


WINNER

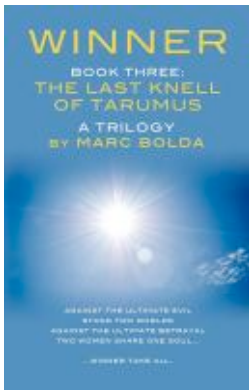
BOOK THREE:
THE LAST KNELL
OF TARUMUS

A TRILOGY
BY MARC BOLDA



AGAINST THE ULTIMATE EVIL
STAND TWO WORLDS
AGAINST THE ULTIMATE BETRAYAL
TWO WOMEN SHARE ONE SOUL...

...WINNER TAKE ALL.



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WINNER – BOOK THREE

The Last Knell of Tarumus

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**WINNER -
BOOK THREE:**

THE LAST KNELL OF TARUMUS

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ISBN 978-1-62141-733-0

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2012

First Edition

PART THIRTEEN: SHÜN

CHAPTER ONE

Clive Keplar stretched wearily and tried to straighten out the cricks in his neck and back. Poor posture and failing eyesight were occupational hazards in his line of work. Looking like a complete geek was another. Luckily, his innate fashion sense had already taken care of that. Not that he cared one wit about it now.

Keplar turned in his seat and smiled tiredly at Roberto Grivado. The dark South American grinned back. He was one of the more helpful technical assistants at the Las Campanas Observatory, located in the Atacama Region in northern Chile. Both men were taking a reluctant break from an uninterrupted nine-hour viewing session at the Landon Clay telescope. Keplar had just finished figuring out the history making odds of what happened to them.

Slim indeed.

Much earlier, they had witnessed the rare and brilliant onset of an unprecedented Type II supernova explosion, generating an astonishing negative nine on the magnitude luminosity scale. A supernova occurred only when the hydrogen fuel of a large main sequence star finally ran out, resulting in a contracting core and correspondingly higher temperatures.

This in turn generated fusion leading to increasingly heavier elements, such as helium, carbon and neon. Depending on the initial size of the star, the more massive ones turned into red supergiants, producing even heavier elements, all the way up to iron. Iron fusion, being the first reaction to consume energy rather than releasing it, always gave rise to a stellar core collapse, induced by the sudden lack of a counterbalancing force to the crushing squeeze of gravity.

The resulting blast in this particular instance originated in the closest neighboring galaxy to the Milky Way, the Large Magellanic Cloud, some 150,000 light years distant, and was highly visible to the naked eye. Half the station personnel remained crowded around the main viewing screens of the computer lab next door, in the remaining hours before dawn.

Keplar knew he could afford to relax.

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Six years ago, he had completed his Ph.D. under the tutelage of no less a personality than Professor Alan Dressler, one of the famed ‘Seven Samurai’ and a faculty member of the esteemed Observatories of the Carnegie Institution of Washington.

Keplar’s specialty was ‘dark matter’. This was the mysterious exotic substance that theoretically prevented the spiral arms of rotating galaxies from being ripped apart by centrifugal forces and flung off into the surrounding void. The more they learned about it, and of its even more mysterious cousin—‘dark energy’—the less it seemed they understood.

That did not deter him one bit.

Young, talented and ruthlessly ambitious, Keplar was a rising star among a voracious new breed of astronomers and cosmologists. A breed boldly determined to finish the job handed down to them by their perhaps slightly more conservative predecessors. This required nothing less than a truly definitive understanding of the origin, structure and dimensions of the entire universe.

Keplar yawned again and gingerly arched his aching back.

“Long night, huh?” he remarked gratuitously to Roberto, while he poured them both yet another cup of steaming hot coffee. “You do of course realize that by tomorrow evening, barring the certain outbreak of World War Three—which I think we’ve now avoided—there’s a very good chance we’re both going to make the front page headlines of every newspaper on the planet.”

And that, surely, has to translate into meeting hot, willing babes somewhere along the line. Hmm...fantasizing again, are we Mr. Keplar? He grinned to himself and drank his coffee.

Such feel-good headlines would certainly provide a welcome distraction to the disastrous news pouring in about Antarctica these past couple of days. The international scientific community was still reeling from the inexplicable loss of some of its most brilliant minds. Keplar personally knew two colleagues included among the many officially listed as missing. They had been assigned last minute positions with the wintering over crew attached to the *IceCube* project at the South Pole Station.

Poor bastards.

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The partial press blackout certainly wasn't helping matters and in Keplar's opinion served only to fuel the wildest speculations as to what was really going on down there. Everything from terrorist attacks—which, given recent history seemed like the most plausible explanation—to space alien abductions. Whole thing reeked of government cover-up.

None of this seemed to bother the always-serene Roberto, who remained happily nodding and humming to himself, while he stirred in copious amounts of brown sugar to his coffee. He was as enthusiastic and tireless now as he had been at the start of their viewing shift. Keplar shook his head in amused bewilderment.

Guy must be chewing coca leaves or something.

The lanky Californian had been at Las Campanas for nearly two weeks but continued to have trouble adjusting to the colder climatic conditions and thinner air at close to eight thousand feet above sea level.

Even so, Keplar was having the time of his life.

The serendipitous onset of the supernova had occurred only moments after Roberto completed a series of routine bias calibration adjustments to the telescope camera. This was standard procedure before the filming of known gravitational lensing effects on certain Cepheid variables. These stars were located in both the Large and Small Magellanic Clouds as well as on the far outer rim of the double galactic nucleus in Andromeda, over 2.5 million light years away.

It was part of a renewed study being jointly undertaken by Las Campanas and Mauna Kea in Hawaii, on galactic rotation curves and the probable role dark matter had to play in the statistical comparative analysis of individual stellar velocities and density ratios. The Cepheid variables, yellow supergiant stars with highly determinable variations in light density emission, allowed for precise calibration of distances and the subsequent bench marking of all other stellar measurements made in the study.

What was truly amazing was that Roberto had activated the camera for the start of its first run on a closely neighboring star, literally seconds before the exploding supergiant lit up the entire night sky. Consequently, they had been positioned almost dead center on it

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and caught the very beginning of the massive detonation. And they weren't even supposed to be working that night—it was a swap he'd agreed to at the last minute with one of the MIKE technicians from the Magellan Planet Search Program, and those guys normally had all the best viewing slots.

Well, eat your heart out Edwardo... 'cause not tonight!

Talk about luck.

Keplar knew he was probably going to be able to dine out on that one for the rest of his life.

The two men were now huddled around the electric heater beneath a small table in the Data Correlation Room. It was one of the newer additions to the enclosure-housing unit of Magellan II, the second of the two 6.5 meter optical telescopes constructed for the Observatory.

Outside, on the isolated and desolate Cerro Manqui peak, it remained bitterly cold. Ice crystals on the snow packed ground were glistening faintly with the first glimmerings of predawn light, beginning gently to caress the tips of nearby mountains.

In Keplar's opinion, the new upgraded units completely supplanted the original du Pont and Swope telescopes, which still remained in use. Being the elitist snob he was, he'd privately refused to even consider them. It was Magellan II or nothing. Once he and Roberto realized what was happening, they had feverishly realigned the initial settings on the MagIC CCD filter photometer. Then they quickly hooked up the IMACS spectrometer, in order to record a time-domain luminosity analysis of the spectacular stellar explosion unfolding before them.

These readings would of course have to be verified by a whole host of follow-up gamma burst and x-ray spectrograph composites. There were also the more thorough examinations being jointly undertaken by NASA's Chandra X-Ray Observatory and the Italian AGILE satellite.

However, all of the emission line evidence so far indicated that the imploding stellar core remnant had easily been of sufficient mass to trigger an irreversible gravitational collapse. If so, the near instantaneous consequence would be the formation of a rapidly

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spinning black hole, a gravitational rupture in the very fabric of space-time, one of such enormous appetite that not even light could escape its insatiable maw.

If this turned out to be the case, it would be a historical first—the only *recorded* observation of black hole in the making, ever. A chance to finally support theory with fact. Such an event might not be seen again for hundreds, or possibly thousands of years. The last time a supernova explosion had even been directly witnessed in recent times was back in 1987, at this very observatory. The time before that was in 1604. Neither incident was of sufficient magnitude to initiate a black hole sequence, resulting instead in incredibly dense rotating neutron stars, known as pulsars.

Unfortunately, Keplar's elation was not destined to last very long.

Jeff Taylor, another visiting astrophysicist from the Lick Observatory in California, aroused him later with great difficulty from a deep sleep. Keplar squinted evilly at his colleague and groaned loudly. "This *is* the day sleepers' lodge. Didn't anyone tell you I was up all night? You know, groundbreaking discovery of a black hole, etcetera, etcetera. Tell them I'll be doing press interviews later—not now."

The expression on Taylor's face remained uncompromisingly blunt. "Never mind all that. Doesn't matter anymore. Nothing does, not after this. You'd better over there right away. Sleep or no sleep, you won't believe what's going down over at the main ComLab."

"What? What is it?" Keplar felt a sudden shiver of premonition flow through him. He realized he'd never seen anyone with such a frightened look in their eyes. And Taylor had a reputation for icy calmness.

His colleague shook his head numbly. "If I told you, you'd think I'd gone nuts. It's best you see it for yourself. Everyone's there. All I can say at this juncture is God help us all." Without another word, Taylor turned his back on Keplar and walked out of the wooden dormitory.

Keplar cursed repeatedly to himself while he dressed.

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This better be *fucking* good, he snarled under the exhalation of his frosted breath, while he hastily pulled the open ends of his parka together and made his way over to the Magellan II Housing Complex.

Outside, it was blustering with freezing, icy gusts, and a gunmetal sky was blowing in steadily from the east, eating up the last vestiges of blue. Definitely looked like fresh snow was coming over. Thank heavens the weather had held for as long as it had.

Inside the computer lab, he was genuinely astonished to see Liz Castella, one of the more senior resident astronomers, sitting alone in a chair and sobbing her heart out. The rest of the faces were in stark contrast to those he remembered earlier, at the excited announcement of his discovery. They now looked shocked and uniformly grim and people were speaking to one another in lowered, hushed tones.

What in hell was going on?

This was supposed to be a celebration, not a wake. He pushed his way through to the front of the crowd, to where Stan Louvard, the Station Chief, was standing, staring with disbelief at one of the large monitoring screens mounted on the wall.

Keplar could see a blurry, undefined image of stars, many stars. But there was something wrong; he had never seen anything like this before. Even as he looked, three of the brighter stars in the foreground flared up into dazzling bursts like a camera flash and then faded, within seconds, *into nothing*.

Just blackness, where once there'd been a point of light.

Other stars were exploding all around, in similar fashion.

Keplar shook his head and stared harder, trying desperately to make sense of it. What he was seeing was impossible and in violation of all the known laws of astrophysics.

Dr. Louvard took note of the younger man standing by his side. "Welcome to our collective nightmare, Clive," he said softly. "It's live datafeed coming direct from W.M. Keck in Hawaii. It's now being monitored by GCN and other observatories throughout the entire Northern Hemisphere."

"My God, what is it? What are we looking at?"

"It's Andromeda. Or what's left of it. It started shortly after your supernova discovery in LMC. The whole Galaxy is disappearing in an

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unknown and absolutely unheard of process. It turns literally everything we thought we knew about space completely on its head. And if it carries on at this rate, within another hour Andromeda will have ceased to exist. It will be as though it never was. An entire galaxy. Gone.”

“Sweet lovin’ Jesus,” whispered Keplar again in horrified awe. “How can such a thing be happening?”

“I don’t know.” Dr. Louvard looked like he was only a step away from fainting. “None of us have any idea as to what is really going on out there. But it’s changed the way we’ll look at science, forever. Just pray we’re not next on the list.”

A single tear rolled down the old man’s crumpled face and Keplar stared hard at him, the numbing realization seeping into him that life would never again be the same, not for as long as he lived.

CHAPTER TWO

How the hell did he get himself into these situations?

Martin tried to stop hyperventilating and realized he'd never been so scared in all his life, unless it were for those horrible whispers that haunted his dreams. What a fool he was, lulled into complacency by optimism and an unwarranted sense of his own bravery. Enough at least to lure him into entering that unknown forest alone and at night.

Big mistake.

Christ, being here was so *real*.

He still had trouble accepting it. If only he knew how to wake up. But he didn't. The nightmare continued. *Horribilis nocturnus*. And he was in it. And it was clearly nothing that Dr. Nalks or Victoria knew about, or else they would have surely brought him out of it.

Unless he was in another coma...

The ghostly howling drew ever closer and there was a frightening, almost casual inevitability to it, for he knew he was being tracked, considered and evaluated. *As food*.

The dimming light from his staff still gave them continuing reason for caution, whatever *they* were, and yet there was a building hunger in those feral calls he knew would soon outweigh it. Something heavy crashed through the undergrowth ahead of him and he stopped, peering wildly into the impenetrable gloom.

Martin felt like smashing the ornate rod in sheer frustration.

He tried not to think beyond the demise of its waning power.

Why the damn staff should fail him at precisely the moment he needed it most was completely beyond him. Martin had tried focusing on it in every way he knew, and repeatedly pressed the button on its burnished side in exasperated panic.

Nothing. Instead, the fading glow on the metal tip had grown fainter by the minute. Was it like a battery, he wondered. Had he run the bloody thing down without even realizing it?

He had no idea of the time, but it seemed to him that he had walked for hours, lost in his own thoughts, until the intrusion of a disturbing awareness that he was no longer alone.

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He remembered his first freaky-deaky night naked beneath the giant trees, just before he had stumbled into Valrensd's place. He had heard howling then. But this was different. Whatever these animals were, they did not sound anything like wolves.

Their cries were darker, deeper and more drawn out than the venting of any lupine source he could imagine. They sounded positively evil. God, why hadn't Gyrimba or Keresel warned him of any of this?

They seemed to have an awful lot of expectations riding on him, but he wasn't going to be of much use, not if he ended up as the *entrée* inside the belly of some disgusting beast.

The light flickered, like a candle gutted by lack of air, and he turned in the sudden stillness, cringing in desperation. The creeping fear he'd tried to suppress, ever since first recognizing his peril, gained the mastery over him. Martin knew that if he heard the nightmare whispering at that point, he would go insane, and the thought of it almost made his knees buckle.

Gone. The light was gone.

He could see nothing in the blackness, but felt the palpable, near overwhelming presence of the massive boles on either side of him, stretching up into the leafy reaches of the hidden canopy, hundreds of feet above. Squirrels were such lucky bastards.

With a jolt, he heard the bestial howling resume and knew he was surrounded.

There was a note of slobbering triumph to it now, which had not been present earlier. Oh Jesus, was he really going to wet himself, why couldn't they wake him up? *Please, oh please.* Martin swore he was never going to do anything like this again. Fuck adventuring.

Glowing pairs of pale green eyes floated in the darkness, not more than twenty feet away. Their stalking luminescence glistened menacingly and the howling stopped. An unearthly panting, a rasping, wet, hoarseness accompanied by grotesque sniffing noises, replaced it.

This was it.

He was dinner and they were obviously very happy with their menu selection. Oh God! The unbelievable horror of it stuck in his

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throat and he was only glad that neither Keresel nor Victoria would witness his pathetic and cowardly end. Some hero he turned out to be.

Dr. Nalks had advised that people sometimes *did* die in their sleep, and without Gyrimba's protection, Martin expected the worst. There was a rustling in the undergrowth, followed by a low, menacing purr. When it came, he hoped it would be quick.

And then the shock of comprehension struck him like a thunderbolt.

Of course!

He suddenly realized precisely how the staff had failed him.

Its magick could not work in the presence of fear. Why that should be, for what reason he could not fathom. Indeed, considering his current predicament, it seemed like a monstrously stupid design blunder.

Now he remembered, of course, that the light started to dim only *after* he felt the first icy flush of apprehension. It had occurred upon the onset of the deathly howls, breaking the hitherto serene silence of the evening. Up until that moment, everything had been fine.

Arkarnem luokar shai taynane.

What?

The words arose unbidden in his mind and he knew not their origin, or their meaning.

A shiver ran through him. Again. *Arkarnem luokar shai taynane.* Fear! Dispense with fear! And it was like the bursting of a great dam. A colossal rage filled him and washed over everything; he was sick and tired of being buffeted around by these outrageous situations.

Two sets of bilious green eyes began advancing rapidly upon him, the horrific growling giving way to a savage roar of impending death.

And Martin in turn wanted to kill *them*.

He felt bloodlust and hatred bath him in a delicious glow, converting all his fear into a driving need to strike back.

Say the words!

Just say the fucking words!

For the briefest of instants, time seemed to come to a standstill and then Martin inhaled deeply. The resonating power in the strange

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language became evident the second he shouted it out in a ringing intonation at the top of his voice: “*ARKARNEM LUOKAR SHAI TAYNANE!!*”

There came an almighty crack of reverberating, rolling thunder and the darkness was blindingly dispelled by a flaring blue-white bolt of lightening, forking wickedly from the top of his staff into the leaping forms that were almost upon him.

Skulls split and brains were super-cooked in their own evaporating juices.

Better than a microwave.

Lifeless bodies thudded to the ground before him.

The rest of the watching creatures howled again, but this time their braying was of utter dismay.

They fled quickly into the surrounding forest.

The commotion of their departure soon grew faint and he could hear them no longer. The steady light returned to the top of his *Sorlell* staff. Martin heaved a sigh of relief and wanted to embrace it and break it in half across the top of his knee, all at the same time.

He gingerly stepped forward to examine the two slain beasts.

God, were they ever ugly!

They looked like the mutated offspring of a demented hyena and a maniacal baboon. Or something like that. Each creature was easily twice his size and the slanting, elongated jaws seemed to contain nothing but razor sharp teeth.

Wow. He’d come that close.

He peered at them more closely. To his amazement, the brutes wore collars! No. Some fucker had actually *trained* these things. Images from the earlier massacre on the road came to mind.

Somehow, he had the nasty feeling that those responsible for that atrocity were behind the unleashing of these nightmarish freaks. For all of that, the collars were handsomely made.

They were constructed out of a black, highly reflective metallic material and encrusted with shiny, coal-like jewels, that seemed to flicker oddly with a sickly, greenish hue, the longer one looked at them.

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Ignoring the foul odor of their ruined skulls, Martin leaned in to unclip the cold metal clasp on the collars of both beasts.

Barely controlling his gag reflex, he tugged and pulled each away and retreated. He then fastened them loosely around his own belt. He had no idea why he did it, except that doing so gave vent to a feeling of the most exceptional satisfaction.

Teach 'em to count their chickens before they were hatched.

He continued walking along the road and within the hour, noticed the first gray-green intimations of dawn, percolating down through the treetops. He allowed the light on his staff to go out and took a brief break to eat some of the wayfarer's food and to take a welcome draft from his flask.

The food and drink completely reenergized him and Martin was amazed, aside from the fact that he knew somewhere else he really *was* sleeping, that he didn't feel tired.

Time distortion was obviously an ongoing factor in his travel between the two realms. Dr. Nalks explained that this was a frequent feature in many lucid dreams—it was not unheard of for some dreamers to experience months, years, whole lifetimes even, in the course of a single night.

It remained a comforting thought, if in an abstract fashion, assuming Dr. Nalks and Victoria were still watching over him, although it certainly hadn't seemed that way only a short while ago.

He was about three hours into the fresh morning when he caught sight of something moving up ahead, over to one side of the narrow road. Martin approached cautiously, careful not to make any sound. It was a *Cranoen*, wearing a finely crafted saddle and harness.

The animal appeared lost and tired and chewed listlessly on some yellowish-green vegetation growing at the base of a giant tree. Upon seeing Martin, it emitted a series of alarmed grunts and began nervously backing away from him.

He made soothing noises and held out a piece of the wayfarer's bread in his hand. The *Cranoen*'s nose twitched at the smell and Martin gradually edged closer, until the hungry beast was near enough to stretch out its long neck and take a tentative nibble from the proffered food. Once it had a taste, it smacked its rubbery lips and

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eagerly took the rest. Martin walked right up and took hold of the reins, hanging loosely from its neck.

“What happened to you, old chum?” He cooed softly as he stroked the animal’s head, and fed it about half of the remaining waybread. By the time he had finished, the *Cranoen* rubbed itself repeatedly against Martin’s arm in sheer bliss, judging from the enraptured look in its eyes and the purr like winnowing sounds it made.

Martin wasted no time in mounting the beast and performing a quick search for its missing owner. He discovered nothing and suspected the worst. Poor bugger. He decided to press on with his journey. He now found that he made excellent progress, and rode all day, until late into the evening.

When he decided to rest, he spread out a coarse, woolen blanket he found in the *Cranoen*’s saddle pouch as a bedroll. Martin used his staff to make a small fire from brushwood gathered in a natural clearing just off to the side of the road, and there he slept. He tied the *Cranoen* to an exposed tree root and figured the animal would soon sound the alarm if any danger approached. He felt too tired to think of anything else.

Martin woke up feeling very stiff and sore, shortly before dawn. He made sure that the fire was completely extinguished and shared the last of his food with his newfound friend, before riding again. The new day slowly beckoned, revealing increasing detail amid the shadows of the silent, green world surrounding him.

A couple of hours later, amid a background hum of insect noises and birdsong, he noticed a gradual thinning to the enormous moss covered boles, and blinked his eyes against the brightness ahead. The sharp contrast obscured the road beyond but he was elated. It meant the end of the forest and he knew that he wouldn’t miss it one bit, not after the scare he’d been given.

Martin emerged from beneath the towering fastness of the verdant canopy. He paused briefly, blinking his eyes, and entered a broad wilderness, opening out in all directions into wide, grassy plains. A warm wind sighed and blew a faraway dust cloud across the horizon.

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He licked his lips, grimacing at the arid, stale smell that hung in the air.

It wasn't long before he was overlooking a bleak land full of boulder-strewn, rolling hills, diminishing in height as they marched away towards the hazy distance, where a vast expanse of shimmering gold coupled with the iridescent glory of the rising, twin sunned sky.

Shiin.

He realized that he beheld at last the great desert of the interior Keresel had warned him of, and that the most challenging part of his journey was about to begin.

CHAPTER THREE

Wolf stood outside the main building of the Sedona Sleep Research Institute, gazing up with deeply troubled insight at the remote brilliance of the star-studded sky.

After being cooped up for so long in Gidfel's underground city, he was otherwise enjoying the crisp, clean feel of the cool desert air. There was a purity to it that evoked half-forgotten memories of his childhood. But he could not believe he had traveled half way around the globe to finally link up with Martin, only to find him lost in another coma.

Victoria, poor thing, was beside herself. She remained inside, guilt-ridden at Martin's bedside, where Claudia was attempting to console her.

What a fucking mess.

Wolf turned to face Dr. Nalks who had stepped outside to join him. The tall Texan offered Wolf an embarrassed smile and held out an open packet of Marlboro lites.

"No thanks, these days I try to stick to the ones with the twisted ends."

"Well, I could find you one of those—we do have a license for medicinal use."

Wolf shook his head and laughed dourly.

"No, that's okay. General Lauderton and his boys will be arriving anytime soon. I think you'll find then that the security round this place will be tighter than a duck's ass. Probably not the best of times to be getting gonzo."

Jessie Nalks shrugged and took a long drag on his cigarette. "You know, Dr. Spengler tells me that Martin has returned to the same synchronous brain wave states recorded during his post-traumatic coma, but at a much more intensive level—he's generating beta spikes that are going off the scale. Dr. Spengler's never seen anything like it and neither have I. This goes beyond any transcendent phase or extended dream your friend may be going through. Martin is experiencing something none of us have ever encountered before."

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Wolf nodded, taking a couple of seconds to digest this news. “The world is changing fast Doc, and in ways I don’t like. Too much weird shit coming down the line. Of course, Martin knew something was up, that’s why he talked you people into letting him do this. Crazy sonavabitch, should have discussed it with the rest of us first.”

Dr. Nalks exhaled a blue-gray cloud of smoke and looked rather sharply at Wolf. “Were I to hazard a guess, I’d say you’re referring somewhat obliquely to the situation in Antarctica. That and the disappearance of the entire Andromeda galaxy. Are you suggesting these phenomena are related?”

“Tip o’ the iceberg,” muttered Wolf darkly. “Trust me, there’s more to it than you might imagine—a lot more, but I can’t *tell* you anything, or, as the saying goes, then I’d have to kill you. As matters stand right now, you’re gonna be sworn to state secrecy on just about everything you’ve seen and heard here, ever since Martin and Victoria arrived. Cooperate fully—and they might still let you keep your license.”

Dr. Nalks ground out his cigarette butt with the steel-tipped toe of his Texas cowboy boot. “Look, I can see this is getting serious, but there’s no need to—”

At that moment, the door opened and Claudia popped her head out. The strained expression on her beautiful face spoke volumes. “You two had better get back in here—Martin’s vital signs have just taken a turn for the worse.”

Inside, both men followed Claudia hurriedly along the short corridor leading to the Institute’s infirmary, a small ward with four sickbeds set up next to a dispensary counter.

The unused beds had been pushed outside to make way for the medical equipment Dr. Spengler requisitioned from the local ER. He was there at the personal request of the Secretary of State, once Victoria finished making some very panicky telephone calls after Martin failed to awaken from his eight-hour session in the isolation chamber, two evenings previously.

Dr. Spengler looked up with a haggard face when Dr. Nalks entered the room. “He’s gone into a highly unusual fever,” he growled ominously. “One minute I’m monitoring normal signs, the

next his systolic blood pressure is up to 165, he's sweating buckets and now he's running a temperature of 107. He's burning up. How all of this can occur so quickly is beyond my expertise. There is only so much I can do here. We'd better get him to a hospital."

Claudia was calling EMS on her cell when Martin began thrashing wildly and yelling out words in a strange tongue. Victoria and Wolf gently but firmly restrained him and then, as he slowly relaxed in their arms, he began muttering repeatedly, at first in a low chant, barely audible and then much louder, over and over again: "*Epená, epená...*"

"My God!" exclaimed Victoria with a sudden shock of recognition. "I know that name. He's referring to the Semen of the Sun!"

Wolf gave her a quizzical side-glance and was about to say something in response when Martin tensed and inhaled deeply, giving way to a huge sigh before slumping back into unconsciousness.

Almost simultaneously, several different electro-diagnostic alarm buzzers began sounding and Dr. Spengler shouted, "Quick! He's going into cardiac arrest! Jessie! Get the defibrillator over here! Victoria—move that crash cart closer!"

All hell broke loose while the two doctors frantically administered emergency cardio-care and placed defibrillation paddles on Martin's exposed chest.

"All clear!"

The cry rang around the small room and Martin's body heaved upwards off the bed in a spastic reaction to the electric current pulsing through him.

"Again! There's no response!" At the discharge of the second shock, however, the air split with a deafening explosion and the defibrillator burst into flames.

Wolf froze in disbelief as Martin's body shimmered and rippled into tiny waves of filmy translucence. A fierce rise in temperature suddenly forced everyone back from the bed. This was followed by a loud, cracking noise and then Martin simply wasn't there any more. The intense heat subsided as quickly as it came.

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Before anyone had opportunity to react to this stunning turn of events, Martin's body reappeared and Victoria screamed piercingly at the top of her voice.

Bright red blood gushed copiously from his ears and nose, followed closely by a halo of blue-white luminescence emanating brilliantly from the top of his head.

They noticed a sharp hissing sound, and for a tense second the vibrant, sparkling energy seemed to hover above Martin, gathering rapidly into a wildly gyrating ball that almost disappeared into a velvety smooth blackness before arising abruptly into the air and discharging violently into Victoria's forehead.

She screamed again and was flung backwards into Wolf.

He struggled to regain his balance and caught sight of the horrified expression on Claudia's face.

But it was no longer Martin she was looking at.

Victoria's unconscious body had transformed into a wraithlike shade of darkness. Wolf suppressed the urge to fling the hideous apparition away from him when he could make out bones and internal organs glowing inside her with a ghostly hue.

Moving quickly, he prevented her from falling by scooping her up into his arms instead.

What in hell was going on?

Before any of them had a chance to react further, a second, even louder explosion ensued. Pieces of broken glass flew everywhere, amid showers of angry sparks and thickly spewing smoke.

Almost immediately, the electrical equipment in the room went dead, including all of the lights.

After several chaotic seconds of coughing and groping around, Jessie Nalks found an emergency flashlight and shone it onto the charred remnants of Martin's bed.

It remained empty.

Wherever he'd gone for the second time, he wasn't coming back.

CHAPTER FOUR

It took Martin all day to traverse the difficult, barren hill country that lay beyond the plains. Towards evening, he thought he could discern the watch fire of a small, enclosed settlement, several miles away. Under the open expanse of the indigo sky, it was hard to accurately gage distance.

Further still, lay the first of the looming, wind sculpted dunes, casting deepening shadows into the fading light. He drew closer, and soon realized his error. The stockaded walls were constructed out of the same huge trees that were standard issue in this world. What had appeared to be diminutive revealed itself as a distortion of scale.

These walls were in fact massive and bore the scars of recent battle. He estimated them at close to two hundred feet high, with even taller watchtowers erected at each of the four corners of the reinforced ramparts. There was a battered gate, one-third the height of the main walls, guarded on each side by twin bastions. This was a formidable fortress. Countless stars were glittering brightly by the time he reached it.

Martin had taken pains to memorize all of the relevant portions of Keresel's letter. He could only hope that he would deliver an Oscar worthy performance when the time came to pass himself off as a warrior-priest of Talsar. Then again, this whole scenario was like something out of a movie—*almost*—and he intended to act accordingly. Improvisation had always proved one of his foremost legal talents, right behind being late.

The gate partially opened as he urged his increasingly nervous mount towards it. He saw a single rider, holding a flaming torch in his left hand, moving forward at a trot to meet him in the center of the road. Martin stopped and waited to see what would happen next.

The other man sat with relaxed insouciance in a worn and creased saddle. He was tall and well built, with rugged, swarthy looks that would have done a pirate proud. He clicked softly under his breath and brought his *Cranoen* to a halt directly in front of Martin.

Martin tried hard to return the intensity of the other man's stare.

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The stranger was dressed in long, flowing robes of saffron and white. His face and head were clean-shaven, with the exception of a narrow tuft of black-red hair, protruding like a miniature horn from the top-center of his forehead. He bore a long, curving sword that sat across his lap and the fingers of his right hand rested lightly upon its jewel encrusted hilt.

Martin was starting to feel uncomfortable under the scrutiny of these flashing green eyes. They matched a countenance both dangerous and unyielding. After a further moment, the rider nodded and addressed Martin in a hard-edged tone clearly accustomed to command.

“Well traveler, you seem like no Gurushhi raider to me, yet these have become perilous times. I will have knowledge of your allegiance before you pass further.”

Better do this right, thought Martin, you won't get a second chance.

He unbuckled one of the black collars from his belt and in his best cavalier fashion tossed it to the man before him. He spoke with what he hoped was the same convincing authority. “My gift to you. I travel to Naralune and hold those who wear these as my enemies.”

The darker man laughed loudly and in the torchlight examined carefully the collar he had caught with his sword hand. He spat contemptuously to one side and said, “*Groth*. Yet the jewels will fetch a good price in Naqlaren. You took this yourself?”

Martin held up the other collar. “And this as well. I am a conduit for the wrath of my god.”

The other man's expression acquired a look of calculating interest. “Is that so?” he responded dryly. “However, should you speak truly, then you are to be counted as no friend of Gurush. They train their hellspawn only too well. There must be more to you than you seem, to lay claim to two of their beasts and live to tell the tale. You seek passage to Naralune with the *Rhöofka* caravan?”

“Aye.” Martin hadn't the faintest idea what a *Rhöofka* caravan was, but decided this was no time to display his ignorance.

The man from the fortress was still eyeing him very closely. “I have not heard of the need, that a servant of the Hidden Fire should travel so far from his home.”

“The need is great and so is my thirst. Will you aid me?”

“That depends. Give me the other collar.”

Martin threw it over to him and received a large, leather flask in return. He spent long seconds gratefully swallowing the cool, delicious tasting water and then dismounted and tipped the remainder into the cracked and parched lips of his *Cranoen*.

The other man nodded approvingly and sheathed his sword. “The collars will pay the greater part of the passage cost. The rest depends on your fighting skills. If we are attacked, you will assist. Your arrival is fortuitous in timing if nothing else: The *Harsayshe* season of storms is soon upon us and no further caravans depart Farnarhar this year. My name is Rhul Tarsh Kanär, leader of my people and keeper of the ancient ways. Where we go, my word is law.”

Martin returned the saturnine hardness glittering in the flat stare and replied, “My name is Mar-tin, warrior-priest of Talsar. Your law I will accept if it is not in conflict with my own. For the duration of the journey, my staff is yours to command.”

Kanär tilted his head slightly and narrowed his hooded eyes. “Understand this, *priest* of Talsar. There will be no conflict between you and I. If there is, I will kill you. Now, join me. Tonight you shall be a guest of the Rhükon. We ride with the first dawn.”

Martin wasn’t entirely satisfied with these last remarks, but followed his newfound host beneath the wooden gates, which swung shut behind him with a loud creaking noise. He had to repeatedly dig his heels into the sides of his mount to keep up, and traversed a narrow dirt path lit by many glowing lanterns. This wound its way into an exotic looking tent city spread haphazardly over a grassy mound within the confines of the fortress.

At the apex of this mammoth hill burned a mighty watch fire and, upon drawing closer, he saw gathered there many armed warriors dressed in the same flowing robes as the man he followed, staring down at him, curiosity gleaming in their hard eyes.

Kanär led him about halfway up the hill and stopped outside a magnificent tented structure easily the size of a small mansion. He smiled graciously.

“Go within. My handmaids will attend to your needs. Eat, drink, wash yourself. When it is time, you will be awakened. My stable master will house your *Cranoen*. And, my new friend, you can afford to relax. In addition to the bargain we have struck, the hospitality customs of my people allow no harm to befall those entering as invited guests. Were it not so...”

Martin followed Kanär’s gaze to a long row of silhouetted, misshapen heads stuck on poles, adorning one of the far ramparts.

Kanär laughed harshly. “They were not invited.”

Martin gulped involuntarily. “They...they were Gurushhi raiders?”

His host nodded grimly. “They probably bred the *Groth* you slew. Unfortunately, they themselves do not wear such expensive collars, even though my sword this day parted five of the living from their necks.”

Martin chuckled along somewhat uncomfortably with Kanär and then stopped abruptly. “If you could have seen the butchery of those bastards, outside Elestra...”

The amusement left Kanär’s face as swiftly as it came. “I am familiar with their methods, *priest*. On their last attack at the Melrusa Oasis, they took two of my wives. What was left when we caught up with them was hardly worth burying. Understand this: many more Gurushhi will come from across the great sea. It is said that this time they intend to bring the whole of Hsäm under their heel. Dark times have befallen us. Terrible rumors abound. I have heard that at least one of the *Narsh-krar* leads their chief host, in an unholy alliance designed to destroy utterly the remaining Free Peoples of the world.”

“Hold on,” said Martin, for a moment slipping out of character. “Wasn’t that the name given to the Shadow Lords of old?”

The darker man again fixed Martin with one of his stares. “I too once dismissed such things as myth. No longer. The accursed undead truly walk the lands. Ours will be the third caravan to attempt the crossing since the *harnar* phase of the last moon. Of the others,

except for a scattering of half-crazed survivors picked up by my brother's people, there is no trace.”

“What happened to them?”

Kanär sighed deeply. “Those who were saved were unable to describe what they saw. Their minds have cracked like dropped eggs and they will never be the same. Such is the evil of our times. And now, I must leave you to contemplate such pleasantries while you rest.”

Kanär inclined his head semi-mockingly and left.

Martin did not need the encouragement. He slept fitfully and woke of his own accord. Dressing quickly, he left the guest wing of the tent partitioning and walked up to the smoldering coals of the previous evening's watch fire to warm himself. From there, in the grayness of the predawn light, he perceived an impressive number of large, elephant like beasts being lined up by the main gates.

Each had a wide wooden platform attached to its broad back, more than half with low, dun colored tents affixed. Crowds of men were using ladders to load stores onto the platforms and were securing them tightly with many ropes. The flurry of focused activity made it clear that departure would not be long.

Martin raised his eyes, looking beyond the confines of the wooden walls and the row of grisly heads. There, the first colossal dunes reached up, touching the pale blue-green glimmering gradually replacing the ultramarine backdrop of the starlit sky.

It was a timeless moment, and he stood there, lost in his own thoughts.

At the top of the highest crest, the rapidly dispersing darkness was hit with the thinnest sliver of piercing light, pushing up until the whole horizon burst forth into an erupting rim of orange-red puissance. This radiated in dazzling waves from a slowly rising orb of fire, soon overwhelmingly bright in the luster of its incandescent immensity.

Martin remembered the names and descriptions Keresel had given him and knew that Hurul, eldest of Tärfarin's twin sons, had begun climbing the azure sky in majestic ascendance. In less than an hour, the full power of his dominating heat would be complemented by

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Rafarin, sister star, following eagerly above the wind swept perpetuity of the sandy heights.

One of the great beasts below gave vent to a bellowing roar and stamped its hairy foot with a resounding thump on the trampled ground. Within seconds, many of the others were joining in, until the resulting plangency almost forced Martin to cover his ears.

“Magnificent, is it not?” said Kanär, seconds later, standing beside Martin, who had not noticed his host’s arrival.

Martin turned to look at him. It was far too early to carry on with his theatrical farce. He asked bluntly, “What exactly are our chances of making it to Naralune?”

The taller man squinted sidelong at Martin. “You are a man of directness and few words. I like that. So, I will be honest with you. This is a ride into death, my friend. When you said that you wished for passage to Naralune, you did not ask that it be free of danger.”

“An oversight, I assure you.”

Kanär smiled thinly. “The Rhükon are a proud and resourceful people. We will not be denied our heritage, our right to the trade routes we have called our own since time immemorial. We leave today with five thousand swords disguised as traders and merchants—the greater part of the fighting strength of my tribe. The Gurushhi will come for us. And so, it is simple: we will destroy them, or they will destroy us.”

“Hmm. Don’t suppose there’s any chance of a refund?”

Kanär gazed more keenly into Martin’s eyes. “You are no priest of Talsar. They are famous for having forsaken the ways of the flesh and I see nothing of that about you. Nevertheless, I do believe that you killed two *Groth*. The horror of it is still written upon your face. A man who can do that is someone whose talents will be put to good use on this journey. Your past I care nothing for. It is your future that has possible worth to the Rhükon. You said your need was great, Mar-tin. Do you still wish to go to Naralune?”

Martin smiled tiredly at his host.

“Actually, it’s Martin. And if we really are being honest with each other, Rhul Tarsh, then you should know this. Outside of a courtroom, acting was never my forte. You are an astute man and I

should think that your tribe is very fortunate to have you as its leader. You are of course correct, I am no priest, but it was felt that I needed some sort of disguise. I suppose I'm taking a risk in telling you this, but I am in fact *Astari*—although I would ask that you keep that to yourself. I seek the *Lelcraid Salar*, sworn enemies of the *Narsh-krar*, in addition to one whose life I have promised to defend. As with you, there is no turning back for me. I must reach Naralune.”

The darker man regarded Martin with a look of vindication on his face. “*Astari!* The people from beyond the Veil. So, what the old men say is true! The prophecy unfolds. And Relban is wrong. I knew there was something about you; my instincts are rarely so misplaced. It accounts also for the oddness of your tongue. Everything else fits. One legend seeking out another. You are the one. Incredible. The days of final reckoning are with us.”

Martin was astounded to hear Kanär speak such words. Then he remembered the counsel of Gyrimba. This whole thing was getting stranger and stranger by the minute. “Am I to understand then, that my arrival here wasn't entirely unexpected?”

Kanär exhaled heavily, like he bore the weight of the world upon his shoulders, and nodded. “Our elders and seers have oft spoken of the return of an *Astari*, but I did not believe it until now. Your presence among us marks the long foretold advent of *Dunulvär*, the testing time.”

Martin frowned. “That sounds ominous. However, my own home is also in great danger, which is one of the reasons I'm here. I'm afraid I know very little of your world or its politics. All I can say is that until we reach Naralune, I will help you to the best of my abilities.”

Kanär's face took on a wistful and almost resigned expression. He removed a razor sharp gold-hilted dagger from a jeweled scabbard on his belt. “You will ally yourself with my people against a common foe?”

Martin nodded. “I will.”

The Rhükon leader swiftly drew the blade across the top of his hand. The welling blood spilled quickly over his fingers and dripped freely onto the lush, oasis fed grass.

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He flipped the knife expertly and handed it hilt first to Martin. “Blood speaks to blood. It is our way.”

Martin tried not to wince while he reluctantly cut the front of his own hand. He handed back the knife and shook hands with Kanär until their blood had thoroughly commingled. “Does this mean we’re blood-brothers?”

Kanär grinned roguishly and wiped the blade between two folds on the sleeve of his robe. “Unto death. Five thousand warriors will from this day hold forth the safety of your life above their own and expect you to do the same for each of them. Come. There are many introductions to be made and your *Cranoen* has been readied for the journey.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Three days later, Martin was still trying to adjust to the endless, blistering heat of the deep desert interior. He was told it would only get worse. Two hundred and fifty of the lumbering desert animals known as *Rhöofka* were following the vanguard, one after another, in a weaving trail that led through steep and winding sand canyons, flanked on either side by the mountainous, towering dunes.

The scale of this place was off the map.

It was a near endless ocean of sand, unimaginably vast, and some of the more intimidating dunes were close to a mile in height. For a while, during the morning or in the hours before sundown, they provided some shade from the blinding glare of the twin suns. Other than that, the heat was constant, merciless and cruel.

All around, warriors of the Rhükon watched warily and guarded from the high ground, continually on the alert for ambush or open attack. Despite many misgivings and uneasy expectations to the contrary, however, no sight or sign of the enemy was to be seen, anywhere.

Kanär cheerfully explained how the path between oases had to be renewed each time the crossing was made, for even outside the *Harsayshe*, fierce and frequent windstorms ensured that the precipitous dunescape was never the same.

They rested only during the worst of the afternoon heat and otherwise relied on Vanadiar, the silvery-blue, half-visible disk that was Tärfarin's moon, to navigate by day.

This involved an innovative process of cross triangulation, using each of the blazing suns as vertices, to plot a slow course south by southeast, leading eventually to the bounteous grass plains of Kulush. Beyond, Kanär advised guardedly, lay Ulra, the coastal lands whose mighty cliffs overlooked Selless, Ocean of Dreams.

Only there would Martin find Naralune.

But the journey might take months.

And in the evenings, after the welcoming routine of a fully cooked meal, the Rhükon would break camp and continue on their long trek, relying on the same constellations that had guided their

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ancestors inveterately before them. These were patterns Martin soon learned to recognize in the crystal clarity of the cold night air, marching in stately precession amid the glittering remoteness of surrounding stars: *Aeuthuna*, the Path-Finder, *Gilreliam*, the Horns, *Sukühtar*, the Broken Sword and many others.

So it passed, and as the days began to merge and blend, one shifting seamlessly into another, Martin discovered something he never expected to find—a sense of belonging, of comradeship and peace, maturing into a tranquility made all the more profound the less he questioned its origins. Instead, he allowed his heart to open to the subtle mysteries of this strange and forbidding land, seeing beyond its harsh immediacy to a hidden beauty that coaxed him slowly to trust in its secrets and allow his soul to heal, setting aside a burden he'd carried ever since his parents died.

To the unseen nods and smiles of the Rhükon, Martin took to ascending the highest of these mighty dunes by himself, pushing beyond physical limitations he no longer believed in.

He became a climber.

Such a climber.

One colossal peak in particular challenged him, a standout height from all around, a weird anomaly of nature stretching upwards to an almost unbelievable two miles in height.

He wanted to view the desert from atop this giant and resolutely assaulted the soft, shifting surface for hours on end, pushing down hard to raise each foot higher than the last.

No surrender.

The desert suns of Shün shone directly down upon him and the radiating heat filled every molecule of his awareness. Muscle fatigue burned through him and he ignored it. Pain assaulted him and he welcomed it. Consciousness threatened to leave him and he dared it. He would not cease, he would not stop.

Only at the top did he finally stand, panting, his lungs heaving in the sun baked air, the sweat running down his face in rivulets, and he took his water flask and drank from it deeply, his parched throat opening and washing him with relief. His life was melting through him in waves and he stopped thinking of himself, his sense of identity

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fading, each crystal grain of silica around him was more important than that.

In every direction, the sands stretched endlessly into forever, a golden dream, a shimmering perception of reality segueing into one timeless presence of being, transcending all logic, all memory, all thought, all desire, and he knew not his origins or his future, he was merely there, and the salt on his lips was sharp in the taste of his mouth and it was enough, he no longer wanted anything, this moment was enough.

He felt transformed...

Weeks passed, and the protean splendor of the wind-sculpted landscape became familiar to him, gradually opening up in ways and on levels he could scarcely comprehend. Martin forgot that he was in a dream; it seemed it had always been this way, an endless epiphany of dunes and he felt segments of his old life slip away from him, like rose petals stolen in a wind-swollen storm.

Even Victoria and Keresel faded into the polar regions of his heart, still very much a part of him, but rendered remote by his present proximity.

In such manner did Shün weave its spells, transforming him into a man burnished by gradual hardening, the product of a Nietzschean crucible these fierce warriors were prepared to accept as one of their own. And, for the first time ever, Martin felt like he wasn't an outsider, and enjoyed an affinity that had always eluded him, especially among his peers in the profession of law.

Indeed, Kanär and many among the Rhükon regarded him with a rare wonder in their impenetrable eyes, for he seemed more intimately attuned to the unseen rhythms of his environment than even they were. A prodigy and a true child of the desert, they began calling him. In response, Martin adopted many of their customs and mannerisms, including their style of dress and the shaving of his head.

His friendship with Kanär grew steadily, and he learned much about Naralune during intense discussions that focused always on the myriad differences between their respective worlds. Martin's paradoxical conclusion was that the Rhükon were the most martially gifted and yet wholly generous people he had ever met.

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Long evenings passed where he would ride silently among them, returning glances and small gestures, while intuitively choosing the best routes leading through to the hidden oases, strung out like lost jewels among the topaz valleys of softly flowing sand. Golden sand, smooth and dry, the very essence of Shün, a part of every insight of what was, of what could be, for thousands upon thousands of kulargs around.

Months turned into the closing of a season and the ripening fullness of five new moons came and went. The size of the desert was omnipotent and it became easy to believe that no other world existed beyond it. Time itself took on a dreamlike, hallucinogenic quality and Martin began thinking that it might never end, but it did.

There came a morning when growling thunder rumbled ominously in the distance. Soon, it reverberated well beyond the twilight haze gathered on the horizon like a foreboding shroud of doom. Before long, from the tallest dunes, they looked upon dark cauldrons of thickly swirling clouds, black edged and glowing inwardly with a flickering, dead light. From them, sprang bolts of brilliant lightning, repeating in increasingly violent displays of kinetic discharge.

There was something profoundly disturbing about this weather change, something sinister and unnatural, and it did not diminish the closer they drew to it, nor did it rain. The Rhükon weather diviners became worried and remarked that this was no early storm of the *Harsayshe*. A decision was made to keep the main caravan hidden until a large scouting party led by Kanär could determine exactly what was going on.

Martin did not hesitate to accept the Rhükon leader's offer to join his elite bodyguard of five hundred warriors on *Cranoen*. Immediately, the crack troops rode away, heading swiftly towards the murk-hidden source of the burgeoning storm. The rumblings increased and the atmosphere acquired a muggy, sulfurous quality that made it difficult to breathe.

The day grew old and yet they approached, finding that the landscape around them was changing, with the dunes thinning noticeably and becoming less steep. Soon, carpets of gently waving

flowers filled the air with a wondrous fragrance. These exquisitely beautiful umbels were yellow and pale, growing profusely in large patches of sandy soil. The welcoming perfume dispensed with the worst of the bad air and soothed Martin's lungs considerably. In another time it would have been quite lovely, for the alteration in topography clearly signified the end of the deep desert.

They pulled up near a small, wide valley lying between the last of the truly big dunes. Dark shadows were before them and the fields of flowers disappeared into multitudinous curtains of hanging gloom, no further than a few miles away, cast by towering thunderheads that climbed ponderously into the upper reaches of the angry heavens.

Martin learned from Kanär that the beautiful flowers were called *Grebin*. They were to be found only along the shifting demarcation between the true desert and the nameless, adjoining scrublands bordering the grass plains of Kulush. The crushed petals were widely famed for their medicinal properties.

Before Martin could ask another question, there came an almighty crack of deafening thunder. The darkness of the horizon burst into a stark, monochromatic glare. In less than a second, a surreal vision briefly revealed itself in the distance, the haunting, preternatural gleaming of a strange crystalline tower.

The startling image imprinted itself firmly upon his mind.

Broad and thick at the base, it tapered impossibly to a narrow, stately extremity that flared into a wide, mushroom shaped dome, hundreds of feet above. Dark, elongated windows were embedded in it, looking out onto the world in all directions.

Another flash of lightning.

A disturbance below caught his eye. There he spied a seething mass of black figures surrounding the unreal spire and Martin felt a thrill of fear pass through him.

"Gurushhi!" hissed Kanär ominously, drawing his long sword quietly from its leather sheath and kissing the blade reverently. The other Rhükon followed suit and Martin was wondering whether he should do anything with his staff when there came a great commotion from behind.

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A terrible, bloodcurdling scream was abruptly cut off and Martin swiveled his upper body in response.

A blur of speed, and another, indistinguishable, while several of the riders grappled suddenly with monstrous shapes that had them tumbling from their steeds. The vale filled with dark shadows leaping through the air. “*Groth! Groth!*”

With ghastly agility, the ungainly, nightmarish beasts took down scores of other riders and howled in grisly perturbation. Martin nearly fell off his own mount when the nervous *Cranoen* panicked and bolted off into the darkness in front of them.

He held on for dear life and managed with a quick turn of his head to look again to his rear.

A further flash of lightening revealed the surviving Rhükon, including Kanär, all spread out in a mad gallop behind him. Further back, he caught a receding glimpse of an overwhelming number of the disgusting beasts engaged in a savage feeding frenzy, rending asunder the unfortunate fallen and their downed *Cranoen*.

But what he rode towards was altogether worse.

There could be no turning back, not now, and Martin knew what it felt like to be caught between the hammer and the anvil.

He thought his heart would stop when his ears were invaded by the insidious whispering infecting his most fearful recollections. Simultaneously, a fell chill entered his bones, reaching in for his soul and he sensed the brooding, unmistakable presence of great evil.

It reminded him of his encounter in the hospital and he realized instinctively he was about to meet head-on with something his rational mind told him couldn’t exist, an unspeakable denizen of the underworld, a horror beyond imagination, a Shadow Lord, known fearfully to legend as the *Narsh-krar*.

Despite Gyrimba’s assessment of his abilities, Martin doubted he would survive the encounter. This opinion he evidentially shared with the surviving Rhükon, but they did not let it bother them in the slightest, filling the air instead with the fierce, reckless challenges of the damned and urging their *Cranoen* to even greater speeds, many of them rushing past Martin in their overweening haste to engage the enemy.

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For a second, Martin felt deeply ashamed of himself. And then, quite unexpectedly, in spite of his fear, or perhaps more accurately *because* of it, he punched through to an illuminating instant of unfolding clarity, understanding the essence of what was actually happening to him.

Leaving the desert, he was no longer the same person who had entered it.

Something changed in him in that moment, some recognition that how he acted now would forever shape how he viewed himself thereafter. And so, how could he turn his back on one of the most exhilarating moments of his life, of any life lived not wholly without honor?

Was giving in to fear really worth that much? Was it worth the loss of his dignity, his manhood?

He relaxed his grip on the saddle and reins and immediately found it much easier to guide the headlong momentum of his thoroughly spooked *Cranoen*. Despite the fact he was about to die, the thought flashed exuberantly through his mind—so this is what it's like to be in a charge!

The gleaming tower grew closer, flickering oddly in the twilight shadows surrounding it. There was definitely something odd about its translucent structure, for it didn't appear to be quite solid, not even here in the dream realm of Tärfarin. Indeed, he gained the distinct impression that the entire edifice was somehow phase shifting between the visible world and another, altogether empyrean plane of existence.

How did I know that?

Other, more pressing matters demanded Martin's attention, as hundreds of Gurushhi raiders moved up swiftly from the base of the tower to meet the oncoming threat. It was abundantly obvious that the Rhükon were hopelessly outnumbered.

In some small, remotely observing corner of his mind, he was riveted by the speed in which an ambushed scouting party could be so readily transformed into a suicidal attack force—and one clearly bent on taking as many of the other bastards with them as possible—all within the space of a few, adrenaline driven seconds.

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And in the midst of it, fear lost finally the last of its grip, and he was caught up in the unbelievable battle lust of these crazy desert dwellers, his adopted brothers-in-arms, galloping so eagerly toward their deaths.

Martin abandoned any notion of common sense or self-preservation. No use for it here. Instead, he switched to holding his bunched reins with one hand and used the other to grab his silver and gold rune staff from its saddle grip. He raised it up and swung it forward at the same time, depressing the button and feeling a surge of electricity throughout his entire body.

A gathering strength was flowing within him, concentrating exponentially to pulse along his arm into the hotly glowing tip of the rod.

Motherfuckers were gonna see something now.

“Kafarnar tulay, shämarq-tular!”

Like the time before in the forest, he had no idea of what the words meant, nor indeed where they came from. He was only aware that he was a channel for the mesmerizing power he felt resonating through him while he yelled them out, at the top of his voice, over and over again.

The Rhükon around him took up the cry and the gap between the riders and the tower closed quickly.

The shrouded thing by the base of the ghostly spire snapped up its head and raised two scaly arms in defiance towards Martin. He saw the abomination of dead eyes that were portals into nothing and knew that he had captured the hideous creature’s undivided attention.

Unraveling spools of blue tinged darkness rippled from the outspread talons of this diabolical monstrosity. Martin flinched and could see his death in the stygian blackness that roared towards him. The withering blast of hellish energy swept up the hordes of Gurushhi that were before it, but the demonic beast did not stop nor seem to have any regard for them.

Other riders were still ahead of Martin and fighting the first mortal duels with Gurushhi opponents. Swords clashed furiously, clanging on shields or finding their wet purchase on unprotected flesh. In the churn of battle, before they were even aware of it, all

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were caught helplessly in the expanding wave of lethal terror that smashed into them.

Friend and foe alike ruptured the air with agonized, hair-raising screams, while bubbling flesh separated in melting curls from burning bones. Exposed, cooked meat charred into wisps of blackened smoke, sending fragmenting skeletons on all sides falling into the ruins of their disintegrating chargers.

Martin's staff cracked in two down the middle.

Shattering pieces of it flew away from his singed and blistering hand, even as a monumental spear of dazzling white light cut through the darkness to pierce the unholy creature into the very depths of its being. A nightmarish wail overwhelmed every other sound on the battlefield and the ghastly thing spun around, tottering on its clawed feet.

Every nerve ending in Martin's body writhed uncontrollably with the unimaginable pain brought on by the inhuman contact.

Demon...

His poor *Cranoen* died instantly of triple heart failure.

Through the auspices of continuing good fortune, Martin was thrown clear of the collapsing animal and was aware of the black viscosity fading into the aether, just as it was reaching out to take him. On his bruised hands and knees, he could only watch what unfolded next.

Ahead, and coming up towards the wounded fiend in a flanking maneuver, Kanär whooped with savage intensity. He swiftly decapitated two surviving Gurushhi on either side of him, with a blindingly fast figure-of-eight swirl of his sword. Twin geysers of blood erupted into the air and headless corpses toppled backwards from their steeds.

The blinking, amazed heads had not yet bounced among the trampled flowers of the gore-splattered loam when the Rhükon leader closed with the infernal horror. Leaning low from his saddle with a jubilant cry of unleashed fury, he swung upwards with a deadly axial motion, his razor-sharp sword cleaving deeply into the foulness of its muricated flesh.

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In the same blinding instant, the hellish thing reciprocated by whipping around its scaly arm with devastating speed, and in one swipe completely eviscerated Kanär. A shower of blood sprayed everywhere when it pulled backwards with vicious retraction, holding a fistful of steaming entrails in its dying grip even as it fell. Kanär turned, collapsing heavily from his mount while it swept past and did not move.

Martin was on his feet and running towards Kanär, oblivious to his own pain and the dismayed cries of the enemy remnants, retreating now in disarray from the unbridled rage of the Rhükon, seeking vengeance for their fallen warlord.

Martin tried, but could not speak past the bulging lump gathered in his throat. He held the mortally wounded man gently in his arms and leaned low to catch the words Kanär was struggling to say.

“Behold, Martin! For I have lived well and cross the final boundary with my head held high. I have taken my revenge against the accursed kinslayers and what warrior could ask for more? Go forth.”

Kanär hesitated and then coughed harshly, the bright red blood spraying across his trembling chin.

“Go forth...our bond is broken...seek the fate...that awaits you in the *Dradhinnon*...for I have met mine.” The dying man again coughed violently, and for a few seconds, the grip on Martin’s shoulder was iron hard while Kanär leaned forward, with great difficulty.

“Know this: I die happily. My name and our deed shall live on in song. Together...we have carved a new legend, my friend, and the *Narsh-krar* ...is no more. Who else but you or I could ever recount ...such a...such a tale?”

His lips stilled and the shining smile of victory stiffened on Kanär’s ashen face. The light in his piercing green eyes faded and gazed fixedly to a point beyond Martin’s, into distant spaces no living man could hope to see.

CHAPTER SIX

Martin let Kanär's body down and closed his eyes.

He stood up and turned to look at the terrible thing that had killed his blood brother.

There was nothing left of it, just soiled black rags flapping in the wind that had sprung up, breaking apart the storm clouds above. A single sunbeam fell on Kanär's gore stained sword and Martin picked it up.

Kanär's tall and swarthy second-in-command, Relban, walked over stiffly to him and there was blood all down his left side. With tears on his face, Martin handed him the weapon.

Relban stared at it wordlessly and flexed its weight in his hand.

Martin waited until the other man's eyes met his own. When he spoke, it was with considerable difficulty, his words leavened by grief. "Your people have won a great victory this day and I...have lost a brother. He really was the best among you, wasn't he? And so, your loss far exceeds mine, but I never...I never had a brother before. Kanär took me in—you all did."

Martin paused, eyes still brimming, and catching his breath for words that had to push their way up through the tightening constriction in his chest. "You know, for a while I believed in it. I wanted so much to believe in it. I wanted to be a part of what you are and never leave the desert. But it's over now. I realize that. I have woken up, as from in a dream within a dream."

Relban regarded him grimly with a strange and begrudging countenance. "You did not know him, nor could you, as I did through the long years. He led a charmed life. He was the greatest leader among the seven tribes, until the day of your arrival. Against my wishes, he welcomed you with blood. And with blood he has paid. *You* were the harbinger of his doom, *Astari*, but he never told you that."

"What!?"

The Rhükon warrior sighed bitterly and spat down on the black rags in disgust. "Don't look so shocked. He forbade any of us from ever making mention of it. The accursed prophecy that foretold your

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coming also warned of Kanär's demise. The Dark One could not be taken without a significant life price being paid and he knew it. But it should have been you."

Martin could scarcely believe what he was hearing.

The shock of it reflected in his eyes and in the words that fell from his leaden tongue. "Then...along with your prophecy, I must likewise be held accursed in your world. Everyone I learn to care for here is destined to die, all as a result of me."

Relban simply nodded at Martin's stark assessment. "I am now the leader of my people. I will not lie and say that I like you, *Astari*, but I do believe in what you say. The truth is, I will be glad to see you go. Unlike Kanär, I have no trust in those who try to hide behind prophecy, or the efficacy of unnatural magicks."

Relban paused to wipe Kanär's blade on his robe.

"The Elran were right—the return of any *Astari* is an ill-favored omen. You are not one of us and you never will be. You are wise to finally recognize this. The blood bond is broken and I do not choose to renew it. You are free to leave. Go back to your own realm and take your troubles with you."

"I...I had no idea..."

Relban cleared his throat and relented a little when he saw the stricken, crushed look his words had wrought. "If it means anything to you, I will freely acknowledge that Kanär's bravery alone would have been insufficient to defeat this foe without your sorcery."

He pointed with Kanär's sword. "We have discovered that the main tent city of the Gurushhi lies yonder. I have set scouts to watch over it closely and sent word back to our main force to join us here as quickly as possible. I intend to finish what you and Kanär have started."

Martin stood just a little bit straighter. "I'm...I'm very glad to hear it."

Relban glanced at the shimmering tower with distaste and shook his head. "I have made the long crossing over twenty times, *Astari*. Never before have I seen such a thing in these parts as this eldritch edifice. It is plain that no man living could have designed or built it. Therefore, I warn you, such enchantments are best avoided. Take my

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advice. Let it slip back into the void undisturbed, from whence it came. There is nothing more to say. I must leave now.”

“I understand,” said Martin quietly, feeling emptier inside than he could ever have imagined. He forced himself to go on. “However, this is the *Dradhinnon* tower I seek. I cannot return until I pass within. I also have unfinished business in Naralune. Somehow, I will find a way.”

He hesitated a second before continuing. “I for one would not have us part on bad terms, Relban. And so, I wish you all the best in your endeavors. I’m sure you’ll prove yourself a worthy and capable leader. May the two suns shine always upon the swords of the Rhükon!”

Martin turned to walk back towards the tower and then looked at Relban one final time. “Oh yes... there is something else I should mention. Kanär’s last words were that he would live on in song, songs made to record the deeds of this day. Is that true?”

The swarthy warlord allowed the faintest of austere smiles to crease his worn face, while other warriors gathered silently to carry Kanär’s body away, placed reverently on an animal hide stretcher. “You will be included in those songs, *Astari*. It is beyond my power to stop it. Neither of you shall be forgotten. In this way, your blood bond endures.”

The baldheaded man swept his hooded eyes across the field of recent carnage. “This land we will watch until the last *Groth* has been hunted down. Until the last Gurushhi head is mounted upon a pole to rot while we prosper. *Should* you return from this tower—and I would not find sufficient reason to step within, not for all the jewels in Naqlaren—I will leave orders that you are to be provided with a guide, a *Cranoen*, and sufficient provisions to enable you to complete your journey to Naralune.”

“For that, I and the progeny of my unborn sons thank you,” recited Martin solemnly, replying correctly with one of the more traditional tribal responses. Relban nodded curtly and then marched away, joining up with the more slowly moving honor guard that was taking the fallen Rhükon leader back to the main caravan.

Martin turned to face the glimmering spire.

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He noticed with a chill shiver that the lower parts of it were beginning to discolor rapidly, like the lethal spread of some metastasizing disease. All around, the crystalline surface was starting to buckle and crack, resembling sores on a darkly bruised, necrotic skin. Was it a trick of his tired eyes or did the tower also seem to be fading even as he looked at it?

He had better find a way in and soon.

Easier said than done, however. The tower had no door. He remembered Keresel telling him that the *Dradhinnon* were normally invisible to the world of the living. That might explain part of it. But what evil had the *Narsh-krar* caused to injure the aerie, that the veils of the unseen could no longer hide it?

Martin sat down despondently on a clump of unbloodied grass growing thickly in the sandy soil. The cavalry had shown up just a tad too late, that was for sure. So, did this assault form part of a generalized plan, or was there something more specific at work?

He still had no idea what his own appearance portended on the grand scale of events. He remembered his earlier conviction that matters were building swiftly to a climax. And here he was, stuck doing nothing.

And then he laughed, a little self-consciously. He'd just spent nearly six months trekking across the desert and he was deriding himself for doing nothing—clearly he needed to review his perspective on that.

Martin tore strips from his robe to bind his burned hand. His whole right arm still felt numb. He found himself nodding out of a doze and took a moment to gaze back across the vastness of the desert plain he had crossed earlier in the day. He thought he could still see faint silhouettes moving against the heat washed backdrop of the horizon, where the last of Relban's men were disappearing into the dunes.

He looked up, to where the twin suns were falling serenely into a succession of orange-pink clouds in a westering sky. It was a rare moment of beauty and peace, in stark contrast to all he had been through.

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Martin shook his head, got up, and walked around the massive base of the tower, in a stunned frame of mind. He was trying hard to assimilate the events of the past several hours, especially the last couple. The shock of it was almost too much to bear. He wondered, for the first time in a long time, how long his real body had been asleep, back in the isolation chamber on Earth. It all seemed so distant now, in time as well as in space.

He walked around for a second time, just in case he was missing something. There was definitely no doorway or any other visible means of access.

What the hell was he supposed to do?

He couldn't even rely on his *Sorlell* staff—it was gone, along with everything else that had been a part of his life these past several months.

Martin felt utterly lost and alone.

While the storm clouds above had almost entirely dissipated, evening was drawing on fast. Within another hour, it would be totally dark. What about the unknown words he had shouted out earlier? Anything was worth a try at this point. Could he even remember them? He was trying his best to recall what he had said, when a new phrase entered his mind.

Anaray alumon.

Wherever these strange words were coming from was a mystery he would be very happy to resolve. Thank God this isn't happening to me on Earth, he thought. They'd all think I'm crazy. That made him laugh again, as though any of the rest of it wouldn't already have him declared delusional, if he tried to get anyone other than Victoria, or possibly Wolf or Claudia, to take him seriously.

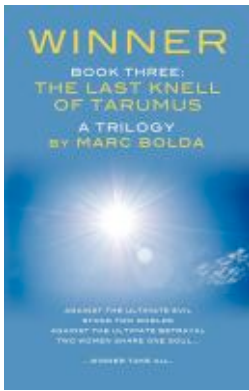
He tried saying the words out aloud.

Immediately a shimmering doorway appeared in one of the last unblemished sections of the tower wall. The rest of the spire seemed to grow dimmer, like it was fading into nothing, and Martin decided there was no point in delaying the inevitable.

He walked in.

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Everything grew dark and he stood absolutely still, feeling for a moment a sensation like a strong wind passing through his body and then it was gone.



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WINNER – BOOK THREE

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