

# The Hidden City

Book Three of The Tamuli



David Eddings

DAVID

**EDDINGS**

**THE HIDDEN CITY**

*The Tamuli Book Three*



HarperCollinsPublishers

for his enthusiasm and his technical advice -  
and for keeping our favorite author (and wife) alive

AND FOR NANCY GRAY, R.N.

who takes care of everybody else,  
and neglects to take care of herself.

Shape up, Nancy.





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# Prologue

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Professor Itagne of the Foreign Affairs Department of the University of Matherion sat on the platform reviewing his notes. It was early in the evening of a fine spring day, and the windows of the auditorium where the faculty of the college of Political Science had gathered were open to admit the smell of flowers and grass and the faintly distracting sound of bird-song.

Professor Emeritus Gintana of the International Trade Department stood at the lectern droning on interminably about twenty-seventh century tariff regulations. Gintana was a wispy, white-haired, and slightly vague academic customarily referred to as ‘that dear old man’. Itagne was not really listening to him.

This was not going to go well, he concluded wryly, crumpling up and discarding yet another sheet of notes. Word of his subject had been broadcast across the campus, and academics from as far away as Applied Mathematics and Contemporary Alchemy packed the hall, their eyes bright with anticipation. The entire faculty of the Contemporary History Department filled the front rows, their black academic robes making them look like a flock of crows. Contemporary History was here in force to ensure all the fireworks anyone could hope for.

Itagne idly considered a feigned collapse. How in the name of God – any God – was he going to get through the next hour without making a total ass of himself? He had all the facts of course, but what rational man would *believe* the facts? A straightforward account of what had really happened during the recent turmoil would sound like the ravings of a lunatic. If he stuck to straight truth, the hacks from Contemporary History would not have to say a word. He could destroy his own reputation with no help from them at all.

Itagne took one more brief glance at his carefully prepared notes. Then he bleakly folded them and thrust them back into the voluminous sleeve of his academic robe. What was going to happen here tonight would more closely resemble a tavern brawl than reasoned discourse. Contemporary History had obviously showed up to shout him down. Itagne squared his shoulders. Well, if they wanted a fight, he’d give them one.

A breeze had come up. The curtains at the tall windows rustled and billowed, and the golden tongues of flame flickering in the oil lamps wavered and danced. It was a beautiful spring evening – everywhere but here inside this auditorium.

There was a polite spattering of applause, and old professor Gintana, flustered and confused by this acknowledgement of his existence, bowed awkwardly, clutched his notes in both hands, and tottered back to his seat. Then the Dean of the College of Political Science rose to announce the evening’s main event. ‘Colleagues,’ he began, ‘before Professor Itagne favors us with his remarks, I would like to take this opportunity to introduce some visitors of note. I’m sure you will all join with me in welcoming Patriarch Emban, First Secretary of the Church of Chyrellos, Sir Bevier, the Cyrinic Knight from Arcium and Sir Ulath of the Genidia Order located in Thalesia.’

There was more polite applause as Itagne hurried across the platform to greet his Elene friends. ‘Thank God you’re here,’ he said fervently. ‘The whole Contemporary History Department’s turned out – except for the few who are probably outside boiling the tar and



bringing up bags of feathers.’

‘You didn’t think your brother was going to hang you out to dry, did you, Itagne?’ Emban smiled. ‘He thought you might get lonesome here, so he sent us to keep you company.’

Itagne felt better as he returned to his seat. If nothing else, Bevier and Ulath could head off any *physical* attacks.

‘And now, colleagues and distinguished guests,’ the Dean continued, ‘Professor Itagne of the Foreign Affairs Department will respond to a recent paper published by the Department of Contemporary History under the title, “The Cyrga Affair: An Examination of the Recent Crisis”. Professor Itagne.’

Itagne rose, strode purposefully to the lectern and assumed his most offensively civilized expression. ‘Dean Altus, distinguished colleagues, faculty wives, honored guests-’ He paused. ‘Did I leave anybody out?’

There was a titter of nervous laughter. Tension was high in the hall. ‘I’m particularly pleased to see so many of our colleagues from Contemporary History here with us this evening,’ Itagne continued, throwing the first punch. ‘Since I’ll be discussing something near and dear to their hearts, it’s much better that they’re present to hear what I say with their own ears rather than being forced to rely on garbled second-hand accounts.’ He smiled benignly down at the scowling hacks in the front row. ‘Can you hear me, gentlemen?’ he asked. ‘Am I going too fast for any of you?’

‘This is outrageous!’ a portly, sweating professor protested loudly.

‘It’s going to get worse, Quinsal,’ Itagne told him. ‘If the truth bothers you, you’d better leave now.’ He looked out over the assemblage. ‘It’s been said that the quest for truth is the noblest occupation of man, but there be dragons lurking in the dark forests of ignorance. And the names of these dragons are “Incompetence” and “Political Bias” and “Deliberate Distortion” and “Sheer, Wrongheaded Stupidity”. Our gallant friends here in Contemporary History bravely sallied forth to do battle with these dragons in their recently published “Cyrga Affair”. It is with the deepest regret that I must inform you that the dragons won.’

There was more laughter, and dark scowls from the front row.

‘It’s never been any secret at this institution that the Contemporary History Department is a political entity rather than an academic one,’ Itagne continued. ‘It has been sponsored from its very inception by the Prime Minister, and its only reasons for existence have been to gloss over his blunders and to conceal as best they might his absolute incompetence. To be sure, Prime Minister Subat and his accomplice, Interior Minister Kol-ata, have never been interested in the truth, but *please*, gentlemen, this is a university. Shouldn’t we at least *pretend* to be telling the truth?’

‘Rubbish!’ a burly academic in the front row bellowed.

‘Yes,’ Itagne replied, holding up a yellow-bound copy of ‘The Cyrga Affair’, ‘I noticed that myself. But if you knew it was rubbish, Professor Pessalt, why did you publish it?’

The laughter in the hall was even louder this time, and it drowned out Pessalt’s spluttered attempt to answer.

‘Let us push on with this great work that we are in,’ Itagne suggested. ‘We all know Ponds Subat for the scheming incompetent he really is, but the only thing that most baffles me about your “Cyrga Affair” is its consistent attempt to elevate the Styric renegade Zalasta to near sainthood. How in the name of God could *anyone* – even someone as severely limited a

the Prime Minister – revere this scoundrel?’

‘How *dare* you speak so of the greatest man of this century?’ one of the hacks screamed at him.

‘If Zalasta’s the best this century can manage, colleague, I think we’re in deep trouble. But we digress. The crisis which Contemporary History chooses to call “The Cyrga Affair” has been brewing for several years.’

‘Yes,’ someone shouted with heavy sarcasm, ‘we noticed that!’

‘I’m so happy for you,’ Itagne murmured, drawing another loud laugh from the audience. To whom did our idiot Prime Minister turn for aid? To Zalasta, of course. And what was Zalasta’s answer to the crisis? He urged us to send for the Pandion Knight, Prince Sparhawk of Elenia. Why would the name of an Elene nobleman leap to Zalasta’s lips in answer to the question – almost before it was asked – *particularly* in view of the sorry record of the Elenes in their relations with the Styrics? To be sure, Prince Sparhawk’s exploits are legendary, but what was it about the man that made Zalasta pine so for his company? And why was it that Zalasta neglected to tell us that Sparhawk is Anakha, the instrument of the Bhelliom? Did the fact somehow slip his mind? Did he think that the spirit which creates whole universes was somehow irrelevant? I find no mention at all about Bhelliom in this recently published heap of bird-droppings. Did you omit the most momentous event of the past eon deliberately? Were you so caught up in trying to give your adored Pondia Subat credit for policy decisions he had no part in that you decided not to mention Bhelliom at all?’

‘Balderdash!’ a deep voice roared.

‘I’m pleased to meet you, Professor Balderdash. My name’s Itagne. It was good of you to introduce yourself. Thanks awfully, old boy.’

The laughter was tumultuous this time.

‘Fast on his feet, isn’t he?’ Itagne heard Ulath murmur to Bevier.

Itagne looked up. ‘Colleagues,’ he said, ‘I submit that it was *not* Prince Sparhawk that Zalasta so yearned for, but the Bhelliom. Bhelliom is the source of ultimate power, and Zalasta has been trying to get his hands on it for three centuries – for reasons too disgusting to mention. He has been willing to go to any lengths. He has betrayed his faith, his people, and his personal integrity – such as it was – to gain what the Trolls call “The Flower-Gem”.’

That tears it!’ the corpulent Quinsal declared, rising to his feet. ‘This man is mad! Now he’s talking about Trolls! This is an academic affair, Itagne, not the children’s hour. You’ve picked the wrong forum for fairytales and ghost stories.’

‘Why don’t you let me do this, Itagne?’ Ulath said, rising to his feet and coming to the podium. I can settle this question in just a moment or two.’

‘Feel free,’ Itagne said gratefully.

Ulath set one huge hand on each side of the lectern. ‘Professor Itagne has requested me to brief you gentlemen on a few matters,’ he said. I take it that you’re having some difficulties with the notion of Trolls.’

‘None at all, Sir Knight,’ Quinsal retorted. ‘Trolls are an Elene myth and nothing else. There’s no difficulty in that at all.’

‘What an amazing thing. I spent five years compiling a Trollish grammar. Are you saying that I was wasting my time?’

‘I think you’re as mad as Itagne is.’

‘Then you probably shouldn’t irritate me, should you? Particularly in view of the fact that I’m so much bigger than you are.’ Ulath squinted at the ceiling. ‘Logic tells us that no one can prove a negative. Are you sure you wouldn’t like to amend your statement?’

‘No, Sir Ulath. I’ll stand by what I just said. There’s no such thing as a Troll.’

‘Did you hear that, Bhlok?’ Ulath raised his voice slightly. ‘This fellow says that you don’t exist.’

There was a hideous roar in the corridor outside the auditorium, and the double doors at the rear splintered and crashed inward.

‘Stay calm!’ Bevier hissed as Itagne jumped. ‘It’s an illusion. Ulath’s amusing himself.’

‘Would you like to turn around and tell me what you see at the back of the hall, Quinsal?’ Ulath asked. ‘Exactly what would you call my friend Bhlok there?’

The creature hulking in the doorway was huge, and its bestial face was contorted with rage. It stretched its paws forth hungrily. ‘Who has said this, U-Lat?’ it demanded in a hideous voice. ‘I will cause hurt to it! I will rip it to pieces and eat it!’

‘Can that Troll actually speak Tamul?’ Itagne whispered.

‘Of course not,’ Bevier smiled. ‘Ulath’s getting carried away.’

The hideous apparition in the doorway continued to bellow horribly graphic descriptions of its plans for the faculty of the Contemporary History Department.

‘Were there any other questions about Trolls?’ Ulath asked mildly, but none of the assembled academics heard him over all the shouts, screams and the tipping over of chairs.

It took the better part of a quarter of an hour to restore order once Ulath had dismissed his illusion, and when Itagne reapproached the lectern, the entire audience was huddled closely together near the front of the auditorium. ‘I’m touched by your eagerness to hear my every word, gentlemen,’ Itagne smiled, ‘but I can speak loudly enough to be heard at the back of the hall, so you needn’t draw so close. I trust that the visit of Sir Ulath’s friend has cleared up the little misunderstanding about Trolls?’ He looked at Quinsal, who was still cowering on the floor, gibbering in terror. ‘Splendid,’ Itagne said. ‘Briefly then, Prince Sparhawk came to Tamuli. Elenes are sometimes a devious people, so Sparhawk’s wife, Queen Ehlana, proposed a state visit to Matherion and concealed her husband and his friends in her entourage. Upon their arrival, they almost immediately uncovered some facts which we had somehow overlooked. First, Emperor Sarabian actually has a mind; and second, the government led by Pondia Subat was in league with our enemies.’

‘Treason!’ a thin, balding professor shrieked, leaping to his feet.

‘Really, Dalash?’ Itagne asked. ‘Against whom?’

‘Why – uh -’ Dalash floundered.

‘You still don’t understand, do you gentlemen?’ Itagne asked the faculty of Contemporary History. ‘The previous government has been overthrown – by Emperor Sarabian himself. Tamuli is now an Elene-style monarchy, and Emperor Sarabian rules by decree. The previous government – and its Prime Minister – are no longer relevant.’

‘The Prime Minister cannot be removed from office!’ Dalash screamed. ‘He holds his position for life!’

‘Even if that were true, it suggests a rather simple solution to the problem, doesn’t it?’

‘You wouldn’t *dare!*’

‘Not me, old boy. That’s the Emperor’s decision. Don’t cross him, gentlemen. If you do,

he'll decorate the city gates with your heads. Let's press on here. I'd like to cover a bit more ground before our customary recess. It was the aborted coup-attempt that finally brought things to a head. Pondia Subat was a party to the entire conspiracy and he fully intended to stand around wringing his hands while the drunken mob murdered all of his political enemies, evidently including the Emperor himself. If Professor Dalash wants to scream "treason" he might take a look at that. We discovered much in the aftermath of that failed coup, not only concerning the treason of the Prime Minister, but of the Minister of the Interior as well. Most important, however, was the discovery that it had been *Zalasta* who had engineered the entire plot, *and* that he was secretly allied with Ekatas, High Priest of Cyrgon, the God of the supposedly extinct Cyrgai.

'At this point Prince Sparhawk had no choice but to retrieve Bhelliom from its hiding place and to send to Chyrellos for reinforcements. He enlisted other allies as well, not the least of which were the Delphae – who *do* in fact exist in all their glowing horror.'

'This is absurd!' Contemporary History's reigning bully-boy, the crude and muscular Professor Pessalt sneered. 'Are we supposed to believe this nonsense?'

'You've already seen a Troll this evening, Pessalt,' Itagne reminded him. 'Would you like a personal visitation by a Shining One as well? I can arrange it, if you'd like – but outside, please. We'd never get rid of the stink if you were dissolved into a puddle of slime right here in front of the platform.'

Dean Altus cleared his throat meaningfully.

'Yes sir,' Itagne assured him. 'I'll just be a few more minutes.' He turned back to the audience. 'Now then,' he continued quickly, 'since the subject of the Trolls has come up again, we might as well go into that and clear it away once and for all. As you've noticed, the Trolls are real. They were lured to Tamuli from their home range in northern Thalesia by Cyrgon, who posed as one of their Gods. The *real* Troll-Gods have been imprisoned for eons, and Prince Sparhawk offered them an exchange – their freedom in return for their aid. He then led a sizeable force to northern Atan, where the misguided Trolls had been stirring up turmoil in hopes of forcing the Atans to return to defend their homeland – which would have left us effectively defenseless, since the Atans comprise the bulk of our army. Sparhawk's move *seemed* to play right into the hands of our enemies, but when Cyrgon and Zalasta unleashed the Trolls, Sparhawk called forth their Gods to reclaim them. In desperation, Cyrgon reached back in time and produced a huge army of his Cyrgai. Then the Trolls, true to their nature, ate them.'

'You don't really expect us to swallow this, do you, Itagne?' Professor Sarafawn, Chairman of the Department of Contemporary History and brother-in-law of the Prime Minister, demanded scornfully.

'You might as well, Sarafawn,' Itagne told him. 'Your wife's brother isn't dictating official history any more. From now on, the Emperor wants us to give our students the plain, unvarnished truth. I'll be publishing a factual account in the next month or so. You'd better reserve a copy, Sarafawn, because you're going to be required to teach it to all your students in the future – assuming that you *have* a future at this institution. Next year's budget's going to be a little tight, I understand, so a number of departments will probably have to be dropped.' He paused. 'Are you any good with tools, Sarafawn? There's a very nice little vocational school at Jura, I hear. You'd just *love* Daconia.'

The Dean cleared his throat again, a bit more urgently this time.

‘Sorry, Dean Altus,’ Itagne apologized. ‘I’m running past time, gentlemen, so I’ll just briefly sum up one more development. Despite their crushing defeat, Cyrgon and Zalasta were by no means powerless. In a bold stroke, Zalasta’s natural son, one Scarpa, crept into the imperial compound and abducted Queen Ehlana, leaving behind a demand that Sparhawk give up the Bhelliom in exchange for the safe return of his wife.’

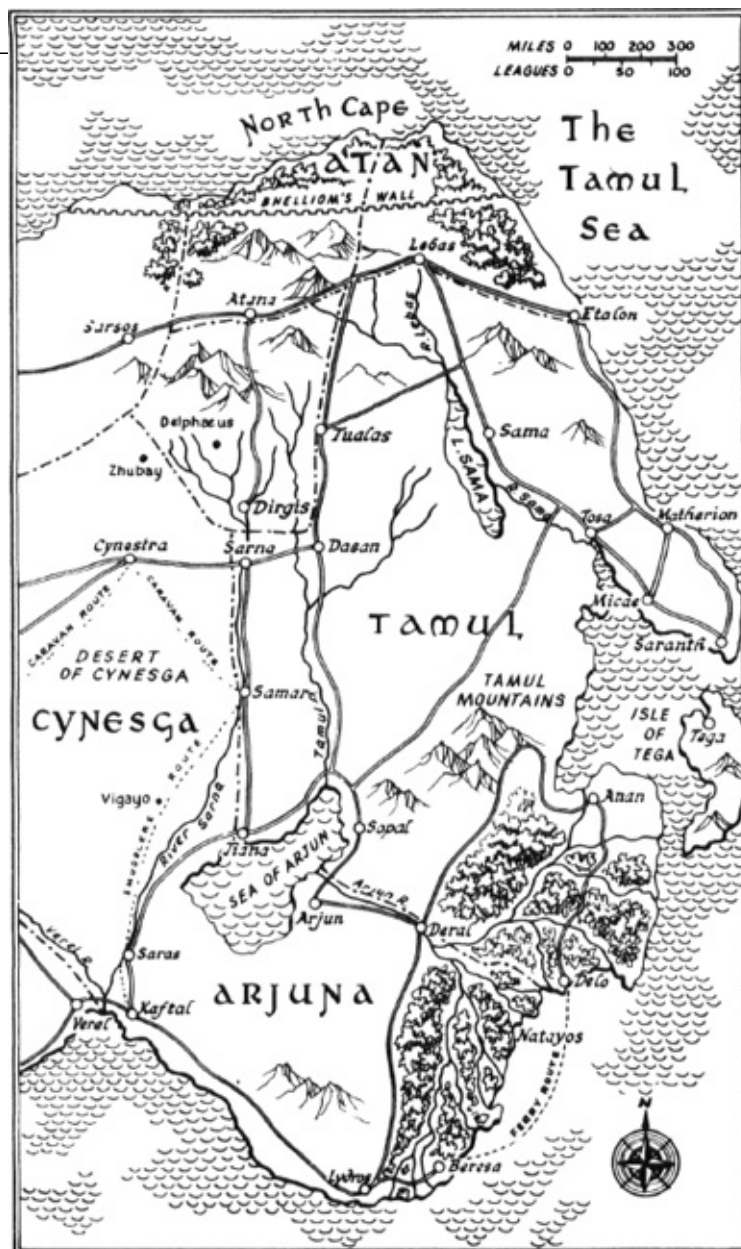
‘Following the recess Dean Altus has been so patiently awaiting, I will take up Prince Sparhawk’s reaction to this new development.’

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## PART ONE

### Berit





# Chapter 1

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A chill haze was rising from the meadow, and thin clouds had drifted in from the west to obscure the cold, brittle sky. There were no shadows, and the frozen ground was iron-hard and unyielding. Winter was inexorably tightening its grip on the North Cape.

Sparhawk's army, girt in steel and leather and thousands strong, was lined up along a broad front in the frost-covered grass of the meadow near the ruins of Tzada. Sir Berit sat his horse in the center of the bulky, armored Church Knights watching the ghastly feast taking place a few hundred yards to the front. Berit was a young and idealistic knight, and he was having some difficulty with the behavior of their new allies.

The screams were remote, mere rumors of agony, and those who were screaming were not actually people -not really. They were no more than shades, the scarce-remembered reflections of long-dead men. Besides, they were enemies – members of a cruel and savage race that worshipped an unspeakable God.

But they steamed. That was the part of the horror Sir Berit could not shrug off. Though he told himself that these Cyrgai were dead – phantoms raised by Cyrgon's magic – the fact that steam rose from their eviscerated bodies as the ravening Trolls fed on them brought all of Berit's defenses crashing down around his ears.

'Trouble?' Sparhawk asked sympathetically. Sparhawk's black armor was frost-touched, and his battered face was bleak.

Berit felt a sudden embarrassment. 'It's nothing, Sir Sparhawk,' he lied quickly. 'It's just -' He groped for a word.

'I know. I'm stumbling over that part myself. The Trolls aren't being deliberately cruel, you know. To them we're just food. They're only following their nature.'

That's part of the problem, Sparhawk. The notion of being eaten makes my blood run cold. 'Would it help if I said, "better them than us"?'

'Not very much.' Berit laughed weakly. 'Maybe I'm not cut out for this kind of work. Everybody else seems to be taking it in stride.'

'Nobody's taking it in stride, Berit. We all feel the same way about what's happening. Try to hold on. We've met these armies out of the past before. As soon as the Trolls kill the Cyrgai generals, the rest should vanish, and that'll put an end to it.' Sparhawk frowned. 'Let's go find Ulath,' he suggested. 'I just thought of something, and I want to ask him about it.'

'All right,' Berit agreed quickly. The two black-armored Pandions turned their horses and rode through the frosty grass along the front of the massed army.

They found Ulath, Tynian and Bevier a hundred yards or so down the line. 'I've got a question for you, Ulath,' Sparhawk said as he reined Faran in.

'For *me*? Oh, Sparhawk, you shouldn't have!' Ulath removed his conical helmet and absently polished the glossy black Ogre-horns on the sleeve of his green surcoat. 'What's the problem?'

'Every time we've come up against these antiques before, the dead all shriveled up after we killed the leaders. How are the Trolls going to react to that?'

'How should I know?'

'You're supposed to be the expert on Trolls.'



‘Be reasonable, Sparhawk. It’s never happened before. Nobody can predict what’s going to happen in a totally new situation.’

‘Make a guess,’ Sparhawk snapped irritably.

The two of them glared at each other.

‘Why badger Ulath about it, Sparhawk?’ Bevier suggested gently. ‘Why not just warn the Troll-Gods that it’s going to happen and let *them* deal with the problem?’

Sparhawk rubbed reflectively at the side of his face, his hand making a kind of sandy sound on his unshaven cheek. ‘Sorry, Ulath,’ he apologized. ‘The noise from the banquet hall out there’s distracting me.’

‘I know just how you feel,’ Ulath replied wryly. ‘I’m glad you brought it up, though. The Trolls won’t be satisfied with dried rations when there’s all this fresh meat no more than a quarter-mile away.’ He put his Ogre-horned helmet back on. ‘The Troll-Gods will honor their commitment to Aphrael, but I think we’d better warn them about this. I definitely want them to have a firm grip on their Trolls when supper turns stale. I’d hate to end up being the dessert course.’

‘Ehlana?’ Sephrenia gasped.

‘Keep your voice down!’ Aphrael muttered. She looked around. They were some distance from the rear of the army, but they were not alone. She reached out and touched Chiel’s bowed white neck, and Sephrenia’s palfrey obediently ambled off a little way from Kalten and Xanetia to crop at the frozen grass. ‘I can’t get too many details,’ the Child Goddess said. ‘Melidere’s been badly hurt, and Mirtai’s so enraged that they’ve had to chain her up.’

‘Who did it?’

‘I don’t *know*, Sephrenia! Nobody’s talking to Danae. All I can get is the word “hostage”. Somebody’s managed to get into the castle, seize Ehlana and Alean and spirit them out. Sarabian’s beside himself. He’s flooded the halls with guards, so Danae can’t get out of her room to find out what’s really happening.’

‘We must tell Sparhawk!’

‘Absolutely not! Sparhawk bursts into flames when Ehlana’s in danger. He’s got to get this army safely back to Matherion before we can let him catch on fire.’

‘But-’

‘No, Sephrenia. He’ll find out soon enough, but let’s get everyone to safety before he does. We’ve only got a week or so left until the sun goes down permanently and everything – and everyone – up here turns to solid ice.’

‘You’re probably right,’ Sephrenia conceded. She thought a moment, staring off at the frost-silvered forest beyond the meadow. ‘That word “hostage” explains everything, I think. Is there any way you can pinpoint your mother’s exact location?’

Aphrael shook her head. ‘Not without putting her in danger. If I start moving around and poking my nose into things, Cyrgon will feel me nudging at the edges of his scheme, and he might do something to Mother before he stops to think. Our main concern right now is keeping Sparhawk from going crazy when he finds out what’s happened.’ She suddenly gasped and her dark eyes went very wide.

‘What is it?’ Sephrenia asked in alarm. ‘What’s happening?’

‘I don’t *know!*’ Aphrael cried. ‘It’s something monstrous!’ She cast her eyes about wildly for

a moment and then steadied herself, her pale brow furrowing in concentration. Then her eyes narrowed in anger. ‘Somebody’s using one of the forbidden spells, Sephrenia,’ she said in a voice that was as hard as the frozen ground.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Absolutely. The very air stinks of it.’

Djarian the necromancer was a cadaverous-looking Styric with sunken eyes, a thin, almost skeletal frame, and a stale, mildewed odor about him. Like the other Styric captives, he was in chains and under the close watch of Church Knights well-versed in countering Styric spells.

A cold, oppressive twilight was settling over the encampment near the ruins of Tzada when Sparhawk and the others finally got around to questioning the prisoners. The Troll-Gods had taken their creatures firmly in hand when the feeding orgy had come suddenly to an end, and the Trolls were now gathered around a huge bonfire several miles out in the meadow holding what appeared to be religious observances of some sort.

‘Just go through the motions, Bevier,’ Sparhawk quietly advised the olive-skinned Cyrinic Knight as Djarian was dragged before them. ‘Keep asking him irrelevant questions until Xanetia signals that she’s picked him clean.’

Bevier nodded. I can crag it out for as long as you want, Sparhawk. Let’s get started.’

Sir Bevier’s gleaming white surcoat, made ruddy by the flickering firelight, gave him a decidedly ecclesiastical appearance, and he heightened that impression by prefacing his interrogation with a lengthy prayer. Then he got down to business.

Djarian replied to the questions tersely in a hollow voice that seemed almost to come echoing up out of a vault. Bevier appeared to take no note of the prisoner’s sullen behavior. His whole manner seemed excessively correct, even fussy, and he heightened that impression by wearing fingerless wool gloves such as scribes and scholars wear in cold weather. He doubled back frequently, rephrasing questions he had previously asked and then triumphantly pointing out inconsistencies in the prisoner’s replies.

The one exception to Djarian’s terse brevity was a sudden outburst of vituperation, a lengthy denunciation of Zalasta – and Cyrgon – for abandoning him here on this inhospitable field.

‘Bevier sounds exactly like a lawyer,’ Kalten muttered quietly to Sparhawk. ‘I *hate* lawyers.’

‘He’s doing it on purpose,’ Sparhawk replied. ‘Lawyers like to spring trick questions on people, and Djarian knows it. Bevier’s forcing him to think very hard about the things he’s supposed to conceal, and that’s all Xanetia really needs. We always seem to underestimate Bevier.’

‘It’s all that praying,’ Kalten said sagely. ‘It’s hard to take a man seriously when he’s praying all the time.’

‘We’re Knights of the Church, Kalten – members of religious orders.’

‘What’s that got to do with it?’

‘In his own mind he is more dead than alive,’ Xanetia reported later when they had gathered around one of the large fires the Atans had built to hold back the bitter chill. The Anarae’s face reflected the glow of the fire, as did her unbleached wool robe.

‘Were we right?’ Tynian asked her. ‘Is Cyrgon augmenting Djarian’s spells so that he can raise whole armies?’

‘He is,’ she replied.

‘Was that outburst against Zalasta genuine?’ Vanion asked her.

‘Indeed, my Lord. Djarian and his fellows are increasingly discontent with the leadership of Zalasta. They have all come to expect no true comradeship from their leader. There is no longer common cause among them, and each doth seek to wring best advantage to himself from their dubious alliance. Overlaying all is the secret desire of each to gain sole possession of Bhelliom.’

‘Dissension among your enemies is always good,’ Vanion noted, ‘but I don’t think we should discount the possibility that they’ll all fall in line again after what happened here today. Could you get anything specific about what they might try next, Anarae?’

‘Nay, Lord Vanion. They were in no wise prepared for what hath come to pass. One thing did stand out in the mind of this Djarian, however, and it doth perhaps pose some danger. The outcasts who surround Zalasta do all fear Cyzada of Esos, for he alone is versed in Zemoch magic, and he alone doth plunge his hand through that door to the nether world which Azash opened. Horrors beyond imagining lie within his reach. It is Djarian’s thought that since all their plans have thus far gone awry, Cyrgon in desperation might command Cyzada to use his unspeakable art to raise creatures of darkness to confront and confound us.’

Vanion nodded gravely.

‘How did Stragen’s plan affect them?’ Talen asked curiously.

‘They are discomfited out of all measure,’ Xanetia replied. ‘They did rely heavily on those who now are dead.’

‘Stragen will be happy to hear that. What were they going to do with all those spies and informers?’

‘Since they had no force capable of facing the Atans, Zalasta and his cohorts thought to use the hidden employees of the Ministry of the Interior to assassinate diverse Tamul officials in the subject kingdoms of the empire, hoping thereby to disrupt the governments.’

‘You might want to make a note of that, Sparhawk,’ Kalten said.

‘Oh?’

‘Emperor Sarabian had some qualms when he approved Stragen’s plan. He’ll probably feel much better when he finds out that all Stragen really did was beat our enemies to the well. They’d have killed our people if Stragen hadn’t killed theirs first.’

‘That’s very shaky moral ground, Kalten,’ Bevier said disapprovingly.

‘I know,’ Kalten admitted. ‘That’s why you have to run across the top of it so fast.’

The sky was cloudy the following morning, thick roiling clouds that streamed in from the west, all seethe and confusion. Because it was late autumn and they were far to the north, it seemed almost that the sun was rising in the south, turning the sky above Bhelliom’s escarpment a fiery orange and reaching feebly out with ruddy, low-lying light to paint the surging underbellies of the swift-scudding cloud with a brush of flame.

The campfires seemed wan and weak and very tiny against the overpowering chill here on the roof of the world, and the knights and their friends all wore fur cloaks and huddled close to the fires.

There were low rumbles off to the south, and flickers of pale, ghastly light.

Thunder?’ Kalten asked Ulath incredulously. ‘Isn’t it the wrong time of year for thunderstorms?’

‘It happens,’ Ulath shrugged. I was in a thunderstorm north of Heid once that touched off a blizzard. That’s a very unusual sort of experience.’

‘Whose turn is it to do the cooking?’ Kalten asked him absently.

‘Yours,’ Ulath replied promptly.

‘You’re not paying attention, Kalten,’ Tynian laughed. ‘You know better than to ask that question.’

Kalten grumbled and started to stir up the fire.

‘I think we’d better get back to the coast today, sparrowhawk,’ Vanion said gravely. The weather’s held off so far, but I don’t think we’ll be able to count on that much longer.’

Sparhawk nodded.

The thunder grew louder, and the fire-red clouds overhead blanched with shuddering flickers of lightning.

Then there was a sudden, rhythmic booming sound.

‘Is it another earthquake?’ Kring cried out in alarm.

‘No,’ Khalad replied. ‘It’s too regular. It sounds almost like somebody beating a very big drum.’ He stared at the top of Bhelliom’s wall. ‘What’s that?’ he asked, pointing.

It was like a hilltop rearing up out of the forest beyond the knife-like edge of the top of the cliff – very much like a hilltop, except that it was moving.

The sun was behind it, so they could not see any details, but as it rose higher and higher they could make out the fact that it was a kind of flattened dome with two pointed protuberances flaring out from either side like huge wings. And still it swelled upward. As they could see more of it, they realized that it was not a dome. It seemed to be some enormous, inverted triangle instead, wide at the top, pointed at the bottom and with those odd winglike protuberances jutting out from its sides. The pointed bottom seemed to be set on some massive column. Since the light was behind it, it was as black as night, and it rose and swelled like some vast darkness.

Then it stopped.

And then its eyes opened.

Like two thin, fiery gashes at first, the blazing eyes opened wider and wider, cruelly slanted like cats’ eyes and all ablaze with fire more incandescent than the sun itself. The imagination shuddered back from the realization of the enormity of the thing. What had appeared to be huge wings were the creature’s ears.

And then it opened its mouth and roared, and they knew that what they had heard before had not been thunder.

It roared again, and its fangs were flickers of lightning that dripped flame like blood.

‘Klæl!’ Aphrael shrieked.

And then, like two rounded, bulky mountains, the shoulders rose above the sharp line of the cliff, and, fanning out from the shoulders like black sails, two jointed, batlike wings.

‘What is it?’ Talen cried.

‘It’s Klæl!’ Aphrael shrieked again.

‘What’s a Klæl?’

‘Not *what*, you dolt! *Who!* Azash and the other Elder Gods cast him out! Some idiot has returned him!’

The enormity atop the escarpment continued to rise, revealing vast arms with many-fingered hands. The trunk was huge, and flashes of lightning seethed beneath its skin, illuminating ghastly details with their surging flickers.

And then that monstrous presence rose to its full height, towering eighty, a hundred feet above the top of the escarpment.

Sparhawk’s spirit shrivelled. How could they possibly – ? ‘Blue Rose!’ he said sharply. ‘Do something!’

‘There is no need, Anakha.’ Vanion’s usurped voice was very calm as Bhelliom once again spoke through his lips. ‘Klæl hath but momentarily escaped Cyrgon’s grasp. Cyrgon will not risk his creature in a direct confrontation with me.’

‘That thing belongs to Cyrgon?’

‘For the moment. In time that will change, and Cyrgon will belong to Klæl.’

‘What is it *doing*?’ Betuana cried.

The monstrosity atop the cliff had raised one huge fist and was striking at the ground with incandescent fire, hammering at the earth with lightning. The face of the escarpment shuddered and began to crack away, falling, tumbling, roaring down to smash into the forest at the foot of the cliff. More and more of the sheer face crumbled and sheared away and fell in a huge thundering landslide.

‘Klæl was ever uncertain of the strength of his wings,’ Bhelliom observed calmly. ‘He would come to join battle with me, but he fears the height of the wall. Thus he prepares a stair for himself.’

Then with a booming like that of the earthquake which had spawned it, a mile or more of the escarpment toppled ponderously outward and crashed into the forest, piling rubble higher and higher against the foot of the cliff.

The enormous being continued to savage the top of the cliff, spilling more and more rubble down to form a steep causeway reaching up and up to the top of the wall.

And then the thing called Klæl vanished, and a shrieking wind swept the face of the escarpment, whipping away the boiling clouds of dust the landslide had raised.

There was another sound as well. Sparhawk turned quickly. The Trolls had fallen to their faces, moaning in terror.

‘We’ve always known about him,’ Aphrael said pensively. ‘We used to frighten ourselves by telling stories about him. There’s a certain perverse pleasure in making one’s own flesh crawl. I don’t think I ever really admitted to myself that he actually existed.’

‘Exactly what is he?’ Bevier asked her.

‘Evil.’ She shrugged. ‘We’re supposed to be the essence of good – at least that’s what we tell ourselves. Klæl is the opposite. He’s our way of explaining the existence of evil. If we didn’t have Klæl, we’d have to accept the responsibility for evil ourselves, and we’re a little too fond of ourselves to do that.’

‘Then this Klæl is the King of Hell?’ Bevier asked.

‘Well, sort of. Hell isn’t a place, though. It’s a state of mind. The story has it that when the Elder Gods – Azash and the others – emerged, they found Klæl already here. They wanted th

world for themselves, and he was in their way. After several of them had tried individually to get rid of him and got themselves obliterated, they banded together and cast him out.'

'Where did he come from? Originally, I mean?' Bevier pressed. Bevier was very much caught up in first causes.

'How in the world should I know? I wasn't there. Ask Bhelliom.'

'I'm not so much interested in where this Klæl came from as I am in what kinds of things I can do,' Sparhawk said. He took Bhelliom out of the pouch at his waist. 'Blue Rose,' he said, 'do think we must talk concerning Klæl.'

'It might be well, Anakha,' the jewel responded, once again taking control of Vanion.

'Where did he – or it – originate?'

'Klæl did not originate, Anakha. Even as I, Klæl hath always been.'

'What is it – he?'

'Necessary. I would not offend thee, Anakha, but the necessity of Klæl is beyond thine ability to comprehend. The Child Goddess hath explained Klæl sufficiently -within her capabilities.'

'Well, *really!*' Aphrael spluttered.

A faint smile touched Vanion's lips. 'Be not wroth with me, Aphrael. I do love thee still – despite thy limitations. Thou art young, and age shall bring thee wisdom and understanding.'

This is not going well, Blue Rose,' Sephrenia warned the stone.

'Ah, well,' Bhelliom sighed. 'Let us then to work. Klæl *was*, in fact, cast out by the Elder Gods, as Aphrael hath told thee – although the spirit of Klæl, even as my spirit, doth linger in the very rocks of this world – as in all others which I have made. Moreover, what the Elder Gods could do, they could also undo, and the spell which hath returned Klæl was implicit in the spell which did cast Klæl out. Clearly, some mortal conversant with the spells of the Elder Gods hath reversed the spell of casting out, and Klæl hath returned.'

'Can he – or it – be destroyed?'

'It is not "he" of which we speak, nor do we speak of some "it". We speak of Klæl. But nay, Anakha, Klæl cannot be destroyed – no more than can I. Klæl is eternal.'

Sparhawk's heart sank. 'I think we're in trouble,' he muttered to his friends.

'The fault is in some measure mine. So caught up was I in the birth of this latest child of mine that mine attention did stray from needful duties. It is my wont to cast Klæl out at a certain point in the making of a new world. This particular child did so delight me, however that I delayed the casting out. Then it was that I did encounter the red dust which did imprison me, and the duty to cast Klæl out did devolve upon the Elder Gods. The casting-out was made imperfect by reason of *their* imperfection, and thus it was possible for Klæl to be returned.'

'By Cyrgon?' Sparhawk asked bleakly.

'The spell of casting out – and returning – is Styric. Cyrgon could not utter it.'

'Cyzada then,' Sephrenia guessed. 'He might very well have known the spell. I don't think he'd have used it willingly, though.'

'Cyrgon probably forced him to use it, little mother,' Kalten said. 'Things haven't been going very well for Cyrgon and Zalasta lately.'

'But to call Klæl!' Aphrael shuddered.

'Desperate people do desperate things,' Kalten shrugged. 'So do desperate Gods, I suppose.'

‘What do we do, Blue Rose?’ Sparhawk asked. ‘About Klæl, I mean to say?’

‘Thou canst do nothing, Anakha. Thou didst well when thou didst meet Azash, and doubtless will do well again in thy dispute with Cyrgon. Thou wouldst be powerless against Klæl, however.’

‘We’re doomed then.’ Sparhawk suddenly felt totally crushed.

‘Doomed? Of course thou art not doomed. Why art thou so easily downcast and made disconsolate, my friend? I did not make thee to confront Klæl. That is *my* duty. Klæl will trouble us in some measure, as is Klæl’s wont. Then, as is our custom, Klæl and I will meet.’

‘And thou wilt once more banish him?’

‘That is never certain, Anakha. I do assure thee, however, that I will strive to mine utmost to cast Klæl out – even as Klæl will strive to cast *me* out. The contest between us doth lie in the future, and as I have oft told thee, the future is concealed. I will approach the contest with confidence, however, for doubt doth weaken resolve, and timorous uncertainty doth weigh down the spirit. Battle should be joined with a light heart and joyous demeanor.’

‘You can be very sententious sometimes, World-Maker,’ Aphrael said with just a hint of spitefulness.

‘Be nice,’ Bhelliom chided mildly.

‘Anakha!’ It was Ghworg, the God of Kill. The huge presence came across the frosty meadow plowing a dark path through the silver-sheathed grass.

‘I will hear the words of Ghworg,’ Sparhawk replied.

‘Have *you* summoned Klæl? Is it your thought that Klæl will aid us in causing hurt to Cyrgon? It is not good if you have. Let Klæl go back.’

‘It was not my doing, Ghworg. Neither was it the Flower-Gem’s doing. It is our thought that it was Cyrgon who summoned Klæl to cause hurt to us.’

‘Can the Flower-Gem cause hurt to Klæl?’

‘That is not certain. The might of Klæl is even as the might of the Flower-Gem.’

The God of Kill squatted on the frozen turf, scratching at his shaggy face with one huge paw. ‘Cyrgon is as nothing, Anakha,’ he rumbled in an almost colloquial form of speech. ‘We can cause hurt to Cyrgon tomorrow – or some time by-and-by. We must cause hurt to Klæl now. We cannot wait for by-and-by.’

Sparhawk dropped to one knee on the frozen turf. ‘Your words are wise, Ghworg.’

Ghworg’s lips pulled back in a hideous approximation of a grin. ‘The word you use is not common among us, Anakha. If Khwaj said, “Ghworg is wise”, I would cause hurt to him.’

‘I did not say it to cause you anger, Ghworg.’

‘You are not a Troll, Anakha. You do not know our ways. We must cause hurt to Klæl so that he will go away. How can we do this?’

‘We cannot cause hurt to him. Only the Flower-Gem can make him go away.’

Ghworg smashed his fist against the frozen ground with a hideous snarl.

Sparhawk held up one hand. ‘Cyrgon has called Klæl,’ he said. ‘Klæl has joined Cyrgon to cause hurt to us. Let us cause hurt to Cyrgon now, not by-and-by. If we cause hurt to Cyrgon he will fear to aid Klæl when the Flower-Gem goes to cause hurt to Klæl and make him go away.’

Ghworg puzzled his way through that. ‘Your words are good, Anakha,’ he said finally. ‘Ho

might we best cause hurt to Cyrgon now?’

Sparhawk considered it. ‘The mind of Cyrgon is not like your mind, Ghworg, nor is it like mine. Our minds are direct. Cyrgon’s is guileful. He threw your children against our friends here in the lands of winter to make us come here to fight them. But your children were not his main force.

‘Cyrgon’s main force will come from the lands of the sun to attack our friends in the city that shines.’

‘I have seen that place. The Child Goddess spoke first with us there.’

Sparhawk frowned, trying to remember the details of Vanion’s map. ‘There are high places here and to the south,’ he said.

Ghworg nodded.

‘Then, even further south, the high places grow low and then they become flat.’

‘I see it,’ Ghworg said. ‘You describe it well, Anakha.’ That startled Sparhawk. Evidently Ghworg could visualize the entire continent.

‘In the middle of that flat place is another high place that the man-things call the Tamul Mountains.’

Ghworg nodded in agreement.

‘The main force of Cyrgon’s children will pass that high place to reach the city that shines. The high place will be cool, so your children will not suffer from the sun there.’

‘I see which way your thought goes, Anakha,’ Ghworg said. ‘We will take our children to that high place and wait there for Cyrgon’s children. Our children will not eat Aphrael’s children. They will eat Cyrgon’s children instead.’

‘That will cause hurt to Cyrgon and his servants, Ghworg.’

‘Then we will do it.’ Ghworg turned and pointed toward the landslide. ‘Our children will climb Klæl’s stairway. Then Ghnomb will make time stop. Our children will be in the high place before the sun goes to sleep this night.’ He stood up abruptly. ‘Good hunting,’ he growled, turned and went back to join his fellows and the still terrified Trolls.

‘We still have to proceed as if things were normal,’ Vanion told them as they gathered near the fire a couple of hours past noon. The sun, Sparhawk noted, was already going down. ‘Klæl can probably appear at any time and any place. We can’t plan for him – any more than we can plan for a blizzard or a hurricane. If you can’t plan for something, about the only thing you can do is take a few precautions and then ignore it.’

‘Well spoken,’ Queen Betuana approved. Betuana and Vanion were getting along well.

‘What do we do then, friend Vanion?’ Tikume asked.

‘We’re soldiers, friend Tikume,’ Vanion replied. ‘We do what soldiers do. We get ready to fight armies, not Gods. Scarpa’s coming up out of the jungles of Arjuna, and I’d expect another thrust to come out of Cynesga. The Trolls will probably hamper Scarpa, but they can only move out a short way from those mountains in southern Tamul Proper because of the climate. After the initial shock of encountering Trolls, Scarpa will probably try to go around them.’ Vanion consulted his map. ‘We’ll have to have forces in place to respond either to Scarpa or to an army coming out of Cynesga. I’d say that Samar would be the best location.’

‘Sarna,’ Betuana disagreed.

‘Both,’ Ulath countered. ‘Forces in Samar could cover everything from the southern edge of



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