

Erich's Plea

Book One of The Witchcraft Wars

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Dedication

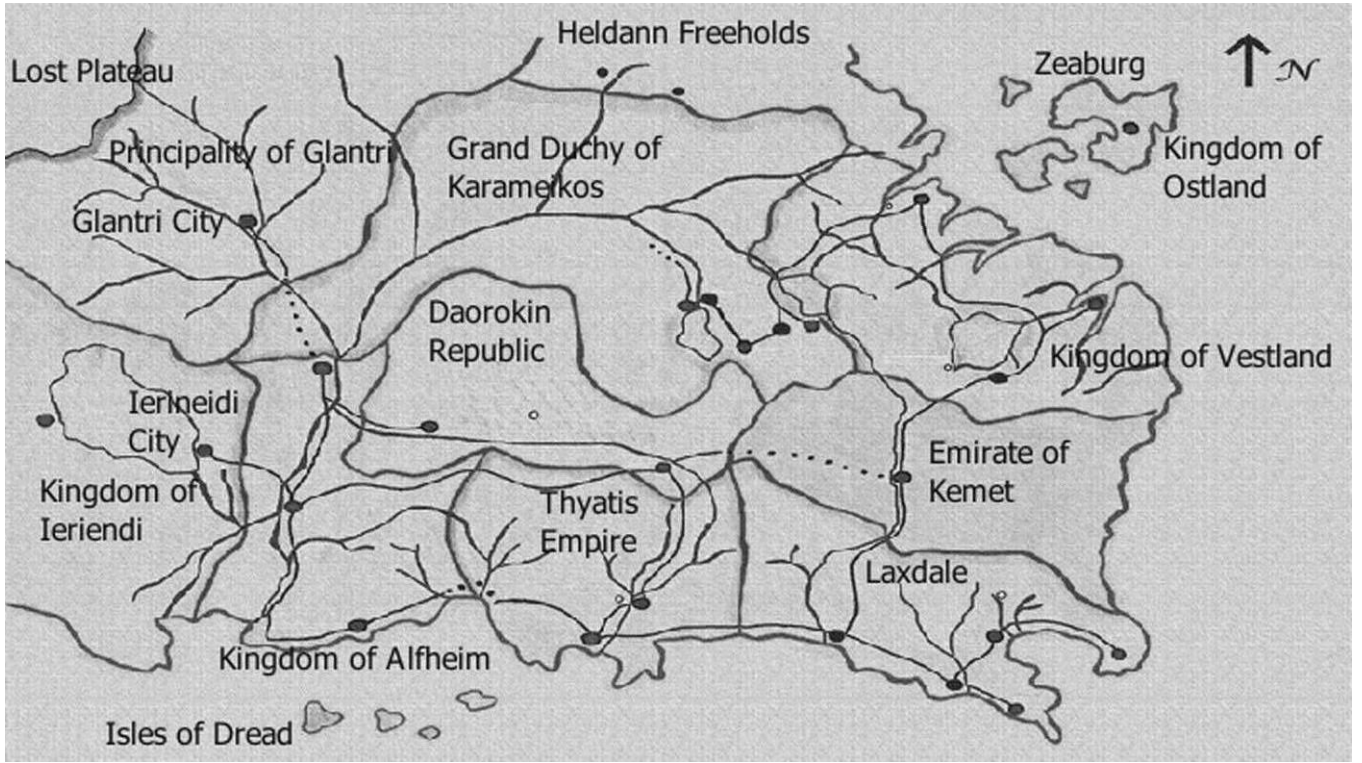
This book is dedicated with much love to my dad, Graham Martin, who taught me the value of dreams.... and to my mum, Janet, who gave me the means to make my dreams come true.

I would also like to give thanks to the people who helped make this book a reality; Andrew Farrawell, Scott Jensson, Rachel and Andrew Lennox-Gordon, John Rittmeir, and Matthew Old... they helped to bring my characters alive.

I also have a very special word of thanks to the extremely talented Geoff Armstrong who did all the interior artwork for Erich's Plea – through Geoff's hard word, under pressure; I was finally able to meet my characters face to face.

Cover artwork courtesy of

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The Dream



Slade could feel the warmth of the rising sun on his face. The subtle scent of the sacred oak trees filled the air. All around him was the slow chanting of the druids who made this forest their home. Opening his eyes Slade saw his druidic mentor standing before him, a guide to this sunrise initiation ceremony. Karel's wise, heavily lined face was hidden by the coarse linen cowl he wore but Slade could sense the gentle smile underneath the rhythmic chanting.

Karel had once been a mercenary soldier, selling his skill with a blade to the highest bidder. Then Karel had turned his back on his former profession and joined the ranks of those who served the gentle woodland goddess Freyita. After years of service he was now her high priest and Archdruid of the Sacred Grove.

The other male and female members of the Grove, who represented virtually every race in The Kingdoms, formed a chanting circle around Slade and Karel as they welcomed Slade into their circle. Once the ritual was completed Slade would be presented with the druidic ring with its wide, silver band engraved with oak leaves and begin his new life. Slade felt as though his heart would burst with pride. Joining the druids of the Sacred Grove had been his dream for more than a year. Finally he had succeeded and it was a triumph he had earned solely on his own merits, owing nothing to his birth.

From this day on Slade would renounce his former life. He would give up the right to continue the training he had begun with the warrior-monks of the Black Lotus and dedicate his life instead to serving Freyita. Slade's decision involved more than just giving up an old profession. He had also given up his name and his birthright. No longer would he be known as Einreich Gudmundson. No longer would he be the Crown Prince of the vast northern kingdom of Vestland. He would no longer be Erich's designated heir, in spite of his position as a second son, to the centuries old High Throne.

Slade knew he had disappointed his father, High King Erich, in his decision to leave court. Nevertheless his father had allowed it, would even have attended this ceremony had protocol allowed. Knowing he had hurt his father pained Slade deeply but he knew it was the right decision for him. Slade wanted nothing more than a life free from the intrigues and pressures of his father's court.

Suddenly a deep shadow filled the grove and a bluish tinted light dappled the ground. It was as though the Sapphire moon were beginning its ascent instead of the fiery sun. Startled Slade looked up at the sky only to find it clear and cloudless; the deep shadow caused instead by a huge black dragon in flight. The giant creature had a wingspan easily twenty feet across, its' body more than twice that amount including the long tail, serpentine neck and huge wedge-shaped head. Slade's breath caught in his throat, the beast above was magnificent, indescribably beautiful.

Slade found himself falling to his knees as he gazed in wonder at the immense dragon, inexplicably hanging stationary in the air. Slade wondered what a dragon, and a black dragon

at that, was doing so far south? Traditionally they were found only in the far north of the Heldann Freeholds.

Slade looked up towards his mentor, certain that Karel would have some explanation of this incredible sight. Instead Slade was horrified to see Karel had somehow grown or expanded, towering above Slade and his fellow druids. Karel threw off the cowl, the material splitting as Karel continued to grow, and revealed the grotesque creature that he had become.

As Slade watched in growing horror and confusion the thing that had been Karel still retained his humanoid shape but everything else was now grossly distorted. He or it, Slade was no longer sure, looked a little like the ogres of the north, a bald oversized head on an incredibly strong and muscular body. Yet it also closely resembled the woodland trolls, having their tough, green tinged skin and elongated arms and legs.

The creature turned his back on Slade and faced directly into the rising sun. Slade was terrified, he knew none of this was natural or normal, and he did not understand what was happening. Then he heard his father's voice fill the air. "Follow the Trunk, my son. Follow the Trunk. Only you can save me. Follow the Trunk. Save me, my son, only you can save me." The voice faded to a whisper on the wind and all was dark.

Slade opened his eyes, as much as possible given the amount of swelling that had not yet receded from his most recent beating. As expected he saw only the flat, stone ceiling of his prison cell. Once again, he had been dreaming, but this dream had been unlike any of the others. Slade's druidic initiation had taken place nearly five years ago, the ritual going as expected, with no unforeseen dragons or ghosts of his father's voice.

This dream had possessed an otherworldly quality to it that Slade had never before experienced. It felt as though his father were truly trying to communicate with him. Somehow Slade sensed the essence of the dream was true, but he had no idea how his father could have come to him in his dreams. Even though he felt convicted of the dream's truth, Slade could not imagine why his father should be in need of rescue. Even more enigmatic was his father's dream instruction to 'Follow the Trunk'. What could that possibly mean?

Gingerly Slade eased himself to a sitting position on the small pallet with its infested straw that served as a bed for him in this tiny prison cell. His eyes were still swollen almost shut, pain accompanied every breath he took, caused Slade was certain by at least one, if not more broken ribs. Despite his growing certainty that his beloved father was in some kind of trouble, Slade couldn't help but wonder how any trouble his father might be in could possibly be worse than his own current predicament.

It had been a little over two months now since he had last seen the sun. Travelling through the Duchy of Karameikos, he had been arrested, tried and convicted as a spy. It was obvious that the charge was ridiculous but the Duchy had no allegiance to any of The Kingdoms and so tended to make its own rules. Initially Slade had not been terribly concerned, convinced he would be able to escape sooner rather than later.

Unfortunately the opportunity had not presented itself before he had been placed in the bowels of a ship headed for this wicked island prison in Ostland. Once on board any attempted escape was impossible. Not only was the distance required to reach the shore too far for him to swim, but he had also discovered that, in the deep ocean, he suffered from debilitating seasickness.

Two months ago he had arrived at Ostland's Zeaburg prison complex and been taken to this subterranean dungeon with its smooth stone walls, mazes of corridors, little or no lighting and the constant smell of death, blood, waste and decay in his nostrils. He had been alternatively beaten and tortured for hours on a daily basis. His own screams blending with the cries, screams and moans of the other, unseen, sufferers in Zeaburg's nightmarish torture chambers.

The horrors here were so great that even the rats eschewed Zeaburg, although the fleas showed no similar scruples and were an additional constant torment. His body was covered head to toe with tiny bites from the multitudes of the awful creatures. Slade would not have believed it was possible for a place like Zeaburg prison to exist if he had not seen it with his own eyes. It well deserved its evil reputation.

Zeaburg also had a reputation for being inescapable; no one, in all its long history had ever escaped from its confines, except in death. Slade had never believed half the rumors that had surrounded Zeaburg before, now he saw clearly they were all true and worse. He also knew why so many of those imprisoned here died and, it was said, were glad to, death being preferable to daily life in Zeaburg.

Each day that passed for Slade saw his strength being steadily sapped; his once lean and muscular frame becoming daily more wasted. Between the pitiful amount of barely edible food, the near constant beatings or other, more inventive types of torture Slade had become a shadow of his former self. Only two things had so far prevented Slade from succumbing to the horrors of Zeaburg.

Physically he relied on the strengthening exercises practiced by the monks of the Black Lotus. The exercises, a compulsory part of his training, had once kept him lean and strong, now Slade believed they were keeping him alive. To survive emotionally and mentally Slade found himself relying on memories of Ming to endure Zeaburg's tortures.

Slade recognized the irony, that Ming, who he had spent the past five years trying so hard to forget now haunted his thoughts, waking or sleeping, and he welcomed the memories. His thoughts of Ming and the relationship they had once shared had given Slade the courage to endure the beatings, the torture and the cold, hard stone of his underground cell.

This far below ground it was impossible to tell the time accurately but very faintly he could hear the far off sounds above him that typically heralded a new day. Soon enough guards would come for him and escort him to whatever torture was to be his fate that day. Still moving carefully Slade dressed in the filthy prison uniform he had been issued, which was now little more than rags. He performed his morning ablutions then slowly and painfully began to work his way through the series of exercises.

As he worked through the strengthening exercises Slade wondered about his former teacher. Solomon was head of the Black Lotus monastery, and had trained Slade, his older brother Ulrich and their younger sister Ursula. The master had taught all of them many extremely useful tricks. Tricks that now might help him escape, which Slade would willingly employ at the first possible opportunity.

Given his growing conviction the bizarre dream was a true omen of danger Slade vowed he would somehow find a way to do the impossible and escape, and he would have to do it soon. While the strict regime and constant torture that was life in Zeaburg prison seemed to

afford no opportunity and Slade could not readily see a way out he would nevertheless have to make a way.

Shortly after beginning his second set of exercises two prison guards arrived. They were big, burly men with the rough, dark skin and slightly flattened noses that were evidence of some orcish blood. The guards were obviously not Ostland natives, who tended towards pale skin and dark hair. This was hardly surprising; very few of those in charge in Ostland were natives.

It was hard to believe that the island kingdom of Ostland and his home kingdom of Vestland had once been close allies. In fact Slade's grandfather, Vidar, had been a cousin of Ostland's former ruler Eldritch. Since the invasion, however, Ostland and Vestland had become bitter enemies.

Although the invasion had happened before Slade's birth he had heard all the stories. A little over forty years ago the once peaceful island kingdom had been thrown into chaos by orc armies that had swept across the land looting, burning, killing many of the people and forcing the rest into slavery. Eventually even King Eldritch had been slaughtered, his head posted on a spike outside the gates of Zeaburg city.

The assault of the orcish armies had been swift and brutal, taking all by surprise and there had been no time for Slade's grandfather to send aid to his cousin. By the time Vestland's troops had landed on the main island the orc army was so firmly entrenched that the men, Slade's father Erich among them, were lucky to escape the island with their lives.

Word had eventually filtered through The Kingdoms that a man known only as 'The Dark One' was Ostland's new ruler. Who he was or where he had come from no one knew. All that was known about The Dark One was eventually learned through bitter experience. His unwarranted cruelty, his tyranny, and his apparent omniscience all too soon became legendary.

A once beautiful archipelago of islands whose folk were mostly fisherman and traders Ostland had now become a home to cutthroats, murderers and a pirate haven feeding the otherwise illegal slave trade. Justice, law and order were now unknown in the islands with the surviving natives reduced to slaves for their new overlords.

As an island kingdom with a highly trained and skilled navy, Ostland was impregnable, yet Slade's father had never relinquished his dream that the kingdom could one day be reclaimed. Although who his father wished to reclaim the kingdom for Slade had never known as Eldritch's only son and heir had disappeared during the invasion and never resurfaced.

Slade, like his father, was tall and normally very well built, over six feet of lean muscle with the reddish hair and pale skin typical of Vestland. His captors, however, were taller still and in his currently weakened condition, considerably stronger. As such Slade did not even bother to struggle when his captors took hold of his arms to lead him away.

For the past two months this had been a silent procession through the maze of cells to one of the many hideous subterranean torture chambers. Today however, his half-orc guards were talkative; to each other, of course. The language they spoke was not orcish or Common. It was unusual but eventually Slade recognized it as a form of one of the hill giant dialects.

When he identified the language Slade was so puzzled by this he stumbled and almost fell, only to be roughly dragged upright by his jailers. Where, he wondered, would a couple of bloodthirsty Ostland guards have picked up hill giant? The majority of the giant tribes lived

in the northern Heldann Freeholds and they were a peaceful people whose only wish was to be left alone.

Today was certainly turning out to be a day of surprises. First the strange dream, then hearing his captors speak for the first time, in a dialect that made little sense, and now it appeared his guards were not taking him to one of the underground torture chambers after all. As they turned into a long, narrow corridor Slade could see a staircase at the end of the hall. A staircase leading up, not down.

Apart from the day of his arrival, Slade had spent no time on the main floor, which was the only part of the prison at ground level. Like all prisoners he had been processed in a large room on the main floor, stripped of his belongings then given the rough trousers and loose overshirt of the prison population and taken below ground. Slade searched his memory for details of the main floor but his time there had been so short that he had only the dimmest impression of the layout.

The stairs ended in a small stone alcove that made an abrupt right turn into a huge, blindingly bright sunlit room without any ceiling. Slade blinked back tears from the painful light and tried to make sense of the room before him. In the centre of the long open room was an odd structure, like a wheel turned on its side. It had a central core with iron bars coming off the core at evenly paced intervals. What purpose the structure served was impossible to tell but its use was immediately apparent.

Several prisoners were already chained to the iron bars and were walking endlessly in a circle causing the central core to move. A few of the prisoners appeared relatively healthy while others were virtual skeletons, their skin hanging loosely from bones. He saw that some of the prisoners were darkly sunburned while others appeared to have only recently been brought to the wheel room, given that their skin was still so pale.

Stationed around the room were several more guards. Some, like Slade's captors, of probable orcish descent, others obviously human but every one of them equipped with long whips, sharp daggers and heavy leather jerkins.

Slade was half walked and half dragged to one of the empty spokes, his hands tied quickly to the bar with strips of leather. The whole procedure being performed on the move as the other prisoners continued to turn the wheel. Once Slade was tied to the structure there was no choice but to keep moving.

As he walked, Slade tried to get a sense of the room's location within the prison complex. The wheel room, as he termed it, seemed to be positioned in the centre of the main floor. Slade remembered Zeaburg as a long rectangular building. He could see doors leading out of this room to either side and there was a pair of reinforced wooden doors in the middle of the northern facing stone wall. There were no doors in the wall behind him, which Slade believed meant it was probably an outer wall. Unfortunately he saw nothing that seemed to offer any chance for escape.

Slade soon realized that this part of the prison complex had been very cleverly designed to catch the full rays of the sun for as long as possible. Morning, afternoon and deadly midday sun beat down on Slade and his fellow prisoners as they walked or, more frequently stumbled on and on in a pointless and endless circle.

That this pointless and backbreaking labor was performed under the blistering sun only made the work more torturous. With sweat dripping from his body Slade could not even

begin to imagine how unbearable this would be in summer; it was torturous enough now in the middle of winter.

The wheel made a continual low-pitched whine and emitted occasional flashes of extremely bright light. Slade's curiosity about the wheel gnawed at him but he forced himself to concentrate instead on the prisoners and guards, searching for any possible weakness he could use to escape. There were only ten guards watching the thirty prisoners tied to the wheel, a number he found encouraging.

Slade fought the mind numbing monotony of the wheel and concentrated on watching the guards and his fellow prisoners. His observations had to be made surreptitiously. Any obvious move to look around was halted by a quick lash from the nearest guard's whip, something he learned when he felt the sting across his shoulders and the guard shouted at him to 'keep his eyes down'.

Not wishing to incur the wrath of the guards or the feel the sting of the lash again Slade focused for the moment on the man directly in front of him on the wheel. He was as tall as Slade with the blue-black hair and pale skin of an Ostland native. His wide, heavily muscled shoulders and arms indicated that the human was probably a warrior.

The prisoner walked shirtless, his bare back showing a pattern of lash marks, all of them likely to have been gained here in Zeaburg. Yet there was something about the stranger's walk that seemed vaguely familiar to Slade. Puzzling over this Slade eventually decided he had recognized the type and not the man.

His fellow prisoners were predominantly human with the occasional elf or dwarf. Not surprisingly there were no orcs, half-orcs, hobgoblins, ogres or goblins. These were the races that made up the bulk of The Dark One's army, along with a scattering of humans, and their penalty, regardless of the crime, was always death.

Gossip that filtered through The Kingdoms claimed this was because only the so-called inferior races, or more specifically humans, elves and dwarves, were fit to be made prisoners. How The Dark One reconciled his classification of humans as 'inferior' given that he himself was said to be human had never been fully explained. The 'true' warriors, a blatant appeal to the vanity of the orc and goblin races, once thought of as little more than animals by many, it was said could never be imprisoned or enslaved and so had to be killed.

Wiser voices said the reason The Dark One killed those in his army for all infractions was solely to promote terror among the rest. Obedience tended to be more automatic if death was the punishment for every crime and there was no shortage of goblins, orcs, half-orcs, hobgoblins and ogres in the north. Slade believed that was the true reason behind the policy. Combined with the fact that if The Dark One began executing humans, dwarves and elves on a wide scale some of their native kingdoms might join together to retake Ostland.

Slade carefully turned his attention from his fellow prisoners to the guards. At first it appeared the guards maintained a strict watch on the men at the wheel but gradually Slade began to realize this was not the case. For the most part the guards walked around, not to keep an eye on their charges, but to talk with each other. Whether this was normal behavior on their part Slade had no way of knowing.

The whine of the central core made it difficult to overhear what they were saying but from the small fragments of conversation he was able to catch, it seemed to Slade that all the

guards were excited about some upcoming festival. With each slow revolution of the wheel Slade heard the guards talking about the food, the drink and the planned entertainment.

Surprisingly it appeared from their talk that most of the guards in the prison complex had been given time off to attend the festival, called The Sun Ascension, which would leave the prison guarded by only a skeleton crew. Somewhere in the back of his mind Slade knew the Sun Ascension festival was familiar, although in his exhaustion he could not remember why.

All that day Slade and the others walked. The heat, despite the winter weather, became unbearable. Sweat poured off their bodies, and still they walked. Only twice was the wheel halted, the prisoners were given a cupful of tepid water, some bread and cheese, and then the walk was resumed.

Salty sweat dripped into Slade's swollen, puffy eyes making them sting and dribbled down his arms causing the leather thongs tying him to the iron bar to tighten painfully, cutting into his wrists and still they walked. If anyone fell, and some did, the others kept walking, dragging the unfortunate soul along regardless until they were able to stumble to their feet. Some of them never did regain their feet, until Slade realized with horror they were dragging along a dead man. In its own way the wheel was every bit as effective a torture as those practiced in the dungeons below.

Eventually the sun began to set and the wheel ground to a halt before each man was freed and led downstairs. Slade took note that the guards transported one prisoner at a time, with two guards to each prisoner. No more than two pairs of guards would leave at the same time, which meant that there were always at least six guards watching the still tied prisoners.

Even if an escape attempt during this period had been possible he doubted he had the required energy or physical strength to even try. Utterly exhausted Slade was unable to do more than stand slumped over the bar and wait to be led back to his cell.

That night he dreamed again, not his usual dreams of Ming and the past, but the strange dream of his father. This time Slade recognized the dream; the same initiation ceremony ending so abruptly with an echo of his father's voice with its enigmatic command to 'follow the trunk.' For the next three days Slade endured the monotonous horror of the wheel during the day while the dream came every night.

His conviction of the dreams truth grew and along with it a desperate need to escape. Each day the guards continued to talk about the coming festival and the small snatches of overheard conversation gave Slade the tiniest seed of a plan. If the festival was as important as the talk of the guards made it appear then there was a chance the guards on duty that day might be distracted and, of course, there would be far less of them with so many attending the Festival.

That distraction, coupled with a tiny sliver of bone that Slade had retained from an evening meal and sharpened to a knife-like edge, might be enough to allow him to escape. At worst, he would die and after all he had been through dying no longer seemed the worst possible scenario.

Follow The Trunk



The morning of the festival was Slade's fourth day on the wheel, and he was prepared. The sliver of bone was hidden between the index and middle fingers of his left hand. His heart was pounding horribly in his chest all the way to the main floor.

With each step he took Slade's fear, his terror, grew. Fear that in his currently weakened condition he would not have the strength required to overcome even one of the burly prison guards, let alone what would likely be many. Fear that the guards would discover the sliver of bone and then all his plans would come to nothing. As it turned out all his fears, and his plans, were in vain.

Arriving at the wheel room Slade was pleased to note there were, as he had hoped, fewer guards than usual. In fact there were only six guards, including his two escorts. What he had not expected or planned for, however, was the distraction being provided by a new prisoner.

The prisoner was well over seven feet tall, heavily muscled and appeared to be a nightmarish blend of troll and ogre. Slade stopped cold in shock; this was the creature that he had seen in his dream, the thing that Karel had become. Exactly as it had appeared in his dream the huge creature had the general appearance, height and musculature of the northern ogres with the green skin and elongated arms and legs of the woodland trolls.

"Trunk not go on wheel! Trunk go home!" The creature said roughly. As he spoke, Trunk flexed his huge, elongated and extremely powerful arms and threw off both his guards with the ease of a child tossing away a small doll. Despite the creature's thick, guttural accent he was still easily understood. Slade was certain this was the Trunk of his dreams. All Slade had to do now was 'follow the Trunk' as his father had instructed.

The two guards who had escorted Slade ran, along with the other remaining guards, to the aid of their fallen fellows. One of the fallen guards, Slade could see, would never rise again; his neck twisted so that it appeared he gazed eternally over his shoulder. Without stopping to think Slade used the ensuing confusion and the sudden surge of energy from adrenalin to run to the wheel.

Using the sharpened bone sliver he cut the leather thongs of the first prisoner he came to and received yet another shock. He knew this black-haired man; it was Wulfstan, who had grown up with Slade in the Palace at Noorvix, and was now a member of his royal father's elite bodyguards. For what seemed like minutes, but in reality was only seconds, the two men simply stared at each other in shock.

"Take this," Slade said handing Wulfstan the bone sliver, "Free as many men as you can, somehow we're getting out of here."

He then darted across to the fallen guard and grabbed the long whip. Straightening up painfully, his broken ribs had still not fully healed; Slade saw one of the guards approaching him warily.

Slade flicked the length of the whip out, demonstrating that he knew how to use the deadly weapon. Never taking his eyes off the guard Slade waited and prayed for his moment, the

moment when his opponent's attention would waiver for a second and he would be able to make his strike.

Slade could feel the tremors in his legs; his breathing was still labored and painful. He would have to finish this human guard off quickly if it were to happen at all, and judging by the sneer on the man's ugly face he knew well just how weakened Slade actually was.

It seemed to Slade that the world had slowed down, that everything was moving in slow motion. When the guard began to move his whip Slade felt as though he had all the time in the world to react. Bringing up his own whip Slade swept the leather thong low to the ground, catching and curling around the ankles of the guard causing him to stumble and fall. One of the other prisoners, a dwarf Slade didn't recognize, jumped on the human's back and grabbing the guard's dagger slit his throat in one smooth motion.

Looking around him Slade saw the entire wheel room was in utter confusion. Groups of guards were pouring into the room and were being mobbed and brought down by the desperate prisoners. The creature called Trunk had single-handedly dispatched three more of the guards.

Yet there were almost as many prisoners lying dead as there were guards. Slade, the adrenalin still pumping through his body providing him with strength he had not dreamt he possessed, began edging his way through the fray towards Trunk. Reaching Trunk's side Slade put out his hands, palms down, in the universal gesture of friendship. Wulfstan, followed by a group of five of the healthiest appearing prisoners, ran towards them.

"We've got to get out of here quick," Wulfstan yelled over the noise, "Maybe your big friend could help us break down those doors," Wulfstan pointed at the two wooden doors in the northern wall. Slade believed the doors Wulfstan had indicated would be the quickest way out of the prison.

"Good idea," Slade started to reply but his voice was cut off by the ear-splitting noise of the alarm. Trunk screamed loudly, heard even above the klaxon sound of the alarm, sounding as if he were in extreme pain. Immediately the giant creature turned and ran to the back of the room towards the stairs.

"Follow him," Slade yelled to Wulfstan, pointing to Trunk. "Are you crazy? The way out is here..." Wulfstan shouted back pointing again to the double wooden doors.

Although he hated to do it, Slade used the only weapon he had.

"Follow your orders soldier!" he commanded. For a split second Wulfstan was shocked, Slade could see the surprise on his face, but then he spun around and together with Slade followed the fleeing Trunk.

None of the prisoners who had been working alongside Wulfstan upstairs had followed Slade and Wulfstan as they raced after the ogre-troll. The other prisoners had scrambled instead for the main doors, believing that offered the best promise of escape and possible safety. Slade prayed he had made the right decision in pursuing Trunk and was not condemning himself and Wulfstan to what would surely be a slow and protracted death if they were caught.

For such a large creature, Trunk moved surprisingly fast, loping along on his long legs so that Slade and Wulfstan lost sight of the ogre-troll almost immediately. His trail, however, was easy to follow; the bodies of two guards who had confronted Trunk lay dead at the foot

of the stairs. The corridor they were in ran for roughly one hundred feet, with several other corridors branching off it and was very dimly lit. At least here, underground, it was quieter than on the main floor. Apart from a few distant screams and the faintly heard ringing of the alarm little else could be heard.

The two men began to walk cautiously down the corridor, Wulfstan automatically moving slightly in front. At the first branch, Wulfstan peered into the corridor, but the lack of light made it difficult for him to see more than a few feet. Turning back towards Slade Wulfstan shook his head. It was unlikely Trunk had gone in that direction; the narrow hall appeared to be completely deserted.

They continued further down the main corridor. After approximately fifteen feet, they came across another guard, his neck neatly broken. At least now they knew they were heading in the right direction. Slade paused briefly to catch his breath, leaning heavily against the smooth stone, as Wulfstan continued ahead.

A sudden noise behind him caused Slade to spin around, the purloined whip still clutched in his hand. The noise was only a fellow prisoner; apparently the only one who had followed them back down into the subterranean maze of the underground torture chambers. The prisoner was quite short, coming barely to Slade's shoulder, slightly built with untidy medium brown hair and clouded chocolate brown eyes.

Sizing up the newcomer Slade quickly decided the man had either not been a prisoner for very long or had not yet been subjected to Zeaburg's inventive tortures. The stranger's linen pants and tunic seemed nearly new and Slade could not see any visible lash marks or bruises. Slade smiled briefly at the young human and lowered his whip as Wulfstan backtracked towards them.

Wulfstan, easily the fittest of all of them, whispered to Slade and the newcomer to follow behind him closely and silently as he continued to move throughout the shadowy prison corridors. The next corridor branch turned north and had burning torches spaced intermittently all the way down allowing Wulfstan to see the fallen bodies of two more guards.

With a small shrug, Wulfstan motioned for Slade and the stranger to follow him down the corridor. Wulfstan wondered why they were wasting time tracking down this half-ogre when they should be working at getting out of the prison. He had, however, spent his entire adult life in service to Vestland's royal family and was not about to disobey a direct order now, even if it came from someone who had abdicated his right to the throne.

This corridor had doorways leading to four separate rooms; two on the left side of the corridor and two on the right. At the second doorway three more of the guards lay dead. Peering around the corner into the room, Wulfstan was so horrified by what he saw that he nearly vomited.

It was a large rectangular room, roughly twenty feet wide by thirty feet long. The room had obviously been used as a torture chamber; there was dried blood, waste and what appeared to be bits of skin and flesh spattered all over the tables and the floors and the stink was overpowering. Bizarre implements Wulfstan had never seen before hung on the rough stone walls, their purpose horrifically obvious.

Six long, low tables stood in the centre of the room. Each table had iron shackles at the top and bottom, evidently used to tie the unfortunate victim in place. Wulfstan had not seen

this room, or any like it, during his time in Zeaburg prison. Now, seeing it for the first time, Wulfstan thanked whatever gods might be listening that he had been spared this fate.

Looking around Wulfstan spied a small door that he had not immediately noticed. In the far corner of the room, the door was made from stone instead of wood, making it barely distinguishable from the surrounding stone walls. Moving cautiously, with Slade and the other, still unnamed man, Wulfstan walked towards the door. Lying dead on the floor in the middle of the room was the strangest creature Wulfstan had ever seen, dead or alive.

Tall and thin the thing had a strange, tentacled head and a gaping maw of a mouth. It was dressed in elaborate robes, similar to wizards' robes and looked like something from a nightmare. Wulfstan could only stare and wonder what manner of creature this was; and what on earth was it was doing in Zeaburg prison's torture chambers?

"There's magic here, strong magic," the skinny stranger whispered with a touch of awe in his voice, "I don't know what that thing is but I don't like how this feels..." his voice trailed off. Slade looked at the dead creature and, like Wulfstan, wondered what it could possibly be.

"How do you know there's magic here?" Slade asked the small man.

"I'm a wizard; I can smell it, beyond that door. Very powerful magic. I don't know whether we should even go in there, but I know you will."

The wizard looked calmly at Slade, smiling just a little. Wulfstan watched the two of them; he did not like magic, did not understand it and, although he would rather have died than admit it to anyone else, he was also a little afraid of magic. His duty however seemed clear; he must open the door and enter the room first. Although, as he reached for the door Wulfstan was no longer sure what his duty was, after all Slade had relinquished his place in the royal line. Steeling himself against whatever he might find Wulfstan went to open the door, but as he did so Slade reached out a hand and stopped him.

"Better let me do this, my friend, you two wait here." Slade said.

Slade had expected the stone door to be heavy and hard to open but it swung open easily at his touch. Inside was a small chamber, just large enough for the long, low table in the centre with about two feet of space all around. The room was brilliantly lit, obviously from a spell, as there were no torches in evidence. Trunk stood next to the table looking down at the man strapped there.

The man was human and seemed young. He would be almost Slade's height when standing and powerfully built with shiny black hair and very pale skin. His eyes were closed and his breathing appeared shallow. Slade felt unaccountably cold, as if he stood in an arctic breeze. The chill seemed to emanate from the man on the table, coming off him in waves. Trunk looked up at Slade and then back to the helpless man.

"This Nikolai, he Trunk's friend. You be Trunk's friend?" Slade was once again struck by how easy it was to understand the huge creature, despite his thick accent.

"Yes Trunk. I'll be your friend. Do you want me to rescue Nikolai?"

"Not yet. Nikolai need quiet, you go outside, we come soon," Trunk said firmly.

For a second Slade wondered about the wisdom of pausing in their escape attempt, even for a brief while but then he turned and left the room, for now he would continue to follow the dreams instructions. Looking at the Wulfstan and the wizard he knew they had heard the exchange so didn't bother to repeat it. Pulling the stone door closed behind him, Slade

slumped down painfully with his back against the wall to wait. He felt suddenly grateful for the brief chance to rest, the adrenalin that had carried him this far deserting him as abruptly as it had come.

“All right, what’s going on?” Wulfstan asked still standing and glowering down at Slade. Slade looked up at the big warrior and gave a small shrug.

“I don’t really know myself. I just know that I have to get out of here, and it has to be with Trunk.”

“And Trunk is some kind of a, what? He’s half-troll, half-ogre, speaks understandable Common and has friends he wants to rescue?” Wulfstan asked, unable to keep the sarcasm from his voice.

“Looks like it, yeah.” Slade could see why Wulfstan would be skeptical but he still felt compelled to follow his dream’s directive.

“Who are you anyway?” Slade asked the wizard.

“My name is Roulibard. As I said before I’m a wizard. Don’t ask what I’m doing here because I haven’t got a clue. In fact, I’m surprised I can remember my own name, everything else is such a blur, anyway consider me ‘at your service’ Prince Einreich,” he said, finishing with a small bow.

“My name now is only Slade,” Slade said quickly, surprised that this young wizard knew his real name.

Roulibard certainly seemed inoffensive enough; yet Slade found that he was troubled by the wizards’ vagueness and lack of any apparent beatings from his stay in Zeaburg. Slade knew well, from his own experience, that all spellcasters were subjected to the most intense forms of torture from the very beginning of their incarceration. Unfortunately Slade’s body was not the only part of him that was not functioning well, his mind was simply too clouded and tired to think properly.

“As for the rest,” Slade continued, “well, I guess we need all the help we can get so glad to have you on board. This is Wulfstan,” Slade said pointing to Wulfstan, “in there,” he pointed towards the stone door, “as you no doubt heard, are Trunk and Nikolai. Do you know if there’s any way out of here from this level?” Slade asked looking at Wulfstan and Roulibard in turn. Both men shook their heads in a no.

“Zeaburg prison has a reputation for being impregnable; no-one’s ever escaped before. I’d guess it’s because there’s only one way in or out. Any surprise we may have had is gone now. Coming down here was completely stupid” Wulfstan finished angrily.

“Are you questioning my decisions?” Slade asked his voice dangerously quiet.

“As a matter of fact I am,” Wulfstan responded, “I don’t know what in the nine hells you were thinking of coming down here when the only possible way out was up there. Instead you’ve dragged us down here and for what?”

Slade stood up to face Wulfstan, his initial surprise at Wulfstan's arrogant anger giving way now to his own rising anger. Anger, if Slade was honest with himself, he knew stemmed from his own concerns about the wisdom of his decision. Slade had ‘followed the Trunk’ based only on the instructions of a dream, something Slade would once have condemned as a ridiculous way to make a decision. Now Slade could only hope that by following the dreams direction he was doing the right thing, and had not, as Wulfstan was suggesting, led them all down here to their doom.

“You are a soldier of the royal house and as such...” Slade began, arguing simply out of his own fear that Wulfstan was right.

“And you,” Wulfstan said cutting Slade off, “gave up your right to give me orders when you gave up your right to the throne so don’t start with me now. We should’ve left when we had the chance, by coming down here you’ve effectively signed our death warrants and I want to know why?”

“We came down here for a damn good reason and I do not like your...”

“And I don’t like the fact,” Wulfstan again cut Slade off, “that you’ve endangered us all. Up there we had others who would’ve fought at our side to get out. What have we got here? A skinny little wizard and...”

“And me,” Nikolai cut in, his voice as hard and cold as ice, “and without me none of you will make it anywhere alive. Now, both of you shut up, we have a lot of work to do and very little time to do it in and we do not have time for the two of you to argue.”

All three men turned to look at Nikolai standing in the doorway leaning heavily on Trunk’s arm. Unlike the rest of the prison population Nikolai was wearing his own clothes, loose fitting black leather pants and a plain black, linen shirt. His black hair was worn long, framing a pale face that would have been handsome if it weren’t so utterly devoid of emotion. As it was the sensually shaped mouth and beautifully modeled eyes seemed somehow repellent. Again, Slade noticed the chill surrounding Nikolai.

“Right now, we need to make plans.” Nikolai turned to address Slade, “Zeaburg is, or rather has been, impregnable,” Nikolai continued, “This means of course, that we will have to take the entire prison complex.”

“What,” Wulfstan asked sarcastically, “The four of us?”

“Five,” Roulibard said indignantly, still smarting over Wulfstan’s description of him as a ‘skinny little wizard’.

“Sorry,” Wulfstan said dismissively, “the five of us?”

“It can be done,” Nikolai looked at Wulfstan only briefly then continued to speak to Slade, “there are only two levels to the prison, this and the upper level. We need to first gain control of this level, taking whatever we find to assist us, and then we’ll be ready to take the upper level. After all, we don’t really have a choice, we win or die.”

Suddenly Nikolai laughed. Slade felt his blood run cold hearing that laugh, it took all his courage not to turn and run. He could see that both Wulfstan and Roulibard also went a little pale upon hearing Nikolai’s cold, emotionless laughter. Only Trunk appeared unaffected, gazing calmly at his friend.