been digging here, Christen. I bet the quake cracked the earth and scattered those rocks!" Being the first to reach it, Gerard also was the first to peer down inside. "I cannot see the bottom; it's too dark and deep."

"Maybe the earthquake uncovered something that was already here. I do not think this is just a crack from the earthquake. I think it's the entrance to a cave!" Added Christen, as he joined Gerard at the lip of the opening and looked inside.

"I'm not so sure Christen."

The opening through which they peered was about one meter long and a half-meter wide. As Christen continued to look in, Gerard pushed all the loose rocks away from the edges of the opening. That didn't widen the opening but it made the area about the opening more secure by clearing the rocks that could fall in or cause them to stumble.

"I'm going to take a look inside." Christen dropped his daypack.

"I don't think that is a good idea, Christen."

*Michael E Pauszek*

Christen punched his friend's shoulder. "Now who is the baby, Gerard?" Then he turned sideways and crawled down into the crack, feet first. Lacking a flashlight, he went only to the depth of the penetration of the late afternoon sunlight.

"What do you see?" Gerard asked, bending down to peek inside but not following his friend.

"It's a big area, like a room. I can even hear my voice echoing." He spun around to see as much as possible as his eyes adapted to the subdued light. As he turned, he stumbled over rocks on the floor. "Gerard, the floor in here seems to be smooth. But there are a lot of rocks scattered around. They must have fallen in when the crack was uncovered. Now I'm sure I'm right. The quake opened the entrance to a cave." After taking in all that was visible in the limited light, Christen climbed back out onto the surface.

He spoke as he popped out his head. "I need more light. I stumbled twice." But then he smiled. "It was amazing! We have got to tell someone about this. Let's go see Monsieur Gifford tomorrow. He has got to see this too!"

Racing back down to their bikes, they pedaled like mad for home. This time he was so excited that Gerard did not stop to look back before they pedaled away.

Their finding made for interesting dinner conversation that evening at both young men's tables.

The next morning, before first period, they marched together into the classroom of Monsieur Gifford, who taught science at their high school. "Monsieur Gifford, guess what we found?"

"Hello Christen and Gerard you are way too early. Your class is third period, remember, not first."

Together they shared the tale of their discovery.

The following day, Friday, after school and now equipped with rope and flashlights, the boys returned with their teacher, Monsieur Gifford, to the site. This time, after looking about the opening and shining in their lights, all three entered the cavern. Gifford crawled in first. "Move carefully and stay with me," he cautioned.



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But once inside the rocky space, the boys were too excited to heed any such warning for caution. They explored the entire area but found only loose rocks. No treasure or hidden corpse here.

The area inside the opening was much larger than could have been imagined from looking in through the dark crack. The ceiling was also beyond their fingertips. Unlike their first visit, when it was very dark in the hole, now with flashlights they could clearly see the newly exposed area. With the light they were able to see that there was another opening in the back wall leading further into the hill.

“First boys, I have to agree with Christen, this is a cave. Guys, did either of you notice how fresh the air seems in here? It is not stale or damp as you might expect in a space long isolated from the outside air.”

They responded by shaking their heads sideways. They had not noticed.

“The freshness of the air suggests that there must be another opening somewhere that allows for air flow.” Always a teacher he was not yet done quizzing them. He posed yet another question. “Gerard, how big do you make this space to be?”

“I would guess this chamber is five meters square.” He paused for a moment before continuing. “Monsieur Gifford, the opening to the next space looks like an archway.”

“Very good, Gerard, you two are becoming good observers. Good observers have to temper their excitement so that they can allow themselves to see and understand what they have found. Let’s go look through that opening. You guys were right yesterday, the floor is very smooth and it’s not because the area is covered with sand. It is as if someone has chiseled the floor level.”

“And made that archway,” added Gerard.

Led by the bold Christen, they moved to the archway, stepping carefully around the scattered rocks. Through the opening, they could see a much larger underground space, again with a smooth floor. In this new area the floor was clear of the debris of the smaller area nearer the hillside crack.

“Wow, it looks like someone really cleared and smoothed this area.” Gerard said as he stepped beyond the opening. The other two followed him.

“Yes Gerard, and notice, there is a thick coating of dust covering the floor. No one, including the hands that smoothed the surface probably eons ago, has walked in this area for years or maybe centuries, until you stepped there just now,” added Monsieur Gifford.

Christen added happily. “Today Gerard and I have become explorers just like the dead guys in our history book.”

“Not eloquent, but correct,” responded Monsieur Gifford.

The chamber in which they now stood was so large by comparison it made the first area seem like a mere antechamber. Their flashlights' beams could only suggest the limits of this next space.

The three moved forward together. A distant echo accompanied their steps, testifying to the size of this chamber.

The floor of this larger room, which stretched before them, descended gradually like a great shallow ramp as it extended deeper into the hill. The only other surface near enough for their beams to illuminate, the ceiling, was irregular and rugged. Unlike the descending floor, the ceiling overhead seemed to remain level. The combination gave the area opening up before them the feel of a grand opera theater. Shining their lights about, examining the area as they moved forward and down, the three seemed like ushers in an opera house, searching for empty seats for a performance.

Unable to contain their excitement, the two teenagers began racing forward, bouncing the beams of their flashlights about like frantic mosquitoes around a warm light bulb. They were now moving much faster than their teacher, who at fifty-eight had both a mild abdominal bulge and better sense. It seemed to Monsieur Gifford that neither Christen nor Gerard was watching the area directly ahead. “Stay together and be careful where you step, be good observers,” he offered.

Heeding the warning of their teacher, they slowed to a walk and wisely began scanning the floor before their feet.

By this time they had penetrated so deep into the earth, the opening to the hillside was now just a dot of light behind them. It was

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fortunate that they slowed and moved more cautiously at Monsieur Gifford's suggestion. Their caution allowed them to stop when the floor in front of them suddenly disappeared a minute later. A wide crack rent the floor. Gerard and Christen stopped at the edge and cast their light beams down into the dark emptiness. No bottom could be seen at the limits of their lights. Shining their lights along the edge of the rift to both sides, it was clear that the cleft extended all the way to the sidewalls of the large chamber. When Monsieur Gifford finally caught up with the two, they were casting their beams across the void to the remaining chamber floor beyond. They were now able to see the distant wall. In that distant wall a passage was just visible.

As he stopped next to them he posed another question. "How wide do you make this crack to be Gerard?"

"It is about eight meters and seems to extend from wall to wall. The barrier effectively divides the room into two, with twenty more meters of floor visible beyond the great crack. I can see what looks like another smaller archway in that wall ahead.

Monsieur Gifford smiled, "Very good Gerard. Do you still think the earthquake made this cavern?"

"No way Monsieur Gifford," said Gerard.

"Correct, it is too perfect. And look over there." He pointed his light at the remains of a structure, off to the right, on the opposite side of the cleft. "That appears to be made of wood. It looks old and quite worn and is as dusty as the floor. I think it is some sort of moveable bridge or ramping device. Someone has been in here long ago and used that to cross this split in the floor."

He turned away from the crack. "Let's see what else we can find. Let's explore along the walls on this side of the cleft."

No primitive paintings or other decorative markings were found on the walls, which were rough with marks, that suggested chiseling. After an hour, with their flashlights beginning to dim, the three returned to the smaller anteroom. Only then did they notice strange markings about the archway that separated the two spaces.

"Those are some sort of rune markings, guys," Gifford said. "You two have made an exciting discovery. We need to call the university."

*Michael E Pauszek*

The following Monday morning Monsieur Gifford made a call to report their findings to Professor Emkes of the Geology Department at the University of Cannes. A few days later the boys and Monsieur Gifford led the professor and a group of his students to the entrance. Over the next several weeks the Geology Department staff and students explored the two chambers and, after spanning the rift, some of the passages beyond. Gerard, Christen and Monsieur Gifford accompanied them when they could.

Within two weeks of Gerard's chance noting of the dark spot, their findings were known in geologic and anthropologic circles worldwide. Over the next year the passages and chambers, which stretched for many kilometers through the mountain, were explored and mapped. In addition to all of the passages having carefully smooth floors, carved stone staircases and steps were found which allowed easy access to the cavern's several levels. The unknown architects and stonemasons had left no artifact other than the movable bridge.

The carbon dating of the bridge placed it from a time so remote that it was beyond the limit of that testing modality (sixty + thousand years). That suggested it had been built at a time so ancient that it was before the rise of modern man, metal tools and civilizations. Believing that to be impossible, the test result was not accepted by anthropological societies.

The markings over the archway were copied and studied but they were never identifiable. So the mystery remained and there were no other artifacts to help resolve that mystery. One thing, though, was clear to all. This cavern was not like the limestone caves found worldwide. Those caves were formed when water poured through the soft stone remnant of coral reefs. Instead, this cave had been meticulously carved in the Pyrenees Mountains, which were formed millions of years ago from dark granite. The creation of these passages and chambers was an accomplishment that vastly exceeded the technological wonder of the building of the Pyramids at Giza.

During the first weeks of exploration the complex was dubbed "Impossible Cavern" by one of Professor Emkes graduate students. That name stuck with the media.

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Smut tabloids doubled their weekly sales in January, 1968, with speculation of ancient aliens as the architects of Impossible Cavern.

The true history and nature of this remarkable finding will be here revealed. The tale has been carefully translated from the common language of Mepergand so that you, the new reader of this history, may understand and know.

## Chapter 2

*Nothing good ever blew out of the south.* It is an antique Hotran platitude, repeated most often over the liquid essence of fermented grain or grapes in the taverns of Hotra. Despite the often associated inebriation, it was meant to be as menacing a truism as fear of the dark. When the wind blows out of the south it is a wind that brings change, always bad, Hotrans say. Or put more simply again; *nothing good ever blew out of the south.*

Bray thought about the platitude as he sat. He had always been wise enough to be skeptical of platitudes. Yet Bray was also wise enough to realize that to survive, all the old Hotran adages must have contained some element of truth. This platitude had come to his mind now only because the wind had started blowing from the south since he sat down here to carve. Did change in the wind's direction raise a concern for today?

Bray stands less than ten hands tall (about the length of an exaggerated pace of a tall man). This morning he is clad in a light gray blouse, brown breeches and soft leather boots that are a shade darker than his breeches and reach up to his ankles. He wears a dark gray parka over the light gray blouse. The parka's hood hangs between his shoulders as he enjoys the warmth of the sun. His ebony straight hair hangs down to his shoulders when not being tossed in the breeze. In the sunlight it shines as if it has been polished.

Bray Proudmane is enjoying the warmth of the late morning sun, sitting on the flat rock that serves as the threshold of his pony hovel home. He had built his hovel on the Proudmane family farm four years earlier in preparation for his own coming of age. It was customary in Hotra that at the time of coming of age the son leaves his parent's hearth and establishes his own. So it was with Bray that three years ago he moved out of his father's hovel, which was on the west side of this same hill, here to his own. The Proudmane farm, where he and his father both live, is located on what locals call The Hill. It is the highest spot in the western half of Hotra. The Hill offers a view of the entire area and overlooks the village at the foot of the hill. Bray had built his personal cabin directly above the nearby

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village. His door faces the rising sun making the stoop a great place to sit and warm on this spring morning. Sitting there in the morning sun he can look down at the quiet little village. The always practical Hotrans also called the village simply Hill.

Bray's hovel is small; he could easily pace across it in fifteen of his small strides. It has a single room with a hearth for heating and cooking at the north end. The roof is made of thatch, which both directs the rain and snow to fall to the sides of the hovel and provides insulation. His home has stout wooden walls with thick chinking that can block even the most determined wintry windblast. Tucked up in the rafters under the roof is a sleeping loft. Opposite the sleeping area is an attic space. There he stores fodder for winter-feeding.

In Hotra, this home style is called a pony hovel. For a cabin to be called a pony hovel, on one side the thatched roof must extend beyond the cabin wall, providing a lean-to style shelter for a pony. So it was with Bray's home. On the west side of his cabin the thatched roof continues down to a short stonewall. It is in this covered area that Bray shelters his stocky steed, a spotted pony he named Fleetfoot.

The sky this morning is clear with only a hint of residual winter chill. While he sits in the sunlight, Bray uses a stout pocket blade to carve on the handle of a slingshot that he is making from a piece of silbern wood. He had peeled the bark away months earlier while the silbern wood was still green. It is a rich looking wood with a deep butternut sheen shadowed by a fine growth ring pattern. Now that it is dry, the hardwood works very slowly. He has to hold it firmly in his broad left hand in order to carve it with his blade. For the last 8 days, between the other chores of the springtime, he has sat on his hovel stoop and worked the silbern to make a slingshot.

The hillside is beautiful in the spring. The farm's tilled fields are all to the west on the opposite side of the hill. Here, Bray's cabin is surrounded by old growth wood. At this time of the year the small flowering trees, which hide amongst the older growth, burst into color. They dot the hillside with bouquets spanning the color spectrum from red to blue. Once the old growth tree buds mature to form leaves those little trees and his hovel will disappear into the wooded hillside, shaded from the summer sun.

*Michael E Pauszek*

As he sits and works, his eyes dart from his project to his surroundings. All Hotrans have what will in the future be called attention deficit. Rather than being considered a deficiency, it was asset among his kind. Being constantly attentive to their environment, Hotrans have always been good hunters.

Last fall when Bray found the fallen silbern branch beneath the silbern tree at the top of the hill, he took it home and removed the bark. He then hung the branch above the fireplace to dry. Over the last two winter months he had taken it down several times and studied its shape. Finally two weeks ago he visualized a new slingshot in the wood and began to carve away the excess wood. He is now finishing it; today it will be ready to attach the pocketed thong.

That is the way of his kind, the Hotran, to take the best of nature and find in its form its perfect use. Brogan, his pap-hotran was fond of saying, "You can't take from the wood what's not already there". This expression also speaks to the nature of Bray's people. Hotrans are always practical, never liking fluff.

Hotrans are focused on taking care of the present and preparing for the future. They do not linger on the past. That is a deficiency of his kind that Bray would soon regret.

Young Hotrans, called hotrenas while still in school and before they come of age, are taught only the three "Rs". They never learn much of their history. The only history they know is of their family. Hotrans are devoted to family. They can all recite their family tree back four generations. That is except Bray. If he were quizzed he would report that his pap-hotran never told him of his ancestors.

No living Hotran ever learned the origin of their land's name. If they had bothered to ask outsiders, but none ever do, they would have learned that hotra is an ancient word from the common language of Mepergand meaning: of the land. Hotrans are the people of the land. Hotrans have lived on the land in Hotra since before measured time.

Theirs is truly an agrarian society. The majority of Hotrans are farmers, only a few ply the trades. There are only small villages, no cities, in Hotra. Each little village has a school, a general store and of course at least one tavern.



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No permanent seat of government exists in Hotra. Every three years the Hotrans elect members to a ruling council that meets only as needed to settle the rare disputes of the land. The practical Hotrans hold these meetings in a tavern.

But despite the stability of their lives, which might be perceived as boring or tedious and their general disinterest in anything not pertinent or concrete, they are surprisingly superstitious, hence the platitudes. Yet they are a thoughtful people given to being pensive. They are bashful but not backward and when engaged, love to talk, visit and laugh, especially over a mug.

The Hotrans are all short of stature, standing about one meter, with round smiling faces and dark straight hair. Their feet are relatively large for walking about quietly. Their dress is simple and functional, appropriate for their agrarian life.

And though they are a hardworking people, they still enjoy an afternoon nap.

This morning the scent of new earth had been borne on the western breeze of first light. That breeze was now replaced with the wind from the south. Still, that new breeze seems to Bray to be just as fresh as any other this spring. As Bray continues to carve the silbern wood his mind again wanders to the new direction of the wind. He could not recall when the wind had ever blown from the south this late in the spring. The wind generally comes from the south only in the coldest part of the winter. Is the new breeze an omen?

*Nothing good ever blew out of the south.* Hotrans believe that southern winds carry the aura of death, the rotting stink of countless crawling carnivorous creatures and the odor of the decaying flesh from the swamp that lies directly south of Hotra.

Hotrans fear that swampland, which they call the Swump. They would never go near that boggy terra. They know little more about the history of the Swump than of their own land. During the Great War, that ended the Elder Era, the enemy vermin, whose names were never spoken in Hotra and are now forgotten, had drowned in the swamp. The Hotran believed that those dead befouled the swamp for all time. That was all of the history of the Great War that the hotrenas were

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taught by their elders. It was really all that any Hotran knows of the Swump. Still, they fear it.

Some years, during the time of the winter freeze; the wind would turn and come up from the Swump. Then it would get very cold. The earth and water would freeze so deep and so hard that animals died and the Hotrans sat chilled even in front of their blazing hearths. For those times they blamed the Swump for the cold and death. For the Hotrans *nothing good ever blew out of the south.*

The breeze coming from the south at this time of the year made this a most unusual morning. As he glanced about and still thought about the wind, Bray continued to work his blade skillfully on the silbern wood. He had shaped the slingshot over the last several days. Now he is cutting deep into the wood across the grain creating notches for the straps of the weapon's thong. Occasionally, because the pressure to cut those notches would cause pain in his fingers, he would stop to rest his digits and enjoy the moment. This is now the last of those moments before the slingshot carving is finished. Bray looked up.

As he rests his hands, Bray's line of vision ascends from the slingshot to Hotra beyond. His dark eyes are drawn to motion far to the east, on the King's Road. Over the downs out of the east, a lone rider moves slowly over the King's Road, the major east/west roadway in Hotra. The rider is traveling to the west, toward Hill but is still at least a league away. Yet even at that distance, Bray could tell that the rider is a man not a Hotran. This surprises Bray, he thinks, *is the arrival of a man related to the change in the wind?*

So few men travel to the west half of Hotra; all men who dare are viewed by the west Hotrans with suspicion. Bray bends back to his work and finishes his carving. Then he focuses again on the approaching rider. Unaware of his audience, the rider continues a slow approach, cutting the distance to a half of a league. At that distance Bray now recognizes the tall hat and stoop shoulders of Mehlo, the magnanimous King's astronomer/physician. Mehlo had regularly visited the Hotrans during Bray's youth but since Bray's coming of age at 26, three years ago, he had not seen the astronomer/physician.

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A smile crosses Bray's face at the site of his approaching old friend. During his previous visits, Mehlo had entertained the hotrenas with tales of dragons and strange peoples. He would tell them about the Elder Time and the Great War that ended that era one thousand years ago. He would pause, smile and then remind them that the peace of their world was because of the courage of those that came before them; a courage that they needed to remember. Though the hotrenas did not hold to history, they loved the tales and asked for more. He would talk for hours and when he finally grew tired he would respond. "It is for your own pap-hotrans and educators to tell you more about the past, not a simple wandering star gazer. Ask them about the past; it is a treasure for your future."

Then he would sit back against a tree and pull his broad hat over his face. His great gray robe would move slowly over his chest as if he slept. Hotrans knew him to be long lived. Frequent rest periods were therefore expected at his age. Only the upturned corners of his mouth under his gray beard revealed the truth. Though he was a man of science, hotrenas thought Mehlo a wonderful sorcerer.

Bray returned to his task, attaching the thong to his slingshot. Then he looked up again to watch Mehlo. Bray expected Mehlo to stop down in the Hill at the tavern. Instead, as Bray sat and watched, Mehlo continued to ride through the village and up the road to the Proudmane gate. Without dismounting, using his staff, Mehlo lifted the gate latch and pushed the gate open. He walked his mount through the gate and then swung it closed with his staff. He continued straight up the dirt and stone path to Bray's pony hovel. He did not stop until he was sitting astride his horse in front of Bray Proudmane on the stone stoop.

Only then did Mehlo, looking down at Bray, speak. "That is a fine way to prepare for an adventure young Hotran, just sitting here in the yard carving a toy. Have you already packed?"

Bray set down his slingshot and then standing, in the manner of greeting of his people, he dropped his arms to his sides with hands held forward and open. "What adventure Mehlo?"

"The High Mark, Eon, has called for all peoples of his realm to send their leaders to a Great Gathering and to prepare their warriors

*Michael E Pauszek*

for war." Mehlo said. "Even peaceful Hotra should be represented and I have asked the chief Hotran counselor, Balbon Brummond, to name you, Bray Proudmane, to be that representative."

"Why would you ask him that and why would you choose me?" inquired Bray, sounding quite puzzled. "As you can see, I am not a warrior or a leader and Hotrans are small and peaceful. What could I or any Hotran add to the business of other people?"

Mehlo straightened in his saddle, seeming to grow suddenly very large. In a booming voice to match his change in posture, he responded. "The problems of our world are not just for men my dear Hotran; they are for all who live in this land. Important affairs of the kingdom impact all peoples, dwarf and elf, man and Hotran. But this is not the time for a discussion. It is enough that you have been chosen. And be quick about it, it is past time for us to leave." Mehlo remains mounted. It was apparent that he is serious about leaving both because of his tone and remaining in his mount's saddle.

"I have never known you to be in such a hurry Master Mehlo. You are being quite strange today. Can we sit for tea? Do you have a tale? You have been away such a long time. Could you at least tell me where you have been for three years and where we are going?"

"We are in a great hurry. I believe the term mysterious better describes my behavior today, not merely strange. No, we do not have time for tea. As to where I have been, I have been most occupied for the last few years with something that affects all of us. And I will tell you about where we are going while we ride.

"Despite all the time I have spent away from Hotra and all my friends, I am now most pressed to complete my task. You will hear more of this at the Gathering. But we must leave immediately. No more questions, for now it is only important that you know that you have been chosen."

Bray knew that Mehlo had always been an important member of the High Mark's staff. But the affairs of the High Mark and Mepergand were of little interest in his land of little people. Talk of Mehlo in Hotran pubs was always of Mehlo's storytelling and strange appearance, never his role in the affairs of government. He had

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always been such an unusual visitor to west Hotra that despite his long absence, Mehlo remains a frequent topic.

Mehlo looks so different from Hotrans. Compared to a Hotran, Mehlo is a giant. He easily stands more than twice Bray's height. Mehlo is thin with curly, long white hair. His face has marks of weathering about the eyes and mouth. His beard, which is also white and curly, hangs almost to his waist. His nose is thin and pointed like his hat. When he walks, the movement of his robe, beard and hair give him an ethereal quality. It all makes him look ancient, confirming his long life. Yet his eyes twinkle with mischievous youth. He truly looks like a sorcerer.

The talk in the Hotran pubs is that Mehlo stands taller than all other man. This always leads to the next question. Is Mehlo really just a man? Though Bray has known Mehlo since childhood, Bray does not know Mehlo's ancestry; he has no knowledge of men or their affairs. Bray has never spent any time with men, unless, of course, if Mehlo is a man.

Like other Hotrans, Bray contents himself with staying warm, being well fed and listening to the pub gossip over a mug of nut brown ale.

Today, Mehlo is wearing a long thick blue robe with a hood over his light tan blouse and breeches, which are just a shade darker. When Mehlo finally dismounts, his parka opens revealing a sword hanging from a brown sash about his waist. The sight of the sheathed blade reminds Bray of his last visit from Mehlo.

It has been three years since he had last seen Mehlo, but Bray remembers that day. Three years ago Mehlo had appeared in Hotra on Bray's "coming of age day". He had brought Bray a present. It was not customary to give gifts among the Hotran. Instead they prefer to invite each other to dinner. Bray knew Mehlo was knowledgeable of Hotran customs, probably more than many Hotrans. A gift from Mehlo, therefore, was unexpected. That day Mehlo had presented Bray with a short sword and scabbard, telling him to put it away in a safe place. He offered no explanation. Later, when Bray examined the sword he saw that the blade was marked with strange symbols. The next day he asked both Mehlo and his pap-hotran about the marks but

both just smiled. In the end he followed Mehlo's instructions and put the weapon in the bottom of a clothes trunk. He wished that Mehlo had invited him to eat at the tavern in the Hill instead of giving him the sword.

Now pointing to Mehlo's sword, Bray commented. "I have never seen you with a weapon other than your staff Mehlo."

"I have carried my sword, Ebonslayer, for the last three years. Outside of Hotra the world has grown very dangerous. Only the peace of Hotra has been undisturbed these last three years. The other peoples of the realm have not been so lucky. But I fear the time has now come when even your people will no longer go unscathed. Evil is upon us. Too long we all basked in indifference as the danger awakened. But enough of this for now, we must leave and move quickly and quietly, for even our trip to the Gathering may not go unnoticed."

As if to emphasize the need for haste, Mehlo waved his left hand in a motion for Bray to hurry. In response, Bray stood, turned and entered his hovel. "I will speak to my pap-hotran, he is visiting." His pap-hotran, Brogan, sat before the hearth. Bray woke him and told him what Mehlo had just said. He emphasized the part about leaving, thinking and hoping that his pap-hotran would discourage him.

"Mehlo has a good heart and has always been trusted by all Hotrans," Brogan said. "Trust him and heed his advice. He is wise beyond our kind."

"But pap-hotran, I would be leaving the Hotra. You told me that no Hotran has left the Hotra since the Great War."

"Yes my son, but a Hotran served with courage in that war. You remember I told you how your ancestor Fruman helped defeat Scaarab in that war."

"Yes, pap-hotran, I remember the tale you told me and will respect your opinion. But I don't understand why Mehlo is here looking for me."

"We know not our own destiny until our life force ends Bray, son of Brogan." Mehlo said as he bent and entered the hovel.

"It is our fate and our fate is not ours to choose. Welcome Master Mehlo; take my seat here at the hearth while my son prepares to travel

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with you. Will you sup with us tonight and begin your journey on the morrow?"

"I am sorry, honorable Brogan but we need to depart as soon as possible. I have lingered too long already. As you say your son's and my own fate now awaits us. Yet I will sit here with you and warm while Bray prepares his things." So saying, Mehlo took a seat at the hearth. "Remember your present Bray; it has been waiting for this day since I brought it to you three years ago."

While Mehlo and Brogan sat and visited, Bray filled a small pack with the essentials of Hotran life: pan, fire flint, flour, salt, a journal and pencil. On top he placed an extra poncho. Changing to his traveling clothes, he added an extra wool shirt and scarf under his parka. To his belt he attached his sword, in reality a long knife, with the strange markings on the blade. He had never before bore the weapon. Yet despite his unfamiliarity with the weapon it felt light at his side. As an afterthought, he put the new slingshot in on top the pack. Shouldering the pack, he rejoined his father and Mehlo at the hearth.

Then while Bray sat with Mehlo as deference to their guest, Brogan packed a small parcel of dried meat, bread and fruit. For Brogan said as he worked, "one never knows on the road when their next meal will come."

It was high sun; seven long hours of daylight remain. Bray was uncomfortable with both the plan to leave and did not understand Mehlo's urgency. But he trusted the wizard. When Brogan returned to his son's side, Bray took the parcel from his father, kissing Brogan gently on the extended hand. He then stood with his arms at his side in the traditional greeting posture of his people. His pap-hotran hugged him and then kissed him on the cheek.

"I will keep a journal for you, pap-hotran, of our journey, so we may share it together."

Mehlo touched Brogan's arm and left the hovel while the exchange was completed between father and son. He remounted his horse and rode to the gate. Bray left the house and walked to the pony hovel. He saddled his pony, Fleetfoot, and led him out into the yard. After another hug from his pap-hotran, he mounted and rode out the

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gate held open by Mehlo. A tear lightly stained his right cheek as they descended the hill to the King's Road.



## Chapter 3

Bray loved to ride his pony, Fleetfoot, about west Hotra. On the warm and lazy afternoons of the summer season, Bray, Keegan Whitestocking and Cooper Blaze would ride their stocky steeds the six miles west to the village of Devlin Creek. There they would fish, eat a picnic dinner and then cool off with a swim. Rarely did he ride to the east. His friends all lived west of the Hill.

The eastern parts of Hotra are less well known to the simple folk of the west Hotra. The people of the west thought the easterners, as they called everyone living east of Oralgo River, too open. Tales of strange visitors like dwarf folk coming to east Hotra were told in the Hill village pub. Respectable westerners stayed to themselves avoiding outsiders. That is, except for Mehlo. He was acceptable since he had been coming to west Hotra for as long as anyone knew. The west Hotrans considered him an old friend.

As they rode toward the east, Bray suggested. "Mehlo, you should have chosen one of the eastern Hotran to go to the Gathering. It is said they like adventure."

Mehlo just smiling rode on in silence thus allowing Bray to imagine his own explanation. Bray knew that his strange astronomer-traveling companion would, in his own time and manner, explain his choice. But Bray did not feel special for being chosen; all he really wanted was to be sitting at his fire or practicing with his new slingshot.

So on they rode, together to the east, in silence except for the sound of their mount's feet clacking on the packed surface of the King's Road.

That spring day's morning had dawned clear and warmed on a western breeze. But now as they rode they were cooled by the wind out of the south. They both noted that the wind was also pushing north a bank of sinister looking clouds, hanging low and heavy with rain. Still, directly overhead the sky remained clear for hours and the early afternoon sun gave the illusion of warmth. As they rode they passed fields still lying at rest from the long winter. Those fields alternated with the undulating hills of west Hotra. To the left, on the

north side of the thoroughfare, the hillsides were already starting to turn green. Spring flower shafts had emerged and were already tipped by the buds promising their intoxicating blooms. Small trees bloomed just like on Bray's hill. To their right, on the south side of the roadway, the north sides of the hills were still cluttered with the remains of the long winter season's dirty snow. It was in these hills, both north and south of the King's Road, that the western Hotrans had always built their snug bermed homes. Hotrans preferred to have their homes nestled into the earth "where the cold did not blow and the summer heat did not glow". But Hotra was running out of hills appropriate for berming. Instead, in the last two generations they had begun to build the pony hovels.

About every ten leagues they passed one of the simple villages of western Hotra. After hours of riding, at dusk they stopped briefly to care for their needs and eat some of the food from the parcel that Brogan had prepared. When Mehlo finished eating and said that it was time to move on, Bray protested, "Mehlo, I'm tired. Can we stop for the night at the next tavern?"

Mehlo just shook his head. "Time works against us." They remounted and rode east.

Fortunately the light clay color of the King's Road was visible even in the dark. As they rode the clouds continued to move up from the southwest, passing on to the northeast, progressively replacing the stars. With the loss of starlight the road grew ever harder to see. The clouds promised a rain before dawn. Bray kept glancing at Mehlo, hoping that they would stop. But still they rode on. As the dark hours passed they moved through two more villages.

*Will we never stop?* Thought Bray as they rode through a village called Hay Field. Despite the hour, the light was still on in the little tavern, and he could hear laughter as they passed. It was too dark to read the sign hanging over the tavern door. Bray's bottom was weary of the bounce of his pony after so many hours in the saddle. But still Mehlo went on. When they finally stopped a few hours before dawn, the air hung so heavy with moisture it was as if the clouds were leaking water. Mehlo built a small fire but as they huddled nearby, covered with their felt bedrolls, the rain, long expected, finally began

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to fall. The fire offered light but no warmth. They ate more of the cold food Brogan had packed. Still, despite his discomfort, Bray was exhausted and slept. Before he fell asleep they spoke but a few words.

"I am grateful to your pap- hotran Brogan, for the food. He saved us having to stop and be identified." Mehlo was leaning against a small tree as he spoke. "I do not want our movements to be known."

Bray did not ask Mehlo his reason for the concern about being noticed, he was tired and at the moment did not want to know. Just after dawn and only a few hours after falling asleep, Mehlo poked Bray awakening him. The rain had slowed to just a fine drizzle. Despite the water resistance of his felt bedroll, Bray was cold and damp.

"It is time to move on."

Moving about to repack his pony, Fleetfoot, Bray warmed. They rode on after feeding their steeds. The rain stopped shortly after they started riding. Stopping at high sun they ate the last of what Brogan had packed. Then they continued on. An hour before dusk they reached West Bank, on the west shore of the Oralgo River. It is the largest village in Hotra. With both water and road access it is a trade center. The village contained a large tavern, the Merry Brew. Before the door of that tavern Mehlo finally stopped and dismounted. They stood and looked at the sky outside the tavern. It had again begun to grow steadily cloudier promising rain again before sun up.

Bray looked up at Mehlo, an unspoken question on his face.

"I too do not want to sleep a second night in the rain." Mehlo said. "We will rest here for the night and dry our bedrolls. It will be easier to find the ferryman to cross the river in the morning."

Bray nodded vigorously and put his right hand on his stomach. "A hot stew and warm bread could fill the empty spot I feel here in my middle. You have been very quiet, as we have ridden, Mehlo. Maybe we could sit by the hearth and you can tell me about this adventure and what I am supposed to be doing."

"I have been lost in thought the last two days and for that I am sorry, but I am afraid this tavern is not the right place to speak. There are too many ears here. The owner of the Merry Brew, Roblyn Connerman, knows no secrets. He listens carefully to what is said

even if he does not seem to be attentive. Anything he hears he will happily share tomorrow with anyone willing to listen after they buy a mug of ale. So hold your tongue. He knows me but do not use your real name, the people in the tavern will be suspicious enough just seeing you with me."

"I have never been here before, why would anyone care about my name?" asked Bray.

"You do not understand the significance of your surname, Proudmane. Always, in one's own country, deeds are discounted or even forgotten. Even your own pap-hotran does not speak often of your famous ancestor. Elsewhere in Hotra and the whole of Mepergand the name Fruman Proudmane is sung in ancient ballads and honored in verse."

Bray looked puzzled as he looked up at Mehlo. Slung their packs over their backs, they stepped up on the tavern's porch. Thirsty, Bray found the sign hanging over the double door entrance to the tavern picturing a mug with suds bubbling over the rim, quite inviting. Yet, heeding Mehlo's warning, after they entered, he stood and was quiet as Mehlo spoke with the tavern owner. That merchantman kept looking around Mehlo to see Bray as Mehlo spoke. The tavern owner was also a Hotran but much rounder than the other Hotrans of the west. Roblyn Connerman wore a long white apron with large pockets that accentuated his girth.

Bray had not realized how chilled he felt until he saw the burning hearth. Moving over to the fire, he warmed himself as Mehlo continued to speak to Roblyn. After a few minutes Mehlo joined him at the hearth. Then before attending to themselves, they went back outside and moved their mounts into the tavern's stable. They fed, watered and brushed the horse and pony. The journey ahead would be long and the animal's well being was even more important than a meal was for them.

Despite still being deep in the Hotra, they were now on the shore of a large river that divided east from west and was a major avenue of transportation. Peoples other than Hotrans were therefore well represented in the tavern. In addition to the several Hotrans sitting in groups about the common room, five men were also present; three

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sitting at a table nearby were engaged in a game of Bacrant. The three were rapidly and boisterously placing chips on the game board. A fourth man sat next to Mehlo at the hearth and, like Bray and Mehlo, he too was nursing a mug of brew. The fifth and last man, dressed in deep brown parka, sat away from all of the others, his chair leaning against the wall.

Despite being indoors, the man's hood was pulled over his head. From Bray's vantage he appeared as thin and almost as tall as Mehlo. Bray could see that under his drab parka a portion of his blouse was visible. His blouse was dark green. His slacks were of the same color and coarse material as his parka. A gray sash about his waist held a scabbard with sword. Even though his face was partially obscured by the hood, Bray could see that he sported a mustache but no beard. His posture advertised that he was disinterested in the game and the tavern's conversation but the truth was revealed as Bray watched his eyes. Those eyes darted about the room, missing no detail. The man spoke to no one. The three men playing Bacrant were similarly dressed to the observant one but Bray noticed that their clothes were older and had been repaired many times. Like the other man, none of those three spoke to Bray or Mehlo. They did, however, occasionally stare at the pair. The man sitting near Mehlo must have been lubricating his jaw all day. He spoke freely and only some of what he said was directed even in Mehlo and Bray's direction.

Bray looked about the room; it was sparsely furnished with chairs at the fire and five tables with benches, one of which was now used for the board game. The walls were bare but for a single picture hung above the fire. It depicted a solitary figure on pony back wielding a small sword. A distant mountain range provided a backdrop to the figure. Under the mounted figure, on the wooden frame was a plaque with the name "Fruman Proudmane".

"Gasp!" Bray exhaled, finally really seeing the figure and the plaque. *That looks like me*, he thought, *and the markings on the figure's blade are the same as the one now hanging at my side*. The utterance got the attention of Roblyn, Mehlo and the hooded fellow against the wall. The three men playing the game seemed not to notice. But the talkative one, liberated by alcohol, seeing and hearing

Bray's response to the picture said. "Hey that looks like you!" He kept pointing back and forth between the portrait and Bray.

Mehlo, after a few moments delay, got up and walked over to Roblyn. After a quick exchange, he motioned for Bray to follow and led him down a narrow dark hall to a door marked with the number 4. Mehlo, opening the door, waved Bray into the room and followed quickly. He locked the door behind them. Only then did he speak to Bray.

"I bid you be careful tonight, little master. Your utterance obviously did not go unnoticed. Even the foolish Roblyn caught your glance at the picture, surprise and your resemblance to figure in the picture. I am sorry; I have been here so many times that I had forgotten about the picture hanging above the hearth. Let's hope the Bacrant players were really focused on their game. Roblyn will bring supper to our room; I told him we were very tired. He too is now suspicious of our purpose for being here. We will avoid the common area tonight and leave before dawn to prevent your being seen again. I hope the memory of your visit to this inn will soon be forgotten."

"I wish that I could understand your concern. We are in western Hotra. This is my home and though I have never been to this village or tavern before, I have no reason not to feel safe. Seeing that portrait above the fire startled me. Traveling with you to a meeting and hearing today for the first time that an ancestor of mine is famous makes this the strangest day of my life.

"Who in the tavern bothered you? Is it the cloaked man leaning against the wall that concerns you Mehlo? He looked very suspicious" observed Bray.

"No, be not concerned with him, he is a woods man well known to me and not prone to speak unless necessary. For now I want you sitting across the room in the shadow when Roblyn brings our supper so that he does not again see your face."

Bray nodded in agreement and moved over to the far wall. There he stood looking out the window toward the river. He was still there at the window looking out when there was a knock at the door. At the suggestion of Mehlo, who Bray trusted implicitly, he stayed at the window continuing to watch the river.

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Mehlo answered the door, his right hand on his sword; he released the weapon when he saw that it was only Roblyn. Mehlo moved aside and let the innkeeper into the room when he confirmed that the hall behind Roblyn was empty. If he noticed the caution Mehlo was displaying, Roblyn did not mention it. Roblyn carried a tray with two bowls, one man size and the other a common bowl of Hotra, a loaf of bread and two new mugs of ale, also size adjusted. He set it on the bed and then stood for a moment; his eyes fixed upon Bray. Then he asked in Bray's direction, "Who are you?"

Mehlo responded softly, "He is my friend and traveling companion. It is time to see to your other guests." He firmly eased Roblyn to the door and latched it. Then to Bray he said, "Secrecy has been lost. We should have camped out again this night. We will leave early in the morning. It might be better if we did not cross the Oralgo here. Instead we will make our way along the river to North Bend before crossing. Maybe we can regain some anonymity."

"But I still don't understand your concern, the picture or what I am doing here with you." Bray said with a look of dismay across his face.

"It is time you at least learned as much about your history as the rest of our world outside of Hotra knows." said Mehlo. "But let's eat the stew before it cools and then I will tell you an ancient tale."

They both set aside the concerns and attacked their bowls. Only when the stew, bread and ale had been dispensed did Mehlo begin his lecture.

"There are many ways that sentient life forms measure the passage of time: counting of the growing seasons, births, deaths and great events. In our world, the longest measure of time passage is the dragon wake-sleep cycle. Dragons live for thousands of years and are very difficult to kill. They have a sleep-wake cycle that spans many lives of the free peoples. When dragons awaken they prowl the earth, terrorizing, killing and burning for about a thousand season cycles. Then just as quickly, they crawl back into their secret lair and return to a restless sleep for the next thousand season cycles. The timing of the beginning of the dragon awakening and sleep cycles is always at the summer solstice of the year of the convergence of planets. As you

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know, this is one of the years of the convergence and the summer solstice rapidly approaches. For seventeen life times of the longest lived of man or Hotran the terrible dragon, Scaarab, has slept. Man and Hotran have chosen to forget that dragon's terror. Even your Hotran history books neglect the history of the dragon and the danger that will soon return. But this summer his name will again be known, feared and hated, rising from a thousand years of forgetfulness. We have forgotten for it is the same with all sentient life; in the warmth of summer we tend to forget the cold of winter."

Bray responded. "Surely the great armies of the High Mark can defeat one dragon."

"The dragon is powerful with fiery breath; it can drop down on folded wings and crush a whole village. It is immune to arrow and lance, for its scales deflect them. It also commands a great dark force, the Fallen. The Fallen are evil men who are bent solely to its will. They are said to know the location of Scaarab's lair and to protect it while it sleeps. Their numbers have grown in the last century and they are now a powerful force. Since the last Great War when they fought with Scaarab, they have been quietly preparing for the next rise of Scaarab and are now ready. It is now that time."

Bray looked about the room. "Are there any of these Fallen here?"

"No. The Fallen are felt to generally shun the sunlight, they were once people of the forest. They suffer no ill effect from sunlight and can walk about like any other man. Though they arose from the seed of mankind, other men consider them unattractive. They have frontal bossing at the eyebrows, bent shoulders and great hairy arms. They live in the Wastelands far to the south. The Fallen are not organized into a society like the free peoples of Mepergand. They are different enough in their appearance that they could not walk about without notice. There are none here or in the settlements of free men. But the dragon has others to act as spies among our peoples."

"Tell me more of Fruman."

"Fruman in the picture above the mantle is of your line, Proudmane. He was the hero in the Great War."



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Bray sat back, his hands across his full abdomen and inquired, "How did an ancestor of mine come to be involved with Scaarab and a war?"

"South of Hotra was once a land of glacial lakes which your kind now calls the Swump. It is the far western watershed of a mountain range, the Brown Mountains, and northern watershed of the Black Mountains. It was from these mountains that before the time of the dragon, great glaciers' waters drained forming the lake. The Brown Mountains are also called Kragland, named in honor of the ancient dwarven realm that was carved within the mountain range's bowels. The Kregla, as they call themselves, are guardians of the mountains and mine them for their minerals. It was to the aid of the Kregla that men and a Hotran assembled in the Great War. The dragon had attacked them in Kragland as he had their ancestors in Gordachom in the Black Mountains. The combined force of dwarves, men and Fruman forced back the dragon and its Fallen. It was in that glacial lake area that you call the Swump that the war ended with many on both sides slain. In that final battle the Fallen, led by the dragon, were forcing the dwarves and men back to the east. The dragon flew at the front of the battle. It was Fruman's sword that you now carry that pierced the scaled hide of Scaarab, wounding him and turning the course of the battle. After that wounding, the dragon returned to its lair. Without the dragon the Fallen lost their will to fight. As the battle continued they were pushed back into the Swump and destroyed. It is said that they befouled the waters of the Swump. Fruman, by piercing Scaarab turned nearly certain defeat to victory. His sword is the very sword that you have brought with you, given to me by your pap-hotran when he was but a young Hotran. I gave it to you when you came of age."

"My pap-hotran knew of the sword and why you gave it to me?"

"Yes, he knew exactly what I was doing. He knows that sword and its destiny. He knows of the coming awakening of Scaarab. He also knows that the sword of Fruman will protect its bearer as it had Fruman Proudmane. The only thing he may not have considered is that Scaarab and its wicked hosts also have not forgotten. When next it rises from its sleep the Hotran will suffer for Fruman's victory so

long ago. Last time the evil Scaarab ignored the Hotra. Scaarab thought the Hotran insignificant. This time the evil one will remember. All the residents of Hotra will be destroyed if the dragon is not stopped."

"Will not men and dwarf again join force to defeat the dragon?" asked Bray.

"One thousand years ago, before the time of the last defeat of Scaarab in the Great War, was also the end of the last glacial age. The grass grew rich and crops began to flourish. Man, dwarf and Hotran all prospered. A grand force of these peoples was mustered for that battle. But the dwarf population has declined and man too seems to have become weak. Only the elves have remained as they were. But their numbers have always been few. Meanwhile the numbers of the Fallen have grown steadily in the last two generations. A great battle lies ahead. Many free peoples will perish because we have not been diligent. The dragon and its followers will strike down the free peoples of our kingdom like a dark plague unless they can be stopped."

"If he knew why did not pap-hotran tell me of this long ago?"

"He is wise, far wiser than you probably know. Would you have benefitted from knowing and worrying before I arrived at your door, Bray? I had the same thought but I now see the wisdom of his decision. Never underestimate your pap-hotran just because he chooses to live a simple agrarian life. He is one of the wisest people of Mepergand." Mehlo moved the now empty food tray to the floor near the door. "But enough for now; it is time to take our rest." Mehlo lay across the bed and went promptly to sleep.

Bray was overwhelmed with the information. He sat up by the unfired hearth. Bray finally fell asleep in the chair. He was still sitting there two hours before dawn when there was a knock at the door.

Mehlo leapt from the bed, pulled his sword from its scabbard and threw back the door. He was so very alert it was as if he had been awake anticipating the visitor's arrival. Outside in the passage stood the stranger that had been sitting against the wall of the common room with his hood pulled over his head. Mehlo motioned him into the room with his sword's blade and in a continuous movement

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resheathed his sword and closed the door. Bray jumped up in amazement. Without realizing how it had gotten there he found his own hand resting on the hilt of his own blade that was sitting on his pack next to his chair.

"I have failed you, Mehlo," said the stranger. "The tack from your mounts is missing. I fear someone from the common room last night has been watching for you and has stolen it to delay you here."

Mehlo sat down and spoke. "Our journey is long and we needed to dry and rest but it is as I thought, the enemy has eyes everywhere. Now we will have to wait until daylight and will lose any advantage. Will you travel with us Leugen?"

The woodman responded, "As far as the Glen of the Silbern at the end of the Coliordien Forest, then I must return here near the Oralgo as I was commanded."

Bray listened and wondered, *commanded by whom?* But he remained silent, not knowing what to make of the stranger. They had observed each other from across the common room, yet Bray had not thought him to be a colleague of Mehlo, until Mehlo had mentioned the man last night.

Mehlo turned to his travel companion. "Bray, I would have you meet a friend. His name is Leugen and he is an officer of the High Mark. He has been watching over Hotra for the High Mark for two years while I have been busy elsewhere. He can be trusted as you have trusted me."

Bray released his blade, extending his arms and open hands at his sides in the Hotran posture of greeting. Then Mehlo and Leugen sat and spoke of the day to come. They would have to replace their tack. That would require that they wait until Roblyn rose this morning. It was now a necessary delay.

It seemed as if only minutes had passed when they heard a cock crowing, announcing the dawning of day. All discretion having been lost, the three made their way from their room back into the common area of the tavern together. There they sat near the hearth under the picture of Fruman.

After a hot breakfast they found the livery open and acquired saddles and bridles to replace those lost. It was still early and they did

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not see anyone else moving about in the village, yet they were sure that they were being observed.

“Even if we ride north to cross the Oralgo at North Bend, it is clear from the loss of our tack that we are now being watched. Better to cross the river here. Those that follow would know if we headed north and that we were bound for North Bend. So let us cross here, move forward as quickly as possible and leave the King’s Road when we must.” So said Leugen, as the three saddled their mounts in preparation to leave. Mehlo agreed and after gathering their belongings from their room they walked toward the ferry leading their steeds.



*For more than one thousand years, the dragon, Scaarab, has slept. During its last wake cycle, Scaarab and its followers, the Fallen, were in a great battle against the forces of man, dwarf, and elf. A dragon victory seemed certain but the most unlikely of heroes, a Hotran, wounded Scaarab, driving him back to his lair. At midday on the summer solstice, Scaarab's long sleep will end and his revenge will begin.*

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