|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Desert Saga **Chapter III**    **Cast**  Qumi ……….……**Prime Saga Master**, Original Idea  Lord Marko………………….. **Reshner Ihe Birlun** (alkmaarian, mage)  Dane…………………… **Himself** (human, inquisitor)  j0hN\_UsKgLa55….…….**John Hastings** (/, librarian)  Sentry……………… **Hiekatthanasul** (elf, summoner) **~ Perfect place, wrong time ~**   "So what time are we in?" asked Hiek after a short while.    "And why are we so important that you would sacrifice three of your men to protect us?"-continued Hastings.    "You must understand that, what was originally meant to be a teleportation spell, turned to be a portal through time. My three friends and myself tried to keep the portal open, not to get crushed in the vortex, but the energies were to strong. Zamz, the weakest among us, fell unconscious, in the vortex. Then Humash, shortly after him. Soon even my own apprentice Ferush went unconscious. If we spent just a few moments more in the vortex I would've been next. But to our luck we escaped. It's sad that my companions weren't so lucky..." - the old one held a moment of silence.  "... As for the exact time. I can't give you an answer. Nor why the teleportation spell went wrong. What I'm sure of, is that we are in the past.    “And how do you know that?” – John was just waiting for the opportunity to catch the old one with a lie.    “Just to the right, there you can see two obelisks. The carvings on them are new and if you think hard, those two are now part of the town square of the village upon Erlach Oasis.” – everyone’s gaze fell upon the obelisks.    “But if those obelisks are new...” – continued the old one – “...that means we are in the time of my ancestors..." - the last part he said as a question for himself. Hastings moved closer to inspect the large prismatic pillars of stone.    Inquisitor Dane mended his clothes, which had suffered in the last battle, a tear here, dirt marks over there and blood on his hands as he tried to help some of the wounded settle down.  "I see, and who might you be?” – Dane commanded his full attention – “For I am quite curious to know why you decided to intervene, and more interested in how you managed to open a time portal, something which the imperial mage orders and the holy inquisition, does not look well upon" I walk over to one of the obelisks. " And when you speak of your ancestors, whom do you speak of? The Alkmaar perhaps?"    “There is no doubt. “ – said John with a small grin – “these are new carvings, the language is alkmaarian and I do remember them surrounded by the village on the Erlach Oasis.”    The old man moved to the obelisks as well.  "Yes the Alkmaar were my ancestors..." - he placed his hand on the stone - "... better said are my ancestors." - again a short moment of silence as he observed the majestic obelisks - "... my poor people..." - he turned his head and locked onto Danes eyes- "...since that witch came to our land nothing is the same. Most of my people are her minions and the small group that survived her malevolent plans, fight among themselves, forgetting whom the real enemy is. Oh, how low we have fallen. From beings of light, worshipers of the Sun God, reduced to no more then desert rats, addicted to magic that is prolonging our life. Always hiding in the shadows and the gutters of society"    "Magic that is prolonging life? And still you didn't answer my question, why did you save us from those sand abominations." – said Dane backed up by John. Both masters of interrogation. One out of profession the other out of need and perhaps out of a little sense of pleasure.    "Hmm ... right, to make a story short.” – tried the old wizard to give some answers before the gaze of the two men shredded him to pieces – “The survivors of the Great Plague vowed to destroy that witch that later became known to all beings of Nevandaar as Mortis..." - the old one said "witch" with utter disgust - "... the method as to how to complete that task split the survivors into two groups. The group that I'm part of, tries to preserve their bodies through magic, while the others let go of their physical bodies and merged with the sands themselves. Both groups have plans, great schemes, but we also consider that the plans of our adversaries to be heretical and with no moral value, so we sabotage each other in an endless battle for supremacy. I would just love to tell you how you fit in these plans. What gear you represent in the machinations of my group, but that information is reserved for our leaders only. I was sent there to keep you safe and I will continue to do that until my last breath. The plan was to save you from their clutches. Open a portal for you to proceed to safety, but something happened behind us when we entered the vortex. Sadly I was to busy keeping us alive to be attentive to the source of the magic and the spell patterns that where used. I'm surprised as you are. Not even the gods have the power to bend time. But here we are. My plan now is to find a settlement and find out what is the exact situation. If you have any other questions I will be happy to answer them if I have the knowledge to do so..."    Hiek stopped beside the old alkmaarian.  "Not even a God can alter time... still we know nothing of combining three gods' powers..." –all our heroes stood silent for a moment. Then inquisitor Dane rushed towards the boy clutched him and lifted him into the air.    “What witchery are you talking about, elf!” he shouted in a rather menacing manner. Hiek choked two or three times and then began explaining in a silent voice.    "I believe all magic is divine..." – he stopped for a while choking again, Dane just twitched when he hear *all* the magic is divine – "then this individual’s magic comes right out of his god."    "That explains nothing, forest dog!"    Hiek slowly opened his palm.  "This gem, sirs, is one of the tears of Solonielle. I wasn’t sure about it’s identity until I read the markings on the gem. It’s in the oldest elven tongue. And it matches the description of the Tears."  Dane threw the boy away and the blue sapphire jumped out of his hand and fell right on the desert sand. Hiek fell shortly after it. Dane picked up the gem and held it towards the sun.    "This thing?" – he slowly moved it between his fingers.    John Hastings didn't give the time for anyone to answer:  "You said three gods. Who is the third one?"    In this moment Hiek, still lying on the ground, would give everything to shout at the man from the mansion:    "Your master Bethrezen, Hastings!" – and to see how the magician's eyes burn in red flame... but that would have remained only in his fantasy. Most likely John would have just stayed nobly shaken of this fact and say something like "Who? Me?” so this stupid act was surpressed and Hiek finally decided to tell these guys the truth. Well, not the whole of it, just a part, but still - truth.  The boy stood up and lifted the sword.    "This thing, my dear friends, is a very old artifact, known to my tribe as Gallean's Blade. It has the power to summon beasts from the forest to the wielder. When I was pulled into the vortex I was in the middle of another summon. That's why the portal was messed up."    "That explains a lot..." -said the alkmaarian -"... still I felt even the magic of my adversaries changing the vortex. Who knows what more events have altered the original structure of the teleport spell..." - a debate started among the time stranded individuals but was made short by the sound of a camel like creature. They quickly raced to the top of the dune and timidly raised their head to see above the dune. It was a human caravan, made up of six camels loaded with merchandise, about a dozen of varying dressed humans and three humans ridding camels, these were armed with sharp scimitars, an composite bow and held in their hand a round shield and a long spear. Who know what other weapons laid hidden under the layers and layer of garments.    "Should we introduce ourselves?" - asked the old alkmaarian.    "How about we try to get back to our time? As I do not like the prospect of messing up something which we clearly should not!" – Dane walked over to the old wizard and place a very firm hand on his shoulder.    "So might I suggest that you rather hastily come up with a way back to our time" – the inquisitor then placed his gaze upon the caravan. Of all the stupid things that could happen “ – he tough – “we end up in the past. After we return to our time and do the things we must, I shall need to dispose of these, lest their knowledge spread to people of the more sinister nature. He pocketed the gem.    "Just tell them to move on, we need not interfere with them"    "I do understand your concern human, but we need information. First of all to find out when we are exactly and then gather resources to help us go back to our time. We can't do this in the middle of the desert. Of course we will try to keep ourselves away from major events."    "I think we must not care what we do here." – intervened Hiek back on his feet.    "I do not understand" – said the old alkmaarian.    "We are products of the future so we cannot change it. Whatever we change here will either prevent our coming here in the future or... had already happened. The future cannot be changed by the ones that live in the future, because for them it is permanent. I mean, whatever we should mess up in this time had to be messed up."    “The forest child is right, I don’t have a great pleasure in saying this, but yes he is correct we can’t change the past. Time is etched on a very hard, almost unbreakable stone” – John crossed his hands and retreated a few steps to be sure he’s out of the view of the caravan members.    "I see, but still we shouldn't be careless in this time. If there are no other objections we shall make our presence felt to these caravan men and hope that they speak a language we know..." -said the old man observing the different features of cloth the merchants wear.    “Bah! Arcane magic’s and mystery wizardry” – barked Dane – “I really don’t know why the inquisition doesn’t call for your heads?”    “Hmm, don’t know...” – started John rather amused – “perhaps to give even you purpose in Nevadaar!” – and an argument started between the two.    But the old alkmaarian stood in full sight on top of the dune. One of the armed camel riders yelled and placed himself at the base of the dune, spear and shield ready:  "Amardin, suhs va enfao buh ..." - the camel riders voice was strong, John and Dane threw themselves as close as to the ground as much they could to avoid the sights of the armed camel rider. The alkmaarian raised his hand in a salute and okward said:    "Memb uis buh evmun jurne..." - Hiek pulled on the white cloth of the old alkmaarian.    "You know the language?" - said the young elf - "Sure..." - replied the old wizard -"... at least I think I do" – an unconfident smile he let loose.    “Next time, please warn us of your actions old one.” – whispered John to the alkmaarian, laying down with his back upon the dune wall – “...cause my heart is but a flea now.”    Dane, on the other side of John, laid comfortably on the sand floor with a prayer book opened.    “How can you read in a time like this?” – asked Hiek turning his head behind.    “I don’t quite like heathen tongue. And I need some guidance right about now.” – Dane moved his head to the next page and continued to read.    The camel rider saw that there was another person with the old alkmaarian, he raised his head in attempt to se above the dune and said:  "Vur ber tuhund..." - it sounded like a question.    "Resul ink besr, elfar bruk..." -said the alkmaarian, pulling the young elf over the dune. The camel rider laughed and relaxed his grip on the spear...    Hiek with his belly on the dunes crest and in full site now looked at the old alkmaarian and asked:  "What was so funny?"    "Hmm, I think I introduced you as a grand elf instead of a child elf..."    "Did you do that on purpose?" - Hiek smiled nervously.    "Old merchant talk is not my greatest skill, young elf..." - the armed camel rider at the bottom of the dune was going up the dune wall, slowly. Sand trickled down as the camels legs were pressing and being engulfed by sand.    "Mashu ev sukan?" -he asked    "Are there ...more?" - the old man translated to the young elf - "...Yes!!...emm ...Sur!!... sur!!..." - answered the old one.    "Enk brazsu, malel uv douh..." - said the armed escort in an questioning tone.    "Small people too..." - translated again the old man, laughing, when he understood the pun - "... Fir'sh nu, acad eru seghu..." - the escort was on top of the dune among the rest of the time stranded individuals. It seamed strange or the testimony of this mans bravery, to stand among a dozen of strangers.    "Meru..." - he said, looking like he was giving of a greeting, but when he tried to voice another word he saw Dane and was immediately draw by his inquisitors mace, without any pause he was on the ground saying...    "Mirdu Evu !!!" - then from that, a flood of others lashed out from his mouth which came to resemble a fanatical prayer.    "Oh dear, please tell me that means praise the Highfather." – Dane moved one of his hands closely to the mace in case the escort attacked.    "Hope you did not tell them to cut our throats..." – added Hiek and stepped back.    "What he said is "Praised One, calm down everybody" ... - the old one was now on the left side of the escort, who was still praying.  "... or "Enlighten One" would be the better term..." - the old one tried to get his attention and asked.    "Efu bas, Mirdu Evu, e dulu baj kareh..." - pointing towards Dane, the escort face stopped moving in his fervorish prayer and looked puzzled, first at the old one and then at Dane, looking for a sign, a response. Preempting a question from Dane the old man said:    "I've asked him to rise and tell me what is this enlighten one..." - now he spoke in a lower tone -"...we can now work together to gather some information from him, you can make a sign for him to rise and pretend to be angry at me for not knowing about the "Enlighten One", then I will ask the escort to explain in order for him to show his faith...I know you have your beliefs but ... you can help us greatly... don't you think?"    As Hiek continued to retreat from the escort he was close to the dune edge and saw a group from the caravan, made up of three well dressed merchants and an armed escort, going up the dune.    In the mean time Dane accepts the alkmaarians suggestions and motions for the man to rise, while also being very angry with the old one.    "I do hope you know what you are doing old one!" – Dane said in a lighter tone, but still somewhat worried of the possible outcomes of this ruse.    Hiek moved fast but calmly to one of the guidsmen and told something to him, then he turned back and rushed after the running men.    The guildsman quickly informed Dane about the other group that split from the caravan and that they were heading this way. The alkmaarian was able to speak only a few words from his intended plan when other sounds captured the attention of the human escort. He quickly understood that his fellowmen were coming and he had the most peculiar reaction, he signaled to Dane to use his cape to cover his mace and said: "Gur bivid ez..." - fast was even the alkmaarian who translated it with:    "Keep it hidden..." – Dane did what he was told and hid his mace under his cape, but not for a moment did he loosen his grip on the handle, ready to fight at the slightest sign of deceit or the likes.    Hiek was the first person to meet the three merchants and the escort as they were proceeding up the dune towards Hieks companions.    The first impression the men gave to him was that they were some rich desert merchants and their guards. The three were riding small but strong horses and the others were following them on camels.    The first of the rich men was dressed in a nice red cotton robe with yellow and orange decorations. He had moustaches and a red piece of cloth on his head held by a large cloth hoop. His face was dark and thuggish.    The second one was dressed in a similar kind of robe, but this one was of the color blue and made of silk. His belt shined in the desert sun, from the numerous gems on the belt. The man also had a huge white beard and mustaches mixed up in a way that almost covered all of his face. On his head there was a large light blue turban.    The last and perhaps the richest of the three was dressed in white, loose pants and white shirt. He also had a white cape and a small white turban. A cloth covered his face, but his eyes were unusually blue. The way he rode, he jumped from the horse and walked towards the boy informed the whole world that he was a noble. All of them carried not very long curved swords.  The rest of the men moving besides the merchants could be described with an old saying “omnium gatherum” – all kind of skin colors, face features, clothes and expressions, as if the desert had gathered all of her children and chosen the worst behaving ones to become this bunch of bandits. Or so Hiek considered them.    "These people look familiar..." - the alkmaarian was thinking as the group of merchants and their escorts were finally on top of the dune.    "Amardin, mizar!" – said the man in the blue robe, still moving towards the group.    "Amardin, mizarui." – replied the alkmaarian and moved two steps closer to greet them.    "Enk brazsu, ih buv deuh?" - continued the blue robe man, turning his horse so that it's right side was exposed. And began to unsaddle from it, but because of his old age, it took a while to get it over with.    "Ih benu ... pilgrims..." - the old one started to speak pulling out a medallion, and showing it high above his head.    "Pilgrims you are?" – delight was the general sentiment coming from the three merchants when hearing of this. Especially the blue robe man. Who by now became the spoke-person of the merchants and off the horse.    "Yes we come from the Ushib Oasis..." - the old one made a pause waiting to see their reaction and it soon came from the blue robed man.    "Ushib, yes..." – a smile pierced through the think layer of facial white hair – "...went there to see the new statue, have we?"    "Yes we did, a master piece of Alkmaar sculpture, I must say..." - spoke the old wizard with pride, even giving of an arrogant glare to his companions.    "And those?" - finally spoke the white dressed merchant, referring to the others laying down covered in stains of blood, the unmistakable souvenirs the warriors have gathered from the battle with the sand abominations. The merchants’ eyes didn't even give them a long look. His voice indeed had that nobility mark and he used his right hand to help in conveying what he wanted to say.    "These are my companions..." - the old one quickly continued seeing questions and suspicion growing in the hearts of the three merchants – "...they are from the Ulmar ["outsiders"] district of my city." - the merchants shook their heads a couple of times in agreement, but the young noble merchant, still having the initiative, asked:    "And what happened to you as you acquired so many wounds?”    “Raiders my good gentlemen.” – bursts the old one quite sure about his words, and a reaction immediately flared up into the merchants. It was a mix of horror and disgust as raiders can turn any merchants’ enterprise into an ongoing nightmare.    “But we managed to fight them off...” – continued the old mana weaver seeing that the merchants were actually believing his lies.    “Actually the scum are notorious cowards when you decide to show them steel rather then fear.” – tried the noble merchant to impress.    “It seams that our steel was not enough to be shown, my good gentlemen, we had to show them the mastery of our control over it. And in every battle you gather wounds, that’s the way it is” – the two other merchants were pleased to hear that raiders have suffered, but the noble one had a grim stance because he was not able to dominate the old alkmaarian, this time.    I hope I am not asking to much on your behalf but where are you traveling, my good merchants?" - a small pause, then the yellow-orange robed man, who by now did not say anything, bursts into words with flowing enthusiasm:    "We transport merchandise for our mistress, we help..." - the noble merchant quickly placed himself in front of his over enthusiastic colleague. The old merchant also glared at the enthusiastic one.    "Now, now we don't want to give our secrets away, do we..." – you could see his cynical smile a feature almost all merchants have. The merchant then turned his head towards the group –    "Merchant business, pretty boring stuff to the ones that are not involved..." - he tried to smile but what he came up with was far from it -"... where did you say you were going?"    "We are heading to Marzinadh. At least we were heading there, but now we seem to be lost, good sir. The battle moved us from ... familiar territory" - explained the old alkmaarian, steering the discussion on that new path, fearing that too many questions will upset the merchants.    "We can give you information on how to get to the nearest outpost but tell you what because we are going there ourselves how about we go togheter..." – the old robed man let the question hang in the air..    "And what do we have to pay?" - asked the old one. The blue merchant laughed the noble one tough of the possibilities while the orange robed one rubbed his hand togheter with much delight.    "Well nothing... “ – pronounced the old merchant. But his eyes slipped from the old alkmaarian towards Dane, examining him a little and smiled towards him.    “What!” – the orange merchant lost his temper – “Why do we...”    “Calm down, will you!” – the blue merchant lashed out against his colleague – “You heard the alkmaarian there are Raiders among these dunes. And it will be better if we travel with the aid of these fine warriors” – the blue robe merchant approached the old man offering a handshake - "...our journey will be safer with you by our side."    “I agree.” – finally said the alkmaarian as he turned his head to the rest of the group to ask for confirmation.    "Alright then." – came from the blue robe merchant as he urged everyone to regroup at the bottom of the dune. As people started to move the merchant turned to his horse, looked left, looked right. Raised his leg once and gently placed it down and then he said to one of the escorts:    "Could you please help me?" – the escort was prompt and the blue merchant was again proud upon his gray desert horse.    Dane and John descended the dune together, hands in mid air for balance and each step a cautious and calculated one, at that moment John asked:    “Why do you think the merchant smiled?”    “You saw that too?” – Dane was slightly amazed.    “Yes, and my logic tells me that perhaps it has something to do with that “Mirdu Evu” person the escort was crying out about...” – John stopped from his descent a little, smiled and said    “Or, he really ... hehe-he ... likes you!” – leaving a pause between the words so that the phrase can have a hundred meanings or maybe just one, who knows. But Dane had no time to respond as John gained speed and passed him shouting    “Alkmaarian ! Wait! There is something I want to ask you.” -    All of them descended from the dune and reformed the caravan. The noble merchant organized everyone, escorts formed an outer ring while the foot solders gathered close to the caravan wagons and camels. When he tough that everything was in order he yelled:    "Miershu!!!" - and the caravan was on its way.     **~ Sand, stories and arguments ~**     Time passed slowly in this land, time certainly didn't rush, it seamed time had no reason, no big battle over the horizon, no religious uprising, no new messiah, everything was simple. Indeed it was a strange landscape, with high cliffs and paths cut through rock, lakes of sand and the almighty sun. But you felt safe in the caravan. The camel riders, enveloped the group, ever vigilant with their shield close and spear ready. This gave you and the rest of the warriors’ calm of heart. You could let your mind wander and think about time. What was happening "outside", beyond the camel riders, beyond the sand seas? If this was indeed the Alkmaar time, then you could not help your self to think that this was the time of the birth of the Holy Empire and the Almighty Holy Church of the Highfather. The first seeds of that dream were sows on the ground where the great battles of Witch Creek and Merken Woods took place. Or that high up in the mountains of the dwarf Clans the war with the Wulf Raiders was coming to an end with the desperate defense of Gurlheim. And that deep in the forests of the elves power hungry shapeshifters were corrupting the forest nation from within their ranks. Thinking about this made you feel as if you wanted to run as fast as you could, or magically grow wings, for that all of Nevadaar - of this time- could be experienced by you... But sadly it is a forbidden fruit, you must after all continue somehow with your life, back in the future.    After the caravan was formed Hiek and Dane ended up guarding the rear end together as the others slowly moved forward. Both did not know why they chose exactly them to guard the last wagon. But both had some kind of feeling that none of their new companions really trusted them.    "So, how did you end up here?" asked the elf after perhaps half an hour traveling through the sand dunes.    "What?" – responded Dane not sure about what the elf was talking about and a little irritated that his solitude was interrupted.    "I ask myself this question for some time now and can not find the answer..." – he took a deep breath and continued – "I thought that perhaps you will have your explanation of why you are here..."    I look suspiciously at Hiek  "You wish to know why I am here? I am here to root out heresy, to spread the light of the Highfather in the darkness that is his absence, to smite the damned and slay the unclean. That is why I am here!”  Hoping that my answer is enough for him I move on in silence.    After the shocking answer Hiek moves along in silence but after that he speaks again:  "So I guess you have a mission in your life... I wonder how it came to be like this? I mean... well I can't say I always wanted to become a summoner, but it just happened. I had the tongue to speak to the animals and the powers to wield the sword. The first is a racial trait to my tribe... well, you know, before the rise of Gallean we were separated and a lot of tribes roamed the forest alone... after that we were united... but still... the second is... rare. Usually only those of pure blood can wield the sword and my tribe are... wild ones. I didn't suppose I could wield it, of course..." Hiek spoke as he did not understand what he was doing, he often stopped, looked at his feet and after a minute or two he went on. As for Dane... he seemed like he was listening, but Hiek was not very sure about that. "So... after that I was taken to the queen and... she said that I must be kept in secret... I was twelve then... they thought me how to wield a sword and how to survive in the forest. Then my companion and me... the one I lost in the forest... we went on a journey... and... that's how I ended up here." Dane sighed. "Hey, how about you? What was that made you take up the inquisitor's mace?"    A distant look enters the eyes.  "Why I became an inquisitor? It all began when I was 15.."  I let out a sigh    "I was the son of a town guard and a seamstress.. A fairly pleasant upbringing. I was going to follow in my father's footsteps and join the townguard as well. But alas it was not meant to be so. It was a cool Autumn afternoon, Witch-hunters had come in search of witches and heretics that had been sighted in the area. My father and a few other guardsmen and villages joined in the search, certain that they were somewhere nearby and not any of the townspeople... Oh how they were wrong"    I say nothing for a few minutes before taking a deep breath and continue.    "In the evening they came back, two men missing, with evidence of the heretics main lair lying in the city, to be more precise, the local basket makers guild. At that time I was at the local tavern, trying to impress some pretty girl with manly banter.. Unknowing of what was about to happen.. They entered the basement of the guild, finding several heretics in acts of depravement, among them was the captain of the guard, who had been so helpful to point out the suspected lair outside the town, the mayor who had held a town meeting to inform of the witch-hunters purpose and asking the townsfolk to aid them. Already the presence of these people among the cultists was shocking to the whole group, but my father, and later me, still had one shock in surprise... My mother was among them, wearing nothing and covered in vile markings! Her of all the people! The one, who brought me into this world, cared for me, nursed me when I was sick! She was among them! My father was in shock, but only for a very short while, for soon he was filled with anger, with hate. They stormed the cultists, my father singling out my mother so that he might end her vile life and hope I wasn't tainted with her vile lies."    I stare up at the sky, my throat dry.    "It was a short and bloody fight, the group had lost a few good men. But there was more to come, for in the fight a number of cultists had escaped. They called upon the help of others in town and the countryside and marched upon the loyal forces and coaxed themselves into the dreaded bloodfrenzy. Soon there was but chaos in the town, many were slaughtered in the first few moments without knowing what was going on. What few townsguards that were left on the holy side sacrificed themselves so that normal townsfolk could escape from the town, other townsfolk, including myself, gathered what weapons we could get our hands on and started battling the bloodthirsty heretics. They fought without thought for their own safety and were easily slain, but there were so many, we were quickly overwhelmed. Soon a few others and me were cornered in the townsquare, when my father and the veteran witch hunters appeared, fighting their way through to us. It was a happy but short reunion, my father was glad that I was not corrupted by the darker powers, and I was glad to see him. But as I said it was a short reunion. An arrow struck my father through his stomach.. the others ran off to fight and so would I have done if not for my father begging me to stay and listen for what he had to tell. He told me what he had discovered outside the town, he told me off the gathering under the merchants guild, of my mothers betrayal"    A small tear forms and falls from my left eye    "Then he made me take up an oath.. He made me swear that I would always combat the enemies of the Empire and The Highfather wherever I would meet them, no matter the cost. He looked at me as his life faded away saying to me: “I’m sorry for this bitter legacy, my son.” And forever closed his eyes. At that moment, I was filled with rage and hatred towards those who had slain my father. Shortly after the garrison from a local fort arrived and cleaned up the remaining heretics. Afterwards I was all alone, no home, no family and all I had was what my father had saved for hard times, his armor was ruined, so I could not use that, but his sword I took, nothing special about it except that it had belonged to my father... I was about to ask one of the officers of the army if I could enlist, when an young inquisitor approached me and offered me to join and fight the enemies of the Highfather. At first I was inclined to say no, but I remembered my promise to not only to fight the enemies of the Empire but also enemies of the Highfather, I accepted the offer and was soon part of a small group of witch-hunters, lead by the inquisitor Rowan. We were trained to seeking out heresy and destroying it."    I look at Hiek.    "That was the beginning, the first few steps on the road to becoming an inquisitor, perhaps I will tell you more sooner"    "I'm sure that your mother was a good person, Dane... I mean, before the darkness tainted her... But Dane, please, do not judge the heretics just for being heretics... judge them of being good or bad... in the eyes of my own people I'm worse than the demons you slay..."    "She was a heretic that betrayed humanity and Highfather for her own gains, even now she probably burns in the pits of hell! But what heresy have you done that has made you an outcast in the eyes of your own people?”    I cast an inquisitive glance at Hiek    "A lot of things happened during my training, but my first and worst sin is touching the forbidden sword of my god. Some believe my fate after that was because of this... I killed an archon, kissed the princess... I stole this sword." Hiek turned the hilt to Dane "I guess I have even worse sins rumored around the country. Still my queen ordered one of her royal guards... which I left to be killed... to escort me to safety... I do not know why."    Dane looked unbelievingly at the boy.    "You are a good man, Dane... I don't want you to hate me for my past... neither for my lack of belief in the Highfather..."    I look at Hiek questioning    "Forbidden sword? I do not like the sound of that, and even more that you have touched it. The other things do not matter, for they are the products of a heretic culture that does not believe in the glory of the highfather... but answer me this.. You kissed a princess? That is usually not an ordinary feat"    Hiek broke in laughter.    "You bet!" he calmed himself then continued "She is... she is fun... she wanted to... she wanted to kiss somebody. But then the archon came in. He saw us, so the bloody noble decided to "defend the princess's honor"... He provoked me in duel. I did not want to kill him, but he was so furious that I couldn't hold on..." Hiek sighed "I guess you can ask him what it is to kiss a princess." the boy pointed at the man in the white who was leading the caravan.    I was suprised that Hiek made such a assumption.    "And how should he know how it is to kiss a princess? Has he kissed the same princess as you? But how did you meet the princess? Was it oh so romantic or just an accident? And more importantly, why do you remember this? Is it not probable that she has forgotten you?”    "He had not kissed my princess... he kissed her... great grand grandmother perhaps? Anyway, that merchant, I recognize him from the murals in an ancient elven fortress, at least his cape is familiar. Any way the murals speak his name as: Thanatos. He happens to be an alkmarian prince and possesses great power."    “Thanatos? I do recall that name as well...” – said Dane – “but not in the way you do. I remember reading about an angel of death named Thanatos. And that Undead sorcerers of great power could summon him if needed, it would seem he has a long way to go yet. Though I can't imagine why he would want to kiss an elven princess.."      \*\*\*      "What delightful information have you gathered... em... can't seem to remember your name old one?" - John moved closer to the alkmaarian wizard and as he came nearer so his voice descended into to a silent whisper.    "Reshner Ihe Birlun... Resh, you can call me, Resh..." - the old man continued without looking at John.    "And Resh, have you found clues at to what time period we belong to?" - Johns metallic voice gently navigated the desert air – “Because I could observe your little game with the merchants, presenting them with questions to feed your desire for information”    "Yes, I think I have pinpointed our location in time. It seams that we are...” – Resh sighted – “a couple of years before the witch, Mortis, turns the Great Plague upon my people."    "How do you know this, Resh?" – John acted caring.    "The statue of Ushib Oasis was completed just before the Plague started..."    "Just before? Are we safe then?" - Johns eyes opened wide in distress.    "I said "just before" in a historical sense, and if it the plague erupted the merchants would have told us, if they omitted to do so then we'll find out when we get to the outpost. And I don’t think you have anything to worry about the Alkmaarian Plague doesn’t seam to hurt others."    “And what about yourself?”    “I survived it once I’ll survive it again. This time after so many years the magic that sustains my body will protect me.”    "I understand..." - John paused and pulled on the backpack he decided to carry - "... what is your story alkmaar?" - he asked the old man. Resh laughed.    "My story? Are you bored already?" - old man Resh, old as he was, jumped upon a rock and then down from it just to prove a point that the magic is strong within him.    "Fine, I'm bored too...hmm... born in the city of Ralmaar, actually second city in the Alkmaar nation is Ralmaar. Nested in the Cliffs of Gurash it’s a jewel of a city" - he said proudly - "Son of the prefect of the city I was..." - but then his face changed and for the first time looked in the eyes of John - "... I was born just ...before the outbreak of the Great Plague, just a boy back then, I seam to still recall after so many years that night when we were carried out of our dear city like nothing more then simple refugees. Now I know that we were the lucky few that were able to leave Ralmaar before the full force of the plague struck..."- as the discussion progressed between the two, one camel steered quickly to the left, towards old Resh. The animal didn't hit him, but he grabbed his chest and let of a short groan.    "Are you all right?" - asked John holding the old man on his feet.    "Yes, I'm fine." – he got onto his feet visibly worried.    “And how were you able to survive, when the rest of your people fell to the embraces of death?” – John still held the old alkmaarian and helped him walk.    “My mother was a High-priestess. And her order...” – Resh stopped to cough.    “Are you sure you’re alright?” – John studied his face in a feeble attempt to discover the problem.    “Don’t worry I need to take my breath first.” – they walked slower and Resh became better. – “Now where was I? Oh yes, my mother and her priests had the power of ritual that extended your health.”    “That’s an extraordinary power!” – John considered.    “It seams so but the amount of mana that is needed for the ritual scars the soul and body in such a way that it remains permanently addicted to mana. I have to meditate constantly so my body can channel in mana and keep it ... in working order.”    “It doesn’t seam to be a high price to pay for a longer life. Or am I missing something?”    “Personally grafting mana to your own soul is rather painful. Most of the ritual is made to prepare your soul to hold on and alleviate the subsequent pain.” – the old one was better now and able to walk on his own.    “Many have died” – he continued – “trying to complete the ritual. Others have died from mistakes made while meditating. But most have just given up and with the lack of mana from the ritual their bodies decayed and their soul was released to the nether.”    “I see.” – said John – “One other question if you would allow me.”    “If the answer is at my grasp I shall try to answer.”    “You have almost human features, from tales I know that alkmaars have somewhat other features.”    “It’s a ...” – Resh was slightly amused – “a magical mask, a disguise. It helps to move among the population of Sandburg with such a, shall we say, bending of perception. Or do you prefer this.” – a for a short moment Resh changed his face to resemble that of an orc from Hagfang.    “What have you...” – John was alarmed at first but calmed down – “you seem to have a talent for bending perception and assaulting the good health of my hearth with your unpredictable actions, old one”    “I’ll try to keep that in mind next time I do something.” – Resh changed back to the form John knew him by.      In front of you, appeared in the distance a structure. Once you came closer to it you realized that it is a guard post. A long stone tower and a small stone building at the base of it, built on top of a rock formation that seamed an island in a sea of sand. The stones were perfectly crafted and joined togheter, the tower had three wooden platforms, manned by a small number of guards.    The guards were armed with a spear and wore a breast plate and armor pieces that covered the lower leg and lower arm. No portion of skin was revealed, covered either by armor or white thin cloth. Even their faces were covered with helmet. The guards were tall and stood proud, ever vigilant to danger.    "Have we arrived at the outpost, you were talking about?" - asked John    "No, this is just a beacon tower." - answered Resh    "When we are close enough, someone from the caravan will ask for a storm warning. If there is a storm then we will stop here. The beacon has a large cave under it’s foundation were we can hide.”    “But how do they know a storm is coming?” – asked John keeping his eyes on the tower that was getting bigger and bigger. Its features becoming more detailed.    “The towers are tall enough to keep in visual contact with other such towers. If a storm is coming they all can inform each other about it.”        When the caravan moved under the tall shadow of the Beacon Tower, one of the merchants moved infront and raised his hand with a piece of ruby in it.    "Cresh, venek tuh juru il opaj?" – it was the blue dressed old merchant that yelled. The yell was directed at a person on the lowest platform of the tower. The guard looked as the one in charged because he had a more lavish decorated helmet compared to the others on the tower.    "There he goes. The ruby, is an identification stone, labeling us as merchants" - said Resh to John. The guard on the platform raised his spear and yelled back:    "Mirnu, fer bul" - meaning - "No, have a good journey."    "No storm?" - John looked first at the Tower and then turned his attention to Resh.    "At least not until the next Beacon Tower. But if I know better this is the last Beacon Tower on the road to Marzinadh."    “So we are close to a city?” – asked John    “By nightfall we are there.”    Resh was having the time of his life. On his face you could see happiness that you rarely see in a person. Even the old merchant dressed in blue saw this and moved next to Resh. The merchant was observing the caravan as it exited the shadow of the Tower when he saw the old alkmaarians expression.    "You have the look of a person that is finally eating his favorite food after a long time." – the merchant laughed.    "Just happy to see my land after so much time..." – answered Resh his heart filled with joy.    "How long have you been in the pilgrimage then?"    "To long..." - Resh stared back at the Beacon Tower and its guards. A moment passed. Then he turned and asked:    "Pardon me for asking, but the white dressed merchant, I see that he has some Alkmaar nobility insignia on his clothes ... how did that happen?"- the old merchant lowered his voice.    "Perhaps because he's 'jumul', his mother was human, father alkmaar. But these things are common in the Alkmaar lands near the Merchant Sea. That's about all that I can say to you, because in the end you are still a stranger to us, and secrets are best kept to ones self, don't you think?"    "Yes you are right..." - the old one searched his brain for a conversation topic - ". It’s nice to see the Huruj Alkmaar Troops again."    "The Guards on the Tower?" - asked the old merchant.    "Yes, the guards near the Oasis are mixed, from other races. It's wonderful and reassuring to see an full alkmaar guard..."    "Spoken like a true alkmaarian..." - the old merchant grinned.    "Really? Emm... I mean, I often forget about modesty when it comes to speaking about my people..."    "Modesty is not one of your peoples major feature, is it?..." - continued the old merchant.    "Perhaps, what do you most like to sell, merchant?"     \*\*\*    Hiek slowed his answer because of the tower they were passing by. Then after the small rest he replied:    "It might be the same person, we really do not know much of him... but I know one thing. When he kisses his "bride", alkmaarian old and young will begin to perish slowly. He was the first to suffer from the plague and the last to die." – Hiek looked down and grew gloom.    "So... Mortis did not kill the alkmarians on her own... my own people helped her." – his elven heart cracked as he finally understood the truth.  "There is going to be a war soon. My people will die... The marriage was for peace... but we wanted something else... we wanted revenge."    "Your people? War? Marriage?“ – Dane couldn’t believe how again the elves had a hand in something that turned so wrong.  “But who did you seek revenge upon? The dwarves? Or somebody else?”    "I think he was speaking about my people, inquisitor." - Said Resh just a few steps ahead of Hiek and Dane, by his left side John and on the right more advanced was the old merchant.  "This part of Alkmaarian history is still foggy to me, elf..." - he stopped for the elf to reach him - "... please continue your story"    Hiek stopped in his place for a second or two, then he continued forward faster to take up the step or two he had lost.    "Fine, I'll try, although I remember it partly. Soon after the dwarfs attacked us our god, Gallean, gave us his sword and went to ask Wotan to stop this nonsense. Still Wotan cared more about his own children and the plead of our god was answered with a brutal crime. Evens among the gods there are forbidden things, but in his fury Wotan ripped Gallean's heart and threw his body into the sun.    Hiek coughed and gathered more courage to continue the tale.    "Then Solonielle, our goddess, rushed and caught Gallean's body shortly after it had plunged into the sun. She managed to pull him out of there, but her skin was severely damaged. The merpeople tried for months to heal her body, there was no cure. Something in the Sun burned her beyond anything in their knowledge could mend. Her race finally decided to enshroud her body in silk algae to prevent further degeneration. What followed is known by almost everybody, she killed the alkmers and turned them into undead to use them to destroy the dwarves. Still there is a shameful page in the history of elves that we buried hoping that nobody would know it. The others that know the story are the alkmers, but their silent lament is forever silenced by Mortis. A silence we helped establish. For the love of our God we helped her, accepted her plans and advises. It was our mistake, that we followed her on that shameful path.    Hiek looked upon Resh with moist eyes somehow seeking redemption or perhaps to show that he was sorry for what his people have done in their demise.     "You already know the story how the Lovers imprisoned the Sun God for his terrible doings. And how his madness can, if released, shatter Nevandaar in a scorching blaze of anger. Also months after Wotan committed his horrendous crime a rumor surfaced that Alk'nar's avatar has risen in the form of an half-breed. The alkmer father took the child with him to his people and there the powers of the child were revealed and enhanced by the alkmer priests. Solonielle logic could giver her only one explanation - she concluded that the sun sucked out Gallean's life essence and transferred it to Alk'nar allowing him to trick the seal. Solonielle traveled to Alk’nars Tomb to find out what was happening. The Sun God was still trapped but the essence he received from Gallean was enough to rebuild the bond between Alk’nar and the alkmers in the form of an avatar. Fearing the people will release the Sun God she called upon the help of my people.  Moving ahead with her plan, she hoped in her strained heart that once the avatar is dead the essence will return to her love, Gallean.    Hiek looked up at the sun for a moment.     "Our queen at that time - Selievelle, gathered an army beyond anyone’s imagination. Almost all of the elves participated to avenge our fallen god and hoped to restore him. A war was declared. We, the elves, united for the first time, rushed towards to the alkmar's territory.    Hiek said it proudly.    "I don't know much of the progress of the war, but in the end, after two years and a half, both people were exhausted and wished for peace. Then our goddess, Solonielle, gave us her permission to end this war. At first, she wanted, no, demanded with full fury that the war be continued. Seven days Queen Selievelle pleaded before the goddess. People finally rejoiced on the seventh day as our queen came with the permission to end the war.  Alkmarians were amazed and did not know what to do for a couple of months but in the end they accepted, when Solonielle proposed a royal marriage, to strengthen the treaty even more. Our own princess, Melinea, was going to marry prince Thanatos, the avatar of the Sun God.    Hiek ceased from his tale, he let out a sigh holding his head low.    “The day of the wedding slowly came. Many adventurers were sent to bring elements. Jewels, herbs, cloth from all over the land to make our princess a wonder to behold. Solonielle herself cared for the preparation. She said to Melinea: “In the tradition I banded my soul to Gallean, so shall you to Thanatos.  Three years after the start of the war the day of the wedding came. It was a happy day for everyone. The murals depicted a paradisiadic mood.”    "Still Solonielle had something else in mind. She poisoned Melinea's lips with venomous plague that would affect only almarian lives. This day Solonielle was poisoned along with prince Thanatos. When he kissed the princess his eyes turned to green and his skin grew pale. Most of the alkmarians there decided it was a betrayal and turned on us. And it was! But we had nothing to do with it...    The wedding became a slaughter! Our own princess and her mother Selievelle were killed that day! Blood! Blood! Murder! Death!"    Hiek was screaming and some of the caravan members turned to see what was happening at the rear end. Resh calmed them with some unknown words while Hastings was shacking the boy hoping to get him out of the trance. After the boy regained consciousness John released him.    "Why were you talking like that? You could not possibly be there when that happened."  Hiek nodded.    "I wasn't but... this sword was..." Hiek took a deep breath observing the sword and continued.    "A sole survivor managed to carry the sword out of there and told the other ones about Solonielle's betrayal. Terrified of the things that happened on the wedding the elves slowly left Solonielle as the alkmarians died. The plague spreaded and there was nothing to do... no way to cure it. My people retreated in guilt to the Forests to mourn the passing of their queen and princess, but everyone felt their loss was nothing compared to the pain of the alkmaars that died with a thousand curses on their lips directed at us and Solonielle.    "Although rumors about Thanatos's death spread through the lands Gallean remained dead. The elves became a godless race on that day as alkmarians did so long ago. We knew exactly how they fell when they lost their god. And we hoped that one day we'll have our own avatar to show us the way as Thanatos showed it to the alkmarians. And we had...    Hiek didn’t like the path the story was heading.    "When Solonielle remained without worshipers to follow her she turned to the dead bodies of our adversaries... She revived them one by one making her monstrous army. And as she did that she was slowly poisoned by her own poison and the love in her heart died and remained only passion and madness. Solonielle died. Mortis was born.    "That is the end of our secret story that no one should know. But... if we are staying here you would have learned it anyway so I think I did the right thing by telling you this. You might wonder why I know this secret elven history. Every elf knows it so we will not forget our sins towards this world."    "Now I remember too, young elf..." - spoke Resh - "... that was all part of the Fleshless Goddess grand plan." - his face changed to resemble what was inside, a maelstrom of hate. His brain started to dig up everything from his memory.    "After the plague, what was left of my people, fled as quickly as possible moving west. After finding somewhere to settle in what became Imperial lands, the next step was to seek clues leading us to the explanation of what has happened. We gathered information slowly but soon we could assemble somekind of answer.”    Resh looked upon the elf but no anger was in his demeanor.    “Your story is right Hiek. Solonielle grieved over the body of Gallean, and yes Alk'nar was able to absorb the essence of her "sleeping" lover. The essence was stored in one Alkmaarian family and with each generation its male members became stronger and stronger while Gallean was closer to oblivion. Solonielle knew that those alkmaarians will grow in power and the bond with Alk’nar will grow stronger until the Sun God will have enough power to persuade the alkmaarians to break the lock of the Tomb.    “We, by that time, lost the image to our Old God. Only tradition and “ancient” stories remained. We always heard a whisper in deep meditation, which was Alk'nar, but our fathers and grandfathers taught us to ignore it, never telling us what it really was. Ji-krul (“Mind Demon”) it was called. The education of every young alkmaarian began with the knowledge to silence it. Perhaps that is why Alk’nar choose a half-breed as his avatar. Young Thanatos didn’t have the knowledge to silence the voice of Alk’nar, but he had the heritage from his father, inheriting the essence of Gallean from Alk’nar trough his parent. By the time his father got to him it was to late. Alk’nar control over the boy was complete. And from this control Alk’nar could remain invisible to the eyes of my people. Thanatos father tough he got to him in time and gave the boy a “proper” education. Oh how Alk’nar laughed as he listened to Thanatos father preach, but silently dismissing his knowledge. Soon trough deceit and miracles Thanatos grew in power and importance.”    “From the side Solonielle was observing Alk’nars every step. When Thanatoses moves became apparent in the eyes of the goddess she choose to do something about it. First she came, to explain to us that if we do not do something, great tragedy will befall on us. But my leaders and more important the avatar storing the essence, rejected any collaboration with Solonielle. What they understood was that Solonielle was trying to steal their power. She was trying to do two good things and was seen as to be doing one evil one. Solonielle was thrown out of Alkmaar lands. Rejected and by now she could also hear the whisper of Alk'nar mocking her, she grew frustrated.”    “Solonielle could her Alk’nars whispers?” – asked the elven boy.    “We found some of her inscriptions that talked about the arguments she had with Alk’nar in her mind. Explaining this was troublesome, was she that mad already or perhaps Solonielle and Alk’nar were kin as some sources tell them to be. Still the complete truth evaded us until this very day.”    “After being cast out her heart began to be consumed by a new entity in her body. On the shores of the future Merchant Sea consumed by the toughs of what must be done and the stubbornness of my people. She determined to end the life of Thanatos and anyone that stood in his defense. Crossing another line pushing her away from what she once was and stood for.”    “Solonielle tried to assassinate him, but to her dismay all of my people came to protect him. She turned to her beloved Merpeople, but soon realized that they were in no condition to fight the Alkmaar in arid lands. The only ones that she could count on were the children of her lover, the Elves.”    “The war, that Hiek talked about, came. Grand armies assembled in our capital. We were able to draw the elven forces out of the forest and into the desert, needless to say the elves suffered great losses. But then Solonielle found a brilliant leader among the ranks of the elven warriors, this gave the elves the much needed edge in the war.”    “To the luck of my people, our ancestor priest perfected every day a method to raise our warriors from the death bed, just for a little while, to help in the war. Actually this was the first time, we think that the Mortis in Solonielles heart, saw a way to raise an army to help punish Wotan. The war dragged on, Solonielle grew more and more mad, the fear that her lover will pass into the Great Nether Sea, far away from her reach, and the awakening of Alk'nar, disturbed her greatly. But the battlefield was locked in place. Scores of elves died trying to break the deadlock, plunging themselves by the hundreds in fanatical assaults only to embrace death to soon and the Elven Nation could do no more. She lashed out at the elves for consulting her about peace with my people.”    “We know that the Elven Queen went for days to Solonielle begging her for peace. And every day Solonielle died knowing that the elves were the last option and they can do no more. Her weak soul began to embrace Mortis. Solonielle was left with no options while Mortis still had one card to play. Genocide. A tough abhorred by Solonielle, but she was weak now and she fell asleep while Mortis was born to full consciousness when queen Selievelle came for the seventh day to ask for peace.”    “Peace came. The royal wedding. The betrayal... and the plague. The death of my people was assured but...” – Resh gave of a cinical laugh – “... Mortis could not yet celebrate victory. The last dying priest gave Thanatos immortal undead life just to spite Mortis. She roared with anger and fury, obliterating our capital city in one careless flash of godly powers. Then proceeding to hunt down Thanatos, finally capturing and bonding him to her will after six years. Mortis returned to the ruins of...of ... I’m sorry I can’t talk more about it, makes me sad..." he stops... then continues - "... at least we are out of harms way... the merchant in white is indeed a noble but not in the family of Thanatos, the family of the Avatars has a different emblem."    “And what is the emblem of Thanatos.” – inquired the elven youth. Resh looked at him rather bedazzled, not quite understanding his question.    “You want me to draw you a picture of it?” – he demanded a clarification from the elf, coming out rather rude.    “No. Just a short description, what elements make it up? You can answer if your heart desires so, but if not it isn’t all that important.”    “I don’t remember it quite clearly but a circle with the alkmaarian symbol for mountains, as his family is from the highlands.” – answered Resh, not quite convinced by the verity of his answer.    “Inquisitor?” – Resh turned to Dane – “You have been quite silent, don’t you have an opinion on this matter?” – Dane raised his head from the little prayer book he was carrying around.    "Well the interesting thing about the entire sequence of events is, that if you want to blame someone is not Wotan ...” – Dane looked at the elven youth – “but Bethrezen the Liar, Bethrezen the Schemer, for it was he that orchestrated the entire chain of events that led to the death of Gallean and the fall of the alkmaar.“    The inquisitor made progress to be in the center of the group so all can hear his side of the disciplian coin.    “As we all know, something terrible had happened in the elven lands and they were forced to make an exodus towards the clan lands, but who had done this ? The answer is simple. Bethrezen, Bethrezen the Corrupter, for he had lured a group of elves with promises of power, wealth and lust so strong that they would do anything, even betray their own people, and so they did. They burned the forests, slaughtered townships, summoned demons, and all hidden from the eyes of Gallean and Solonielle through twisted and cruel magics, fueled by the souls of innocents. How do I know this? During the last hundred years, we stumbled upon of these twisted elves, of course he would tell nothing. Their journals told us everything we needed to know, the journals are locked under one of the largest inquisitorial strongholds in the Holy Empire, protected by Inquisitors and Inquisitorial Wizards of great strength. But let us continue shall we? The elves fled from their homelands towards the dwarves in hopes of getting help and shelter.. Alas the dwarves where not expecting such things, and when they saw the thousands of refugees, they though it must have been an army sent to conquer them. Their armies assembled, they went to war, and things only got worse after that, for the agents of Bethrezen told lies to the leaders of the refugees, saying that they should fight back instead of trying to talk about it. And the refugees fought, but against the dwarves they didn't have a chance. The slaughter continued for several days, an emissary from the dwarves came to the elves, only to return... shaven! This was a great insult to the dwarves, who then decided to show them no mercy, knowing not that the Cultists of Bethrezen had committed the atrocity, but alas there was no going back, the battles became more intensive and the elven emissaries were all beheaded. The climax came when Gallean approached Wotan and asked why his people were slaying the elves, Wotan said Gallean should just go away. Soon it came to fighting and the rest we know... I hope this has enlightened you"    "And why should I blame Bethrezen and not your blind god who had misjudged him, human?” – lashed out Hiek.    “He claims to be perfect, to know everything, but still he doomed his first born son for a crime he had not committed! I told you already, we all remember this story to remember our own guilt about the things that happened. We blame no one for our own mistakes, neither god, nor creature."    "How dare you judge the Holy Highfather! Is it his fault that Bethrezen abused his gifts? I see? So you hate Wotan and the Dwarves because You elves made a mistake? How arrogant of you as always !"    "I hate no one, inquisitor, and that's what I am trying to tell you! You are the arrogant one, the one who claims he and his god are perfect! We all know that Bethrezen is judged for something that was not his fault, still he is your creator but you were not even least thankful for that. How can he not hate you for what you are?"    "Saying that something is perfect doesn't imply its creations are perfect! Bethrezen was given the gift of life and thought, but in the end he used it only for his own glory! Bethrezen has become a corrupt and dark schemer! And if you are to blaspheme against the Highfather!” –Dane closed the gap between him and Hiek    I shall Strike you down!" – to show his words were not hollow he banished his cloak to reveal the inquisitors weapon and tighten his grip upon it.    "Gentlemen, please..." - Johns voice was heard, you could see a smile on his face with which he tried to calm everybody, bring a more relaxed atmosphere around the inquisitor and elf. The argument between the two was heating up and no one wanted for the sand beneath their feet to become glass. Resh also placed himself between the two.    "This will get you nowhere, we must be patient with ourselves, so we can get out of this mess in one piece." - Resh looked at both of them - "... from now on let's make a rule, no discussions about religion, deal?" – all went silent, desiring not to speak with anyone, giving off only a head nod to confirm the rule presented by Resh.     ~ The path back – Marzinadh ~               The caravan were following two tall stone walls, the corridor, hundred man wide, was cut into the stone by ancient events. It seamed endless, even the Sun began to slowly descend into his underground abode to slumber for the night. As the dusk was being replaced by the blanket of night, the stone walls departed from each other and a new landscape opened to the caravan members. Being trapped for hours into the desert, this was paradise, vegetation was growing freely and you almost forgot where you were. Even more source for wonder was the city of Marzinadh itself. As the right stone cliff departed from you, in the distance the alkmaarian city was built upon the cliff. A beautiful symbiosis between crafted and natural rock.                As you got closer, passing trough farmland covered in golden light from the dusk you could now understand and pick up all the details from alkmaarian architecture that you could not grasp when looking upon the ruins in your time. And what a difference it was, to know the entire building and the beauty of its clean, yet simple composition. The city didn’t strike you as lavish, but more as beautiful and friendly, keeping it’s ties firmly rooted into the scale of it’s inhabitants, few were the buildings that had monumental proportions    From what Resh told you, alkmaarian society was rather different from imperial, clan and alliance way of thinking. All three acquired material wealth, while his people cared more for their spiritual wealth. An alkmaar is taught that it is better to know how to play another instrument then to have another coin in his pocket. Their lifestyle revolved around learning and developing skills to new levels compared to hoarding wealth and demanding respect for such accomplishments. This in fact fueled the notion that alkmaarians are arrogant. It is really a misunderstanding of their way of presenting a fact. Alkmaarians love to talk about their achievements in order to find out where they lack, compared to other individuals. They however are not boasting about their knowledge.    Farmers were demanded to produce the bare minimum for their families and devote the rest of their time to music, sports, magic, knowledge and social events. Crafts credo was centered on the skill put into the object and not the object itself, while you could not find merchant alkmaarians, other people acted as merchants for the alkmaarian society. In the end the greatest income for alkmaarian society, the one that contributed to keep it’s population fed and army well supplied was scholarship. Many races sent students to learn from the alkmaarians.    However this was not always the case. In the time of Alk’nar the very reverse of alkmaarian society developed. And because they were not use to it, like the other races that somehow developed over time means to limit the destructive paths of greed. For the alkmaar the whole episode became a debauchery, twisting themselves and their god in the process. Due to the Restoration after Alk’nar entombment alkmaar society returned to its primordial roots.    \*\*\*  The caravan entered the city trough a gateway dedicated to outsiders because these were subjected to a sort of quarantine, althou not as long as its imperial counterpart. The alkmarrian lasted for one week.    The merchants had separated from our adventurers passing unhindered the checkpoint. The adventurers were lead by on rather peculiar individual. I say peculiar because he had goblin features but behaved a lot more proper, then his wild brethren. Resh spoke of this one as a kroblin. In ages past a tribe of goblins demanded sanctuary from the alkmaarians. Reshes people gave them shelter and educated them, subsequent generations gave birth to kroblins. Still rather wild by alkmaarian standards but still good enough to be liaison with the other races. Resh joked that a well-dressed kroblin was better then other diplomats. You could understand why Resh didn’t get many laughs.    Lul-opo, the kroblin, guided the adventurers group to a building resembling a caravan serai. It was of a square shape with a courtyard. The bottom level had the stables for camels, horses and other pack animals that existed in Nevandaar of that time. While the upper levels held apartments for the guest. As the kroblin walked past apartments, he said and Resh translated:    “Two here, one here, six here.” – referring to the amount of people that could stay in the apartments.    “This hallway belongs to your private use” – the kroblin spoke to Resh considering him the leader of the group.    “Thank you Lul-opo, and here is something for your trouble.” – Resh gave him 2 gold globes.    “You are most generous master alkmaarian, but I don’t understand why you choose to stay with these ulmar (outsiders)” – the kroblin bowed but kept his position looking upwards to see Resh.    “They are my friends, now go ” – Resh dismissed the kroblin. And as the kroblin walked away and disappeared behind a corner John joined Resh presence.    “He called you alkmaarian, but I see you as a human.” – John extended his arm to touch his face.    “You do.” – Resh answered but did not give more information, rather moving in the direction of one of the room to observe its contents.    “Ah...” – John remarked just behind the alkmaarian – “Remarkable and borderline amazing. So you can... very interesting.” – John remained besmithen in the doorstep of a room uderstanding that Resh can project his features as he liked to anyone.    “You must teach us...” – John demanded.    “Oh, and I will.” – said Resh.    “What?” – Dane jumped.    “When we return you must be able to defeat those sand ... abominations on your own. They have taken a step to far and I worry for Sandburg.”    “You do?” – asked John rather unconvinced by the alkmaarians statement.    “My people need Sandburg to thrive, don’t ask me why.” – he shock his hand in respons to his words.    “It seams that...” – Resh continued – “...there is only a singular room made for one ocupant and I must take it. My meditation must be done tonight. You really don’t want to be in the same room.”    “Fine, I’ll take the room with the guildmen.” – quickly answered Dane retiring to that chamber. Resh also closed the door.    “It looks like we are room mates.” – said Hiek to John.    “Oh the joy.” – John said in a rather disgrunteled voice, at least there are no marten here.        **~ What night brings... ~**        Night came quickly to this land. Inquisitor Dane having a nightmare of events passed moved outside of his chamber to the corridor and its fresh air that the inquisitor was seeking.    In the middle of a prayer Dane felt a shadow moving upon the darken corridor, only useless torches tried to light the darkness. He prepared himself. Mace ready, hearts at calm. When he was sure of the enemies’ proximity, he struck. Tossing the individual down with the first blow.    Wanting to see if his assault was fatal he investigated the body. It was not, the human on the ground was breathing as he should and no traces of blood. He was none the less outcold.    “Is he wearing caravan escort uniform?” – Dane asked himself when another figure rushed him, pile-driving him upon the wall. Dane was disoriented but the mysterious assailant grabbed the inquisitor by the clothes and raised him on the wall holding him there. One torch that was close lit the face of his enemy. It was the caravan escort that climbed the dune earlier in the day.    “How are you?” – the escort said, much to Danes amazement as the individual spoke in an almost perfect imperial tongue...      **To be continued...** |