

## *'The Fallen Herald'*

### Chapter 1

#### **Star fall**

The army of cheerful imps hammered at the inside of Thorn's head. They hammered, they marched and they sang bawdy songs.

Putting his head in his hands did not seem to help, so he opened his eyes instead. That proved to be a mistake. The imps started banging and crashing even harder, and appeared to have found bin lids and drums as well.

'I'll kill Alazla,' he mumbled. 'That green ale hits harder than Mum's skillet.'

'Still no reason to kick us out, though.' He cautiously rubbed his temples as he continued his mumbled monologue.

Recalling the previous night cracked a smile on his parched mouth, which also felt as if a small family of birds had nested in it. He chuckled as he remembered the nobles'

outrage when they had discovered the seriously uninvited Thorn and best buddy Alazla at their posh dance.

‘Plenty of ale and roast to spare – could have watered and fed twice that number’ he mumbled.

Thorn neglected to remind himself of the fact that they’d only really been discovered because they’d sneaked off with the host’s twin sisters. Naturally the young count had come looking for them. The tussle with his guards had been somewhat less than legendary, half-cut as they were, and they’d been forced to flee – in separate directions. Thorn had lost his own pursuers by diving into the woodland that had hosted his night’s sleep.

‘Decent of you, certainly,’ Thorn said, patting the tree limb that had unexpectedly hosted him for the night, ‘but seriously lacking in the comfy bed department.’

‘Wonder if Alazla got away too?’ he mused, rubbing more firmly at his temples. The imps appeared to have found something more interesting to do, he noted with interest; their cheerful thumping was becoming much subdued.

Feeling slightly encouraged, Thorn reached to his belt for his last skin of wine. The imps hooted in glee, but his hand grasped only his leather belt.

‘Oldoth’s shiny balls!’ he cursed as he recalled how the wineskin had been torn from him by one of the guards last night. ‘Nice vintage too.’

As the reluctant half-light of dawn crept across the sky, Thorn ruefully considered that he should perhaps make his way down from his nocturnal woodland perch. With the

family inn full to bursting with patrons staying for the Festival of Seventy-Seven Blessings, there would be a fine breakfast to be had from the inn's kitchens. His stomach growled in anticipation and the imps fled.

Resolved on consuming the mother of all fry-ups, Thorn steeled himself for the drop, swung his legs over the blue bough of the tree and dropped to the damp woodland grass.

Thorn stopped. Lank dark hair fell about his face and his brow furrowed in sluggish thought. 'Odd. Something... odd.'

Pushing back his overhanging and bedraggled locks, he looked up to stare at his impromptu bed. The tree was blue – and not only blue, but also crystal.

Thorn took a deep breath and looked down, focusing on his feet.

'This is not usual,' he muttered, 'not right at all – bloody imps!'

Perhaps they'd mixed their drinks too much or smoked some bad Jack's Folly. Likely the latter, he realised. Alazla was ever one to buy the cheap stuff.

Sighing, Thorn scrubbed a hand through his hair and tried again.

'Bugger. Blue tree... and still there,' he cursed.

Not only was the tree still there but it seemed very healthy to boot. Its crystal trunk exhibited the intricate swirls and whorls of bark, and the branches and crystal leaves sighed and whispered gently in the chill breeze. And if he was not mistaken, there was even a family of crows nested in it. Thorn swore at them. They took no notice.

Thorn reluctantly looked farther about him and saw that the crystal tree also had many crystal tree friends, in fact a whole wood of them, and they surrounded a small glade.

The blue-grey light of dawn was mixed with starlight from the retreating stars and it set the crystal trees to a gentle shimmer. If he weren't hung over, Thorn would have been enchanted.

Soft, luminescent green light pulsed gently upward from crystal roots, through trunks into the reaching branches and into the shimmering tips of every crystal leaf. As a strong wind stirred the leaves, they rang, shimmering like a thousand tiny silver bells.

The tranquillity of the chimes soothed the ache in Thorn's head, and he stood for a moment, allowing it to wash over him. Oddly, he felt his languidness lift from him like a cloak, as if it had never been. He no longer felt either hungry or thirsty.

Astonished, he opened his eyes.

'Now that's a strange thing, and no mistake,' he started, and trailed off.

There were figures in the glade. They seemed translucent, ebbing, almost ethereal.

He was so startled that the music slipped from his head and the figures vanished.

Perplexed, Thorn stared at the glade.

'Okay. I'm getting that I'm not drunk any more.' He stood on one leg. 'Yup, balance okay.' He felt around his head, pushing and poking. 'No bumps on the noggin either. So that means...'

As he so often did when thinking, he began to chew his lower lip. With his hunger and thirst apparently slaked, his most urgent cravings had vanished. Thorn knew with

the certainty he always felt before he landed in deep trouble that he should probably leave. He also knew that he wasn't going to. He'd always had a talent for finding trouble, although this time his partner in crime Alazla wasn't there to rescue him.

'No helping it then. Let it never be said that good common sense ever ruled what I did!'

Resolved, Thorn took a deep breath, closed his eyes and concentrated again, seeking to find the crystal music. As soon as his eyes closed it was there, in the darkness of his mind, and his awareness was whisked away like a leaf riding a stream.

The pace of the chimes rose quickly, becoming faster, until they raged within his mind, no longer a stream but now rapids across which he fell and tumbled.

Thorn snapped his eyes open.

Dozens of figures danced and spun in the glade. Without exception they were tall and supple, flitting with willowy grace to the chiming beat from the trees. Gossamer-thin dresses and gowns covered skins of copper, gold and bronze, that burned with an inner radiance. As they danced, sparkling motes of light span into the air about them.

The festivities of the night before were all but forgotten and Thorn's mind wallowed in stupor, churning, trying to make sense of what he saw. He'd never seen, or even imagined, creatures like these, and he scrambled frantically, trying to make sense of it. Briefly he looked away, not entirely trusting his tired eyes, but when he returned his gaze, the ethereal figures still danced and swirled like dozens of golden fireflies.

Even though he knew he was bright, there were few things that Thorn actually liked about himself. One of the qualities that he actually fostered, though, but which also so often led to his ridicule, was his passion for the study of ancient lore, and it was this knowledge that finally delivered his answer, but he could scarcely find it in himself to believe it. These creatures could only be Randaerren, he realised. To say that they were fiction or myth was understatement. In religious myth, Randaerren were highest servants and caretakers to the Great Wyrms, dragons, who in themselves were but legend. The same dragons who, legend told, had fought with the dragongod against the younger gods of human-kind.

Chilled, Thorn slipped back behind the bole of his tree. All thoughts of flight had now wholly left his mind. Astonishment and fear warred with his thirst for knowledge.

The spinning Randaerren slowed and parted, forming a row between them towards a large crystal rock that sparkled green in the half-light. Wide oval eyes settled expectantly upon the rock.

Slowly, a single Randaerren maiden stepped forth from the throng, walking between her parting brethren towards the rock. Thorn was awestruck by her alien beauty.

Proud cheekbones cast shadows across a skin of sullen gold, as her oval violet eyes fixed upon the rock. She swayed with an almost impossible sensuality, her golden feet not even seeming to touch the lush grass.

Such alien beauty left Thorn feeling cold, even though he was drawn to her in an almost painful way. He felt somehow unworthy even to rest his heated gaze upon her.

The maiden climbed gracefully atop the rock, its green hue lending an odd, sinister cast to her beautiful features. She raised willowy arms and turned her face towards the sparkling stars and skies, crying out alien words in a rich musical voice.

Silence dropped across the glade like a shroud. The Randaerren did not move, and gazed in beatific expectation upon the fading stars.

Thorn too searched the heavens until his gaze fell at last upon a star that he'd never seen before; it smouldered a sullen red. His mind raced across maps of the heavenly constellations and he still failed to place it. A light dropped out from the red star and, hurtled across the dawning sky like a fiery comet, its tail a streaking banner. The humble hue of the other stars fled before it, until it became the sole light in the sky.

Thorn's attention, like that of the Randaerren, was fixed in unerring attention as the comet thundered deadly straight from the heavens towards the glade. The glade became immolated in its fiery red light.

The Randaerren's gaze never wavered as the molten mass raced ever closer.

Determined not to look away, Thorn was finally forced to shield his eyes as tears streamed down his face.

The comet streaked down with impossible speed towards the glade, the maiden apparently its target, though she did not move. Thorn wanted to cry out to her, but knew that he'd never be heard over the deafening roar. With certainty he knew too that the impact would immolate not only her delicate form but himself too, and most of the surrounding forest. There'd be nothing left of him even to send to the sky god. Thorn knew this and still he didn't move. The certainty that he was witnessing

something momentous drew him, like a moth drawn to the enchanting lure and yet deadly embrace of the candle flame.

The comet was vast now and blotted out the entire dawn sky. Lava boiled across its surface. Tears evaporated in tiny moist wisps from his face as it loomed over the maiden like a mountain, her face upturned and calm beneath its cosmic fiery rage.

Thorn clutched the bole of the tree, bracing himself for its terrible impact. Then just as it seemed that the comet must strike and bury the maiden's body deep in the bowels of the earth, scattering the Randaerren like so many autumnal leaves, the comet simply shattered, raining downing in shimmering bursts of gold, russet and bronze.

The raining sparks lit the wide, saucer-like eyes of the Randaerren, where they were captured as glowing embers. Any resemblance to humanity fled with the feral and alien cast it lent them.

As the raining sparks faded, accompanied by the light within the Randaerren eyes, darkness fall upon the glade. Whether it was owing to the bright glory of the comet Thorn was not sure, but the dark seemed unnaturally deep. He was aware of the rasp of his own breath.

Thorn sought for something on which to focus within the darkness. The raging glow of the comet hung across his vision as his eyes struggled to adjust, but as the moments passed he became able to make out the forms of the Randaerren at the edges of the glade, where they were frozen like statues. Of the maiden, he could see nothing.

Thorn could see nothing in the very centre of the glade; it was as if it had been swallowed into a dark hole in the night. Concentrating harder, he suddenly understood

that he could see nothing, because something obstructed his view. The light in the glade actually seemed to warp in towards that centre, where it was swallowed.

Thorn's stomach lurched into his throat as he began to drink in the scale of the creature that blocked and drew in the light from the heavens.

Feathered wing-tips swept beyond the treetops, fanning out from vast shoulders, human in appearance but unlike those of any mortal creature. Naked save for a breach cloth, his skin was of the deepest blue. The creature's physique was stupendous, muscles rippling across his torso. His presence and beauty were unearthly.

And then the creature stirred, looking down on the maiden, and as it did so the gargantuan wings momentarily eclipsed the moons. The earth groaned under his weight and crystal leaves chimed out as branches swayed.

Thorn suddenly understood that he was in the presence of an avatar; herald to one of the younger gods, of men. And here, that the avatar now faced the Randaerren, caretakers of the Great Wyrms and the most ancient enemies of the avatar.

Oddly, Thorn felt no terror as he waited for the blow that would destroy the Randaerren and scatter their flesh as ash on the wind. He knew that the blow must come; this creature summoned here to face these audacious but nonetheless ancient foes. Nothing but a Great Wurm could face an avatar. As deep as their craft might be, the fate of the Randaerren maiden and her kin was nevertheless certain.

The form of the avatar wavered, and his presence washed about the glade like a soft, summer night's breeze. The avatar slowly diminished in size, allowing light to flood into the glade, until the winged herald stood at no more than the size of a mortal man.

With the return of starlight to the glade, Thorn drank in the sight of the avatar. He swam in the beauty and divinity of the creature, in the skin of deepest blue, the feathered wings of purest white and the eyes: eyes that pierced the soul, eyes that now gazed at Thorn.

Thorn froze, his breath fixing in his throat as he hung in that unearthly gaze. He felt his soul laid bare, and it trembled. Beads of quivering sweat traced down his nose and his heart beat so hard he thought it would burst. Unbidden thoughts raced through his mind, his essence laid bare: thoughts from his past, dreams of his future, his failings and the selfishness of his own petty ambition. Why these thoughts? Why should they assail him as he hung there frozen, a rabbit caught in the hypnotic gaze of a stalking wolf, wanting to move, to flee and yet able only to watch death approach.

The Randaerren began to stir, seemingly sensing that something was wrong.

Thorn recognised the selfish regard of his own ambition. The unexpressed mockery of his parents' achievements. Their desire for him to take over the inn they ran and owned had been spurned by him; such menial work was beneath him. He'd always set his sights higher, and so very high, upon the heady ranks of Arcanum and the League of Mages. Even his attachment to Alazla was perhaps no more than self-preservation: Thorn's mind was strong but his body was weaker. Didn't he cast scorn on his friends for their lack of intellect?

And then those black eyes that spoke of a power so ancient and vast slid past him and back to the Randaerren.

Thorn clawed a rasping breath and wept at the sense of shame that lingered within him.

As the avatar's returned gaze swept over the Randaerren, they bowed low, as wheat before the storm. The avatar smiled, and with it starlight bloomed throughout the glade. As if taking that as their cue, the Randaerren began to sway and dance; the crystal music burst joyously forth from the trees once more.

The Randaerren maiden leaped from the rock and the avatar took her outstretched hand. The dance that began then was of a faster tempo and it centred about the heavenly creature.

The Randaerren spun about the avatar, like myriad rainbow planets orbiting a sun.

The avatar drew the porcelain-like maiden to him and, with a feline grace that belied his massive strength stepped into the swirling dance. The avatar led the dance and the Randaerren swirled in his wake.

The dance seemed to go on forever, and yet to Thorn, who drank in its every detail, it also seemed so short.

The dawn starlight eventually began to fade before the eager sun, and with it the crystal music also started to slow. The swirling Randaerren slowed to a halt about the avatar, who, with the maiden at his side, fixed his gaze upon the fading light of the stars, now finally surrendering their silvered dominion to the morning sunrise.

Hush descended on the glade and something deep within Thorn whispered in concern. Thorn pushed the feeling to one side, determined to remember the details of this immortal event for ever.

And yet Thorn could not seem to allay the gnawing concern in him. He noticed then that the glade had become slightly shadowed, in fact unnaturally so. And yet the avatar and the Randaerren, with their gaze fixed upon the fading stars, appeared not to notice. No, that was not quite right, he corrected: the maiden had noticed.

From where it came Thorn had no idea, but suddenly a blade was present in the hand of the Randaerren maiden and a twisted smile broke across her golden face. From Thorn's vantage point he recoiled at the dreadful malice in that smile, even as he physically felt a rotten taint washing from the blade. The twin points of the dagger writhed and twisted in her hand like venomous serpents and her figure.

The maiden began to raise her hand and her awful intent struck Thorn like a blow.

The gaze of the avatar remained fixed upon the fading stars.

The dagger was framed for a terrible moment between the avatar's white wings and then the maiden plunged it downward with an awful strength. The black blade struck the avatar in the spine, plunging in to the hilt. The divine creature staggered forward with a cry of agony and surprise that pierced Thorn to the heart. His cry blasted across the glade like a gale and the crystal trees sang with the power of it, shattering and cracking, boughs crashing to the earth.

Randaerren began to scream as they saw what had happened, and many were physically blown to the ground with the force of the avatar's cry, their gossamer gowns torn from their bodies and cast rag-like into the gale.

The avatar staggered forward, clutching vainly at the writhing and rotten blade protruding from between its ivory wings. Dark blood ran down the muscles of its back, staining its wing feathers a dreadful scarlet and pooling on the grass of the glade. Turning, the avatar looked down on the maiden. Its twisted face was terrifying and the sinews in its mighty arms bulged.

Closing his eyes, Thorn waited for the certain blow and scream that would signal the end of the maiden's life. But it did not come.

When Thorn opened his eyes he seemed to look straight into those of the avatar and his immortal soul cried out in sorrow. He saw in those eyes a depthless compassion and an intense love for all life.

And the maiden remained alive, though she cowered prostrate before the dying avatar.

Slowly the light in those depthless eyes began to fade as the avatar staggered forward and fell to his knees, now making no attempt to remove the pulsing black dagger from his back. With an arm that could fell trees he reached out and stroked the hair of the cowering Randaerren maiden, sparkling tears running down his now calm face.

And then his wings seemed to fold in upon themselves and his entire form began to crumple slowly inward, hand still resting on the maiden's head, until he was gone.

The form of the avatar was but sparkling motes of light on the dawn breeze, which softly began to settle upon the dew-damp grass.

There was no sound. The wind whispered no more. The animals of the forest were still. The trees had ceased their crystalline wail. Mortal and immortal worlds were caught between time, stunned with horror and disbelief.

Randaerren stood still as statues, frozen in the early morning mist, ebbing slowly from sight.

The maiden stood alone for a moment as the avatar's dust settled on the grass at her feet and then she too vanished, folded into the embracing shadows.

Seconds passed, each like an hour, as Thorn struggled to draw breath through his terror.

'By all the nine gods. What have I just witnessed?' Thorn croaked. 'Must leave. Need to get out of here.' 'No telling who's going to come by next. Some other immortal or legendary type, knowing my luck. I'll need Faed's own skill with shadows to get out of here with my skin intact.'

If the god of deepest shadows heard Thorn's muttered reference to him, he certainly didn't cloak him in darkness or whisk him out of there unseen.

He made to turn and leave this place far behind him, but a dull, nagging voice, within his sub-conscious told him that he must tell someone what he'd seen, but it warred with his ever present instinct for self-preservation.

'No way to be sure whether any of the Randaerren saw me,' he muttered, chewing his lip again. 'With crystal trees and all, it's not your everyday forest, and likely to be sacred. So if I'm not tracked down by the magic types and turned into something

unnatural, the guards will still find me and likely lock me up for trespassing. Bugger. But what if I tell the truth? No one will believe me for sure.'

He blew into his hands to test his breath and could not help but recoil. 'Great, I smell like a dwarven brewery. They'll think it was drunken imaginings for sure!'

One of Thorn's talents had always been to think quickly under pressure. It was one of the reasons why he'd always excelled at college exams. This proved no exception.

'Evidence, that's what I need. Keep your trap shut, Thorn, and hopefully hear nothing. But, if someone comes knocking on your door' (he winced visibly at what his mother would say) 'I'll show them the evidence. Yup, that's the way!'

That decided, Thorn turned back to face the silent glade. Fragments of crystal trees lay scattered on the ground, their trunks shattered as if struck by blasts of lightning. Dust glittered sadly upon the grass in the soft dawn light. Heart in his throat, Thorn stepped cautiously into the clearing.

'Easy now, Thorn. Nothing about right now; quiet as a grave, in fact.' He winced at his choice of words and muttered a curse.

He let the breath out slowly when he realised that no terrible force had yet rent him limb from limb.

The grass was bedecked with tears of dew as he crept slowly towards the avatar's dust. Reaching it, he knelt down and looked upon the remnants of the fallen herald. Grief wrenched him then as the true enormity of the tragedy struck him. His throat clenched and tears fell from his eyes. Thorn suddenly wept in wrenching, unashamed gasps, mortal grieving for immortal.

Minutes passed as Thorn struggled to control his grief. He wiped at his tears, which continued to fall regardless.

‘Like it or not, Thorn, you need evidence if anyone’s ever to believe you,’ he whispered softly. ‘Be strong now. There’s no help for it.’

Reaching to his belt, he tugged loose a small pouch and emptied its contents onto the ground. Grimly Thorn scooped a little dust into the pouch; it was cold to the touch. Somehow he felt dirty having to do this. Thorn talked quietly to himself all the time, keeping up his courage.

Tying the pouch drawstrings, Thorn noticed his tears had been falling into the avatar’s dust. Where the tears had fallen tiny diamonds now lay in small wet craters.

‘Now that’s a strange thing and no mistake. There’s magic still at work here, not to mention the fact that that’s the first time for sure that my tears have been worth anything but the salt that’s in them!’

Amazed, Thorn reached down and gently picked up one of the diamonds. It seemed flawless, with a slight bluish cast that winked at him in the sluggish light of dawn. Several score more glimmered within their dusty bed.

‘You’re worth more than that inn my parents have worked their whole life to pay for,’ he said, shaking his head in amazement.

He paused only for a moment, though, before placing the diamond back amongst its fellows, where it continued to wink at him.

‘Would just seem wrong to take you, somehow. I think you just need to stay right there. Something needs to mark where that avatar met his end, after all’

Gathering himself, Thorn stood and attached the pouch to his belt. He rubbed his hands together to free them of the dust, idly noticing how the wetted dust clung tenaciously to them.

He left the glade in silence and didn’t look back.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Thorn**

Winged messengers fled from the Citadel of Storms. Aolandar, most blessed son of Oldoth, god of sun and storms, stood on battlements on restless smoke. His ancient eyes making out their airy forms, he watched the messengers rush away with impossible speed towards the greater cities across the face of Rune.

He then turned his attention back to the ebbing and coalescing shape before him, of Balthazar his second in command, and head of the divine house of Oldoth in Korth. Balthazars' spirit hung like a dark, brooding cloud over the battlements, where occasionally it took on the shape of a shifting face.

'I saw the blade fall, my beloved son' said Aolandar, his ancient voice heavy with sorrow. 'Oldoth delivered the vision to me. I see it every where I turn, I cannot escape it – that fell twisted blade and the scream of the dying Avatar. All of the gods now gaze upon this place, upon Rune.'

‘You mean our gods, the younger gods, sire?’ questioned Balthazar, the voice from the ebbing cloud was vast.

Aolandars golden shoulders slumped wearily. ‘I think not, my son. Can there be any other answer to this, dark though that answer may be? We had thought the war in heaven over. We believed that six thousand millennia past, when at last, gorGoroth the dragon god fell, we had won, if such a dreadful cost as the death of ninety one of our own gods, could even be called a victory.’

The dark cloud of Balthazars’ spirit seemed to hang its head. ‘You believe that gorGoroth has escaped from his bonds most beloved son? That he now seeks to wage a new war on humanity – a last war?’

‘Perhaps’ replied Aolandar, and there was steel in his voice again. ‘That, or his mate, the female dragon goddess, Ione’, has at last decided to enter this war.’

‘But why would she do that sire? Why now? The female dragons took no part in the last war. Had they done so, we would certainly have lost.’

‘I know not, Balthazar.....but we *must* have answers. Yet, for now, you must put those concerns aside.’

‘But which god did the fallen avatar serve?’ continued Balthazar regardless.

Aolandar crossed golden skinned arms on his muscled bare chest and fixed a grim stare upon the ebbing son. ‘Harken to me Balthazar. We do not know.... as yet, but you must focus, something else is of far greater concern!’

‘I do not understand sire.’ Balthazars’ face shifted in the winds that stirred the battlements of smoke on which Aolandar stood.

‘There was a witness!’ Lightning flickered around the citadel of storms, where it rode banks of dark clouds across a night sky.

‘What!?’ hissed Balthazar. ‘Who?’

Aolandar smiled, and for a moment, the shifting battlements flooded with sunlight.

‘The air spirits have given us a name and it is a most portentous one – Thorn, his name is Thorn. Find him and we may also find the answers that we seek. That task, Balthazar, I give to you.’

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The old trollish teacher was so venerable and diminutive that to Thorn’s eyes it seemed that he’d shrunk from the inside out, leaving bones too small for his skin. Barely able to peer out from watery eyes beneath folds of thick brown skin, he shuffled about the classroom, expanding on points with rangy arms that varied between wagging at pupils and helping him to knuckle across the floor.

Thorn knew that given the previous day’s events it was a major achievement for him to have made it to college at all. On returning home to his parents’ inn he had attempted to catch some sleep, but nightmares of twisted blades and screaming avatars had finally forced him from his bed. His parents had certainly been shocked to find him helping the head cook Janine with early morning chores in the kitchen. Recognising the enquiring look on his mother’s face, he had headed the questions off by then making his excuses and rushing off to college.

With the Festival of Seventy-Seven Blessings starting only the day before, college did not begin until midday, and Thorn had arrived so early that he'd had to spend four hours in the library before lessons began. The words of the textbook on the pantheon of the younger gods had not registered at all, and after trying to read the same page eight times he had given up and eventually sat alone with his harrowing thoughts.

Thorn found himself grateful for the comforting presence of his fellow pupils in the class. Oddly, it meant that he could go through his memories of yesterday without the same mind-churning terror that they evoked when he was alone. However, paying attention to the old trolls' ramblings concerning the events leading to the creation of the Southern Alliance, of which his native city of Korth was a part, was taking it several steps too far.

Thorn was unaware of the glances from his friend Alazla, who had noted his friend's withdrawn appearance and had several times during that class endeavoured to catch Thorn's attention. Unknown to Thorn, Alazla was also somewhat miffed that Thorn had all but ignored him that morning and not even enquired as to how Alazla had managed to extricate himself from the hospitality of the city guards after they'd gate-crashed the noble's party.

Thorn replayed the events of the previous day in his mind again, absently scratching at the palm of his right hand. In his mind's eye he saw the twisted dagger fall again and again and again, the dreadful malice in the eyes of the maiden and the avatar crumpling inwards. Though he was sure in himself, Thorn's mind recoiled from the terrible belief that the creature slain was an avatar, a herald to one of the nine younger gods. How could this be true, he wondered? Such beings were both divine and

immortal and so surely immune to death. And so, when logic concluded that it simply could not be true, he remembered how the beautiful winged creature, though impaled by that twisted and befouled blade, could still strike down the maiden with a single blow, instantly sundering the life from her frail form – and yet it had stayed its hand. With tragic and utter certainty Thorn knew that such dignity and forgiveness could only be divine.

What did such a dreadful thing portend, he wondered? It was believed that each god had only one herald. And to which god did this herald belong? Surely their reprisal would be absolute. Struggle though he might, he could conceive of no power capable of striking down an avatar, and certainly not one with a reason to do so.

And what did it mean for him, for Thorn? Such a thing could not go unnoticed, he knew. The divine orders must know, or would do so soon, he was sure. Did they know that he had seen it? Was the gaze of an angered god now resting on him? Sweat broke out, cold on his brow. He recalled the avatar's dark and depthless eyes boring into his. His innermost thoughts had been laid bare in that brief glance. The avatar had *known* Thorn was there.

Thorn's throat constricted in fear and he glanced down at where he now scratched at his hand. The palm was blue, as if it had been washed with a stain. He knew from his furious scrubbing with the dish brush earlier that the stain would not come off. His vision swam at the horror of it all. The blade, the dust, eyes boring, screams, blades and screams, screams. An angered god.

From a distance Thorn could hear his name. Echoes were all about him and he struggled to bring the class into focus. He fought to slow his gasping breath and

became aware that the old troll was standing by his desk, or rather his watery eyes were just looking over the top of it.

‘My, my, Thorn,’ clucked Master Fafner, sucking at his huge yellowed canines. ‘Seems to me that someone had far too much cider last night! You look decidedly unwell, young lad.’ Fafner ignored the jeers from the class at this revelation, as he wagged old curled claws in Thorn’s face. ‘I think you’d better go and get some fresh air, Thorn.’

Thorn could barely manage a nod as he got up from his desk, and the world tilted under his feet. Unable even to thank the old troll for his kindness, he lurched out of the class, barely aware of the laughter that followed him.

Strong hands eventually lifted Thorn to his feet from where he knelt retching in the college courtyard. Alazla’s rich voice swam through the haze. ‘You’re as cold as ice, Thorn.’

Thorn nodded, grateful for the calming presence of his best friend. His vision cleared gradually to reveal Alazla’s handsome face, his grin framed by a shock of blond hair.

‘You never could take your drink, you know.’

Thorn could only nod weakly, with a half-smile, as Alazla’s presence was taken away from him by a group of college girls who flitted around him like so many butterflies. Never one to be shy and turn down such attentions, Alazla began to entertain them with a ribald story of how he and Thorn had gatecrashed the noble’s party the previous night. Thorn had never been so lucky in his attentions from the fairer sex, nor had he been able to exude the sheer charm of his friend.

Growing more bored by the minute and becoming irritated despite himself at the endless laughter, Thorn eventually moved away, deciding to wait for Alazla at the college gates. The old iron gates were thrown wide and pupils frothed gleefully out, looking forward to another night of celebrations for the Festival of Seventy-Seven, when all things harvested were abundant.

Thorn lounged against the gatepost where it opened out onto the cobbled Square of Mahomet, named after the immortal scion of Lorethian, god of justice.

‘Guess I’ll just wait here, then,’ he muttered to himself. ‘Of course I could go and join in the conversation and enjoy being ignored by Alazla’s various girlfriends again. But, somehow I think I’ll forgo that and stand here pretending that I’ve got no friends.’

It was in fact not unusual for Thorn to recriminate himself for his shortcomings, but most especially for his lack of charm in conversing sensibly with the opposite sex.

Waiting for his friend, Thorn knew better than to expect greetings from many students. Brighter than most, although sociable, he was prone to darker introspective moments that drove many would-be friends away. Alazla, though, had proved immune, or just pig-headed regarding such moments, and usually dragged Thorn out whether he wanted to go or not. Quite why Alazla had decided to befriend Thorn so many cycles ago he wasn’t sure, but Thorn knew that he was immensely grateful for the gift of his friendship.

Thorn couldn’t help but enjoy himself occasionally by greeting some students anyway, calling the odd hello as they passed, knowing they’d ignore him.

‘Afternoon. How you doing? Good evening last night?’ All such jovialities were consistently ignored.

‘Must be something I said. Maybe I should change my underwear?’ he wondered half aloud. ‘Yes, that must be it. I’ll change my pants immediately when I get home.’

All such amusing anecdotes were knocked soundly out of Thorn’s head as he was slammed face first onto the cobblestones.

‘Shit, what the blazes?’ Thorn cursed.

Blood dripped from his lips onto the cobbles as he pushed himself onto his knees.

Suddenly a weight landed on his back, knocking the wind from his lungs with a terrible whoosh and driving him back down. Nose driven into the stone, Thorn gasped for breath and tried to move his head round, yet as he did so something slammed into the side of his face. The world began to tilt and spin, and again something struck the side of his face. Blood ran down Thorn’s face, the salty tang bitter upon his tongue. With a yank his head was wrenched back by the hair and he heard cruel laughter, then with a crunch someone drove his face down again into the unyielding stone.

Thorn’s world was a haze of blood, impotent anger and distant, echoing voices. He was vaguely aware of laughter and the dark smear of his blood on the cobbles, but it seemed oddly disconnected, as if it belonged to someone else.

As if at a great distance someone said, ‘Let him be.’ Other voices just cajoled. It was all so far away as to be almost meaningless. His hands clutched feebly at the cobbles

in an attempt to push himself up, but the weight; the mocking weight was just too much; he simply didn't have the strength.

Then suddenly the weight was gone; there were shouts followed by the sound of blows being struck. Moments later gentle hands lifted him firmly to his feet.

Gradually his eyes focused and Thorn peered into the concerned and undeniably handsome face of Alazla. Surprising even himself, Thorn managed a rather weak but bloody grin.

'You'd better let me set that,' Alazla said softly, looking askance at Thorn's face.

Thorn just nodded glumly as Alazla took hold of his nose and gave it a sharp twist.

There was a soft crunch, and more warm blood ran down Thorn's face. He teetered to keep his balance amidst the spinning.

'Can't have your good looks ruined during Seventy-Seven, can we?' quipped Alazla.

Unfortunately his humour had always been contagious: Thorn couldn't help but smile.

Almost at once he wished he hadn't, as pain shot from his nose.

'Don't you get tired of being a ruddy hero?' Thorn asked as he spat blood onto the cobbles.

Alazla showed no surprise at the caustic remark. 'Where would heroes be without some poor ordinary person to save, Thorn? We'd just be the same as everyone else!'

Thorn grinned, which was not a pretty sight. 'I guess I deserved that. Sorry. Oh, and thanks.'

Alazla clapped him on the back with a meaty paw. 'Always a pleasure!' He beamed as he said it.

Thorn was caught between wanting to throttle his stalwart companion and hugging him. Drawing a deep breath instead, he looked around and noticed that they'd drawn quite a crowd.

'We're fine,' Thorn said to the onlookers. 'Don't worry. No need to rush and help. Crisis over. Thanks for your help.'

Alazla pulled Thorn away at that point. 'Please try not to make any more enemies, Thorn. You've got quite enough to handle with Lorm and his gang taking out their woes on you. What is it they've got against you anyway?'

Thorn did not reply, preferring instead to dab at his nose.

Alazla, it seemed, had not finished, though. 'If you become half as good an innkeeper as you are at winding up Lorm and his mates then you can look forward to a very prosperous life, my friend!'

Thorn had decided at that point to feel sorry for himself, so he just nodded.

'Say now, I think we'd better get you home,' Alazla said kindly. Thorn nodded glumly, anticipating his mother's matronly reaction and his father's anger at his taking another beating. Inevitably they'd both be down the college again berating his tutors, which was actually significantly more mortifying than getting another thumping.

They walked home in awkward silence. The bustling streets of radiant Korth slipped by almost without notice, though citizens laughed and joked in anticipation of more festivities.

Thorn knew, of course, what Alazla was thinking; he was feeling sorry for his friend, wishing he could do more to help. Certainly at times it was all Thorn could do not to ask for that help or even indulge himself in a reservoir of self-pity and sorrow, a black pit of anger and self-recrimination that would sometimes threaten to overwhelm him. It was not even that he was ugly or for that matter stupid; in fact he was far from stupid, which in its own right would often draw recrimination. It was just that he seemed to draw unwanted attention and even hostility from life's disreputables. He simply couldn't seem to get away from it. He didn't look for it; it came to him and struck him in the small of the back when he least expected it. And what did he do about it? Nothing, absolutely nothing, and more to the point he actually could do nothing! He simply didn't have the physical strength or athleticism of many other students. So good old Thorn just had to get up and carry on as always, with a ready grin but tense for another kick in the face. One of these moons Alazla wouldn't be there to pick him up: Thorn had no idea what he'd do then. Now there was a sobering thought, he realised.

Looking up, a slight lump in his throat at the notion, Thorn realised that they had reached his parents' inn. The half-open shutters on the long wooden façade were thrown open to reveal the cheery welcoming glow of oil lamps. He really didn't feel like going in.

Suddenly he recalled that Alazla was still with him, and snapping momentarily out of his melancholy he regarded his stalwart friend. Judging by Alazla's darting but longing glances towards home, with those deep blue eyes into which many of the fairer sex had stared, he was obviously eager to be off and prepare for the evening, yet he made no attempt to leave. Again, Thorn wondered why Alazla hung around with him.

Thorn looked gratefully at his friend and even managed a weary but slightly battered grin. 'I owe you, yet again, Alazla!'

Alazla nodded, his normally cheerful face stern. 'You know, if things don't sort themselves out with Lorm and his buddies, I may just have to take a little more direct involvement.'

Thorn did not miss the way Alazla's meaty fists clenched when he said this, or the feral glitter in his eyes, rarely there, and only so when he was truly and deeply angered.

Certainly Alazla was right, but Thorn was too bone-weary to consider Lorm again right now. That knucklehead was frankly way down his list of important things to do. Thorn needed to clear his head and decide what to do. For this he needed to be away from Alazla too, even though he desperately yearned for his friend's cheerful companionship at that moment. Alazla's more simple perspective on things could be just what he needed.

He'd decided to ask Alazla to stay when he noticed his friend glancing back towards his home yet again.

Thorn sighed in resignation. 'Look, you'd better be getting on. You don't want to miss out on that hot date at the Badgers' Den now, do you? Besides, the more time you waste here the less time you've got to tidy yourself up, and by Sha's Blade you look a state!'

'Besides,' Thorn added belatedly, 'if I came with you you'd stand no chance! Look at the state of me!'

'Now with that,' said Alazla, 'I can't argue. You'll meet me at the Den later, though. I won't take no for an answer! Dina's got a friend I think you'll like! If you come really late, she'll be so drunk she may not notice that you look like you've been dredged up from the harbour.'

'Go on, bugger off, you know there's no hope for me, so stop trying. I might as well become a monk!'

Alazla laughed openly, blue eyes sparkling. Giving Thorn a cheerful jab on the shoulder, he ran off down the cobbled alley away from the inn.

Thorn watched his sturdy friend receding into the press of people, his blond head standing out for a while above the crowd.

Going into the inn was the last thing Thorn wanted to do, and given his wounds he knew that his mother's matronly reaction was going to be more extreme than ever.

'Oh well,' he sighed 'the night, or evening that is, is still young! Can't be going in, so what I need is some company – and company that won't talk back!'

Decision made, he walked round to the rear entrance of the inn. Opening the wooden gate cautiously, he peeped into the courtyard. 'Great; coast is clear and all is well!'

Stepping in, he froze momentarily as he noticed Obelisk, the family bear hound, sprawled nonchalantly by the inside wall. However, the great old beast, now seriously grey around the chops, just thumped his tail happily and put his head back down.

'Good Obelisk,' Thorn muttered. The old hound thumped his tail again but didn't bother to get up. 'I always forget you're almost as old as I am.'

Reaching the outhouse, where his father kept many of the inn's non-perishable stores, it didn't take a moment to remove a rather venerable and decidedly dusty bottle of Apple Spirits from the shelving. He paused and put the Apple Spirits back, instead taking a slim, spiralled, smoky glass bottle.

'Black Spite: the very best, all the way from the jungles of Ylith. If there was ever a time to drink it, I think this is probably it,' said Thorn. Slipping it into his pack belt, he took a quick look across the yard and went for the gate. As he ran he could hear his mother shouting at one of the serving wenches in the kitchen.

'Poor old Lisa, burnt the roast again!' he chortled.

The thought of a little normality brought a grin to Thorn's face, which in turn made him wince in pain. He wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry at his predicament.

Still wincing, he shut the gate behind him (don't want thieves getting in, he noted) and sauntered innocently off down the street.

‘So where to, then, I wonder. Korth’s a big place, after all. Grandest city in the whole of Rune... or so they tell us,’ he amended.

‘What I need is a place to sit down and think. Just me and the Black Spite. I’ve heard it’s hallucinogenic.’ That last gave him pause. Given the shocks he’d had over the last day or two, drinking an alleged hallucinogen might not be the best thing to do.

He shrugged mentally. ‘What’s the worst that could happen? Not much compared to what I’ve seen. It may even dull this bloody pounding in my nose. By the nine, it hurts!’

Thorn did not, or affected not to, notice the strange glances he got from passers-by, who noted his rambling conversation with himself.

He continued. ‘Of course, if I keep drinking, I’ll never have to deal with the matter at all!’ He scratched his two-day stubble at that, although also did not actually notice that he needed to shave. ‘Some would say that’s burying your head in the sand, Thorn. To me, who’s seen an avatar slain, it just sounds like good common sense!’

Pausing briefly, Thorn wondered where to take his night of self-imposed bachelor revelry and decided that the Broken Square could well be the place. Adjusting his pack, he loped off cheerfully in a westerly direction, trying hard to ignore the insistent pain from his nose.

His route took him along the south wall of the inner city, and he decided to take the parapet route, which strictly speaking you weren’t meant to do, it being off-limits to non-military personnel. Shrugging his shoulders nonchalantly to himself, he carried

on anyway, slipping cautiously past the guardhouse and up the imposing stone steps to the inner wall.

‘Crikey, Thorn, you really are being risqué today,’ he quipped to himself. ‘Is this a new you, I wonder? You’re making a habit of going into forbidden areas after all. All you need now is an extra span in height and shoulder width and you’ll have new and wonderfully shallow friends flocking to be your best buddy.’

Some few minutes later Thorn reached the top, his breath clouding in the cooling evening air.

Thorn realised that he was wheezing slightly. ‘You know, I really do hate physical exercise. I wonder if there’s some way that I can have shoulders like Alazla’s but do nothing but push a quill all day? I should write to Arcanum and ask the mages. If anyone would know, they would.’

Thoughts of exercise brought to mind Master Lackweed, and Thorn shuddered involuntarily. The college’s master of exercise was a small but physically robust type, who had an odd penchant for wearing tight vests. In Thorn’s opinion the diminutive chap was always trying to make up for his lack of height by flaunting his physical prowess. He also seemed to think that Thorn (who tragically shared a similar physique) should be able to keep up. Needless to say, Thorn did not share his enthusiastic opinion and often skipped exercise, preferring a good book and a roll or two of Jack’s Folly.

‘You know, in fact, I’m only slightly winded. Lackweed would almost be proud!’

‘Actually, I’m not sure I’d go that far. Although you do bear a striking resemblance to Lackweed.’

Thorn whipped round to see Alazla walking up the last few steps. Alazla, Thorn noticed, was not out of breath.

‘It’s uncanny, I’d say,’ continued Alazla. ‘Are you absolutely sure you’re not related in some way?’

Thorn was not sure whether to be mad or happy. He’d been looking forward to trying to sort things out in his head, but knew that he’d likely fail. There was probably no making sense of it after all. He’d also dreaded the deep melancholy that he knew would settle on him as a result.

Thorn settled for smiling. ‘By the trickster, Alazla, how did you know I’d be here!?’

His friend chuckled and propped himself on the parapet next to him. ‘For a bright lad, Thorn, you can be remarkably stupid. You’ve been coming to this spot “to work things out” ever since you were knee-high. You were too serious....even then.’

There was no denying the truth of it and Thorn felt his spirits lift in his friend’s reassuring presence. He felt obliged to try once more, though. ‘What about your hot date at the Den though?’

Alazla had pulled out a brown clay pipe and was tamping it full of Jack’s Folly. The ‘therapeutic’ dried yellow herb was commonly available in Korth, though frowned upon. It was also not terribly cheap, and Thorn briefly wondered how Alazla had paid for it. His family were not well-off.

‘You’re a fool, Thorn. On a night like this even you could have got laid. Yes, and even looking like that. Ola is just about as desperate as you are. She’s no wood nymph, that’s for sure....but beggars can’t be choosers.’

Thorn had no answer, knowing that his friend was probably right.

‘Anyway, you’ve had a face like a troll all day. I know you’ve got your problems, my friend, but laughing at life has always been one of your talents. Something happened after we legged it from that party last night, or I’m Sea Monkey.’

Thorn could have wept then at Alazla’s insight and the compassion he’d shown in following his friend. For a moment he didn’t trust himself to answer, as his emotions grew thick in his throat. Instead he gazed out over Korth’s lower city, a view that he loved very much. As always, it took his breath away and a little calm settled on him in return. The evening was particularly beautiful and the lower city was illuminated a burnt orange as it rambled erratically downhill towards the ocean.

‘Qizoth’s still down there, you know,’ said Alazla, pointing with his pipe.

Thorn laughed at that, recalling the small skiff with which they’d often menaced the larger ships in the harbour. Qizoth was grandly named after the silver-crested sea beast of legend. Their antics in the tiny skiff had become well known to some of the regular ship captains, and as their reputation for menace grew, the ships’ crews had often pelted them with fruit, wood and even other less savoury items. They’d even tried to steal aboard a ship one night. Swift discovery had found them dumped straight into Korth’s chilly harbour.

‘Took me hours to get those eels off,’ Thorn said.

Alazla laughed, a rich and vibrant sound, and drew deeply on the pipe.

‘How come they didn’t get you?’ Thorn muttered, only slightly sour.

‘Sweet flesh, my friend, I guess you’re unspoiled! Bless. Maybe you should give your life over to Eli-shar – I hear they’re always seeking the untainted!’

Thorn laughed again, feeling a little more cheered, and uncorked the Black Spite. He took a swig of the viscous Ylithian liquid and gagged as it scorched the back of his throat, travelling slowly to his gullet, where it lingered like smouldering coals.

Coughing briefly, he took another deep swig.

‘Careful there, lad,’ Alazla said, raising an eyebrow. ‘Looks like someone’s getting used to drinking that stuff!’ He leaned closer and peered at the bottle. ‘And the black, too. Someone also has expensive taste.’

Thorn shrugged and watched the ships bob gently in the harbour, enjoying for the moment the short but companionable silence.

‘So what was with the disappearing act last night, then?’ Alazla said at last.

Thorn had known the question was coming, of course, but in truth still had no answer. He stared unseeing for the moment at the ships, and in their place a twisted dagger rose and fell. Crystal trees shattered and the sky bled tears of flame.

‘Thorn,’ Alazla’s hand shook his shoulder. ‘What by the nine gods is it? You’ve gone as pale as the solstice moon.’

Still he had no words. What could he say? Thorn had no doubt in his heart that Alazla would believe him, but where to start? And would telling Alazla place him in terrible

danger too? So far no threat or accusation had found Thorn, but that was not to say that he was not being hunted? By what right could he share that burden with his friend? As Thorn's closest friend he knew that he deserved to know, but in telling him would he also betray his trust and place Alazla's life at risk?

Thorn took a swig of Spite, now barely tasting the strong liquor. His thoughts spun far away, perhaps seeking momentary sanctuary in the temporary haven of the familiar, tracing the lower city from the harbour in a series of what appeared to be randomly determined streets and allowing their tranquil solidity to soothe him. Perhaps in those twisting labyrinthine streets he could somehow find the courage he needed.

He knew too, with certainty, that Alazla would not push him until he was ready to answer. Often they'd sat just there after one escapade or another, laughing and joking. At other times they'd simply enjoyed the vista and the warm familiarity of each other's company.

Thorn allowed his mind to wander for a moment, enjoying the solace of lighter thoughts, recalling the tales of how Korth had grown, in harmony with the land about it. Most dwellings and structures in radiant Korth were grown from living crystal where they flourished to the exclusion of all other places in the world of Rune. To Thorn it seemed at odds that such a wonderful city could have played host to the death of an avatar.

Lulled by the Black Spite and the reassuring presence of radiant Korth, Thorn's thoughts begrudgingly twisted back to the avatar like a lodestone, and what to tell his friend. Why would a Randaerren maiden slay an avatar? It made no sense. Was it not written that they were servants of another race, the Great Wyrms, those who swam

through the darkness between worlds? There was no accounting in all the histories for such a meeting.

That this terrible act had occurred on the first night of the Seventy-Seven Festival had not escaped Thorn. The Festival came only once every seventy-seven cycles and it was celebrated across the whole world of Rune. It was a time of abundance, when harvests overflowed and all disease simply ceased. Even warring nations would halt hostilities for the seven-day duration. The Seventy-Seven was held sacred to the full pantheon of nine younger gods.

‘Damn, this just makes no sense!’ said Thorn.

He muttered and mumbled to himself as the sun sank at last, unnoticed, into the sea with a final flash of red fire. Alazla waited patiently, puffing on his pipe..

The avatar’s eyes held Thorn again. Their dark, fathomless depth pinned him like a shrew beneath the talons of an eagle. The strength within them was vast and unstoppable, yet bound by equal compassion.

Thorn lurched upright, sending the bottle of Spite bouncing across the battlements. He knew! The avatar’s eyes had told him. It had been there, in those depthless eyes. He had known that he was going to die. Tears traced Thorn’s face, the salt stinging his wounds unnoticed. Why did he not flee? Why stay?!

Alazla scrambled to snatch up the bottle, endeavouring to save its expensive contents.

‘What is it!? Come on, Thorn! For pity’s sake!’

Again the dagger plunged and again Thorn was torn by the avatar's death cry, its sound like a shattering glass. Crystal trees exploded and tumbled, the Randaerren fleeing. He was faced again by the terrible malice contorting the maiden's face into something obscene.

'In the name of the nine gods, Thorn, what's eating you? Just tell me. Please trust me now, as you always have.'

And so Thorn did. It spilled from him as if from a lanced wound, and he wept when it was over. Alazla cradled his head against his shoulder when it was done, and Thorn cried in shuddering gouts of both relief and sorrow.

'You're not alone,' Alazla said, placing his head against Thorn's. 'I'll always be here for you, you know.'

Thorn looked up and nodded, trying without success to wipe the stinging tears from his numerous cuts and burns.

The solstice moon was high and bright as a candle now, and its glowering sister, the violet moon, also known as Veylistra's Face, named after the capricious immortal scion of Nim, god of magic, hung low and menacing in the night sky.

'You're not alone,' he repeated.

Thorn knew that, but had needed to hear it again. There had been no laughter, no mockery, and no suggestion that the whole thing was the result of his imagination or wishful thinking – just simple and straightforward acceptance. That was so Alazla. It was everything that Thorn had expected and hoped for from his friend.

Alazla gently lifted Thorn's hand from his shoulder and raised it to the sky. Thorn did not resist. The silvered light of the solstice moon bloomed across his palm, revealing the dark blue stain remaining from where the avatar's dust had touched his skin.

Within that darkness a universe revolved now. Stars chased across the night sky, and the sparkling hue and flitting shadows of infinity hung like a ghostly cloak across the dark.

Unable to look any longer, Thorn let his gaze fall, by coincidence or not, upon the Heart of Korth, where nine mighty edifice faced the Heart of Korth itself. There the crystal singers had created their most beautiful works; towering statues of the nine younger gods in crystals of purest emerald, sunstone, sapphire and ruby. Under the solstice moon they blazed like fallen stars. Did the gaze of those angered gods now rest on him, he wondered?

Alazla noted Thorn's gaze and there was no smile upon his face. That absence seemed odd, and that too momentarily added to his melancholy.

'You can't face this alone, Thorn.' There it was again.

And which of you this night is without his herald, Thorn wondered of those gods.

Which of you this day rages at the sky? Whom do you blame? To whom do you look?

Does anyone know the truth but me?

'You must tell someone, Thorn. You need help.'

Thorn's smile was simple as he turned from the faces of the gods. 'I *have* told someone. I've told you.'

‘My dearest friend, had we been born brothers we couldn’t be closer. But you *must* listen to me. You need to tell someone. People need to know. We should go to one of the temples. Perhaps to Oldoth: his revered brothers and sisters tend to be quite... approachable.’ Alazla referred to the god of sun and storms, and Thorn knew that his divine order was much loved in Korth. Most households had at least a bronze disc with the beaten face of the sun god above a door lintel.

‘And what would they do, do you think, Alazla? Punish me? Almost certainly for trespass, in what was obviously some form of sanctuary. Or perhaps just lock me up while they try to understand this mess?!’ Thorn thrust his sparkling palm at Alazla’s face. The whirling stars within for a moment cast a puppet master’s orbiting shadows across his face.

Alazla pushed the hand away, his expression never changing. Thorn’s harrowing palm, it seemed, had no fear for him, or he hid it well indeed. ‘No, they’ll help you. You know yourself how benevolent most of the divine orders are. I can’t recall that they’ve ever punished anyone for anything: that’s the job of the Fist, Thorn.’

Thorn’s face remained set. He wasn’t actually sure what he even wanted, other than to be rid of the damn stars in his hand and to no longer feel afraid. Though it had been only yesterday, the whole thing felt like a lifetime ago. He’d just not thought beyond simply sharing the burden with Alazla.

Alazla drew deep upon his pipe, apparently watching the ships at peace below, nodding gently on the turning of the waves. ‘We can’t face this alone. What’s happened is bigger than you, Thorn, and it’s probably more important too. People need to be told.’

Alazla was not one prone to wise and startling insights, but the truth of his words struck Thorn, though he despised them too for their clarity. Fear curled in his belly, a deep-seated knowledge that life would never be the same again. As miserable as much of it had been, he still did not want to let it go.

‘No one need know, Alazla. No one even knows I was there! And what difference does it make? What’s happened has happened and there’s nothing that either you or I can do about it!’

Disappointment was painted thick on his friend’s face as he turned from the battlements. Veylistra’s Face hung glowering behind him, for a moment framing him in a violet shroud.

Alazla’s words were pitched low, anger taut and coiled in his voice. ‘You’re better than that, Thorn. You always have been. And I see it, even if you don’t! I always have. I know you’re not that selfish, even though you might like to think that you are.’

Thorn wished then that his friend wasn’t right, and it must have shown on his face as Alazla smiled. Thorn still resisted, however, though his arguments, even to himself, felt weak and at best spurious. ‘I’ll not place either you or me in any more danger. We can just ignore it and carry on as normal.’

‘And what’s *normal*, Thorn? The death of yet *another* avatar because you didn’t warn them? If that happens, everyone will despise you, Thorn, including yourself. There’ll be no “living normally” after that!’

‘Do you think that blue mark on your hand’s going to scrub off with brushes and soaps in your mum’s kitchen? No you don’t, and neither do I.’

Thorn found suddenly that he had no arguments left. He was beyond anger, fear and even recrimination. The burden had been shared, and that in itself began to lift him. Alazla and Thorn had never failed at anything they'd tackled together – and they both knew that. 'Fine. You're right. Just let me sleep tonight; I need some rest. We'll go in the morning.'

'The morning, then,' Alazla reiterated, and clapped Thorn on the shoulder, making him wince. 'They may even heal you too if you ask them nicely. You need to keep what good looks you've got, after all.'

Thorn laughed and it felt good. 'You'll only have more competition if I do that.'

'I think I can handle it.'