

The Way of the Wicked, Part I

His large, coarse hand firmly grasped the wood as the sharp knife whittled details in its surface. Against the backdrop of his weather-beaten fist, leathered through years of sunshine and hard toil, the wood looked hopelessly fragile, as if the merest movement would render it to kindling.

In time, his work would become a doll for his favourite niece; a skilfully carved addition to an already prodigious collection. He had not been blessed with children, though he had greatly wished for them. He had even been married long ago, but the love had not been able to withstand the misery of fruitlessness.

He now whiled away his free hours, such as they came, making things to delight the little ones that he so rarely saw. Even so, just imagining the child's joy at receiving the gift was a balm to his spirit and gave him the merest scratch to an itch he had felt all his life.

His duty and position meant he could not often be with those he loved, but this was something he could do, a minor release that prevented a storm of emotion from overflowing.

He sighed, a powerful exhalation which caused the greying hair on his chin to flutter. He turned the wood one way and then the other, inspecting his work. He nodded slowly, satisfied with his efforts. The storm inside was abated, for now.

Without warning, an alarm bell sounded in the distance. Shouts rang out, then he imagined he could discern screams and the clamour of combat. The bell had never been sounded before, except for practice drills. None had been scheduled for today.

The man sat perfectly still behind his broad desk, listening to the commotion with a bewildered expression upon his worn face.

As the moments passed and the sounds only intensified, he stood and placed his work onto the desk. With an outstretched hand he drew upon the power of Ghyr, the Root of Power, to summon his staff of office to his grasp. A corona of mystical energy played across its surface, and the aching of his joints, held too long fixed beneath his desk, was banished.

He strode to his chamber door, opening it with a heave. Passing through, he narrowly missed colliding with the Captain of the Guard as he left his room.

"What's happening, Captain?" asked Timon Gentah, Master Wizard of House Travium.

The Captain halted immediately, offering a rushed salute to his superior. Master Gentah had been in command of the Travium Archives in Pann for over twenty years, and he was the first and last word on the treasures coming from dig sites around the city.

"Diabolists, Master Gentah!" the Captain yelled as he tugged at his uncomfortably tight collar. "Hundreds of them if the reports are true; we are being overrun!"

The aging Wizard gasped inwardly at the name. Here on the outskirts of Pann, far from the coasts and more important cities, the existence of Diabolists was only mentioned in whispered tones. They were a distant, otherworldly menace, a name used to scare wayward children at bedtime.

“Secure the archival stores,” Master Timon ordered, “call on our reserves from the Chapterhouse at Borthal and request aid from the Crystal Temple. Perhaps Abbot Vekh will consider this important enough to make an appearance!”

The Captain nodded, saluted again, and sped away at double time.

Master Timon, drew heavily on the Roots of Ghyr that flowed all around the compound. He extended a hand in front of him and a thin blue line appeared in the air. His hand twisted and the line expanded in height and width, creating a portal of shimmering magic into which he walked.

The Wizard emerged to brilliant sunshine and into the thick of a vicious fight. Bodies lay scattered upon the ground in every direction. Some were black robed Khethra assassins, others were what he assumed to be deranged cultists based upon their mixed attire, but far more were the precious soldiery of House Travium.

Within the blink of an eye the Master had assessed the situation, and knew it was dire. From a quick tally of the dead it seemed only a scant few of his garrison had survived, and the majority of them were pinned in a defensive formation just in front of the Chapterhouse’s main gate. This meant the archives were likely held by no more than one or at best two men. Against a concerted attack, this would never be enough.

Alarm filled his mind at the thought that if these brave men should fall, then the Diabolists would have access to all of the arcane treasures contained within. Though they were not the most powerful relics that had ever been discovered - those were safely stored at the main Chapterhouse, there were some that would be dangerous if wielded by the wrong hands.

Timon’s presence was quickly noted, and a trio of Khethra broke away from the group fighting the soldiers, intending to intercept him. The Wizard snorted in surprise as they approached without the caution due to one of his particular talents.

He pointed a finger at the closest assailant and a bolt of azure lightning fell from the cloudless sky, rendering the man into a charred skeleton. The Wizard exhaled sharply and a great gust of wind blew back the other men, toppling them comically with its sheer force.

“Who shall be next to feel the storm’s wrath?” Master Timon snarled defiantly at his foes – though he noted with some satisfaction they now regarded him with suitable apprehension.

As his enemies regained their feet, he summoned Ghyr to his palms. Timon’s staff of office tumbled to the ground with a clatter as he brought his hands together, causing a thunderclap. His foes fell to the ground shrieking in pain, claspng their heads as their damaged ear drums bled within their skulls.

Timon drew his hands back, readying another spell. He would have to hold the line until reinforcements could arrive; pinning all his hope that a request for aid had been sent before the enemy had overrun their position. He could not rely on assistance from any other source due to their location. The enemy had been shrewd in picking a target.

The Travium Archival Chapterhouse was part of a small group of stone buildings, which comprised of stores, smithies, lodging for soldiers, and the serving people that supported operations in Pann. In this isolated position, they were too far from the city to call on the guard and Prince

Sevestis did not fund a constabulary so far from his Palace. Without the support of their Great House, they were on their own.

More foes streamed around the smaller outbuildings to confront Timon, flooding into the ground in front of the Chapterhouse. On first glance it was not the hundreds his panicked Captain had suggested but nevertheless far more than could be handled by his struggling soldiers.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw one of his men fall to the curved blades of the Khethra, followed shortly by another. He suppressed the sadness he felt to watch good men die, resolving to channel his anger at their passing into holding out long enough for allies to arrive. A storm of emotion welled within him, a familiar and unrestrained fury that was contained by the merest film of his will.

A curiously tattooed man, emaciated and dirty, pushed through the clamour of Timon's enemies. The man squinted in the sunlight across at Master Timon with a mad smile upon his face. "This one is mine," he hollered to the other Diabolists. "This one is mine!"

The other cultists moved back without question, such was the threat of his words. Timon's eyes narrowed as the name of his enemy danced on the tip of the Wizard's tongue, a moniker of fear and infamy frustratingly just out of reach. A sense of visceral and palpable evil radiated from his foe; the hungry man's large, hateful eyes adding a layer of monstrous intent over the lunacy of his smile.

The cultists formed a wide circle around the two men, their numbers bolstered now by Khethra assassins as the last of the Travium soldiers at the gate had been dispatched. Jeers, curses, and spittle issued forth from the crazed throng of people but no one stepped forth in defiance of the Tattooed man's words.

"Gree-tings Master of Travium!" the freakishly tattooed man warbled in heavily accented common speech. "I am called Suleiman. Perhaps it is true that you have heard my name before, yes?"

Before waiting for an answer or any acknowledgement of his words, Suleiman continued, "I have come for a trinket that you have in your possession. Give it to me and no-one else shall be harmed. However, if you do not honour my simple request, then my Khethra shall feast upon your flesh and that of anyone we find within. This is the first and last I will speak of bargains."

Timon drew back into a defensive position. His foe was indeed known to him; the exact name he had been fighting to recall now striking him a blow that robbed him of his sense of superiority. *Suleiman!* A name that carried with it the truth of his situation. Whether he complied or not, there would be only one outcome.

The confidence and hope which had previously blossomed in his chest was diminished; the precariousness of his position had been laid bare in that instant. "*I must hold, whatever he throws at me,*" Timon thought, and he stood firm in the face of what was to come.

Timon's eyes scanned for the smallest movement from the Diabolist, a hint at his next move, but the man remained passive, grinning in the most disturbing way as though privy to a jest that only he could hear.

In the afternoon's warmth, small beads of perspiration formed upon Timon's brow as he waited for his enemy's attack. Master Gentah of Travium was not accustomed to being the reactive combatant, but he questioned his ability to fight such an notorious foe.

Timon shook his head, deciding to delay no longer as his impatience got the better of him. “I am not permitted to surrender ownership of any of the Relics here. Even if I were, I would not give them to the likes of you.” Master Timon took a deep breath. “You shall find only death here, foreign cur!”

Suleiman nodded, seemingly indifferent to the response.

“That too is a satisfactory outcome, Master of Travium”.

The tattooed man moved with a barely traceable speed, drawing his ornate, curved dagger and opening up a thin red welt upon his own arm. Ruby-red blood flowed forth, and Suleiman intoned some harsh sounding words. The blood formed into a pungent mist as it spattered upon the ground, and the mist sped towards the Travium Wizard. Master Timon barely had time to adjust his wards before the malign sorcery struck, the caustic mist managing to break through his shields, burning the skin on his left arm and shoulder.

Timon cried out in surprise and pain. His first instinct was always to attack, so he quickly released another bolt of Ghyr-lightning, trying to buy himself a moment to consider his tactical options. The Diabolist Wizard avoided the strike with contemptuous ease, transmuting his body into a column of twisting sand and then reforming close by as the bolt struck the empty ground.

Suleiman closed the distance to Master Timon in an instant. His long dagger lunged out, and was only narrowly avoided by the bigger man. Timon swatted at the wiry frame of his enemy with the back of his right hand, impacting sharply and sending the Diabolist staggering back.

A stream of blood leaked from Suleiman’s nose, but the smile had not left his lips. Suleiman laughed again and lunged once more, enjoying this fight with the same mad enthusiasm that he invested into every action. This time, Master Timon was not able to avoid the blow and the point of the blade sank into his side, not deeply, but with enough power to force him to withdraw a step. In alarm, Timon summoned a great gust of wind, and Suleiman was sent flying back through the air.

Timon heard a crunch as the sinewy Diabolist landed awkwardly, and he exalted in the damage that he had inflicted. Timon had expected the fight to be far harder than it had proved to be. A small scratch and a burn were a cheap price for the prestige he would gain for felling this monster!

As Gentah towered over him, Suleiman beamed a bloody grin at his enemy and spat blood upon the floor. As he saw the glee in his enemy’s eyes, Timon realised too late that Suleiman had lured him in with feigned weakness and injury.

The Diabolist’s ichor bubbled and boiled as Suleiman whispered words of summoning. Writhing tentacles of dark magic erupted from the sodden dirt, grasping the arms of the Travium Wizard and holding them tightly. Suleiman leapt to his feet, laughing scornfully as the tendrils of his spell dragged Master Timon to his knees.

As the bones in his shoulder knitted themselves back together with a nauseating click, Suleiman wiped the blood from his lips with the back of a dirty hand. His ever-present smile intensified as he leered over his subdued foe.

Suleiman’s victory was all the greater for the reward it would afford him; Master Timon was a formidable Wizard and Suleiman greatly desired to add the man’s tongue to his own Immach

necklace. He hoped that a portion of the weather magic the Wizard wielded with such ease would be added to his own power. The idea of immolating the bones of his enemies with lightning greatly appealed to Suleiman's theatricality.

"Search the archives!" Suleiman commanded the nearest Khethra. "Take five men and be thorough. Retrieve the master's prize and set aflame everything else. We will leave them naught but ashes to sift through, and no clues to our design. "

The mad sorcerer regarded his defeated foe, greedily looking upon his prize. "Go now," he hissed irritably to the Khethra. "You have no longer than it takes to harvest his tongue." The men broke away, determined to not provoke Suleiman's anger.

The Diabolist slowly drew out his sharp flensing knife, waving it in front of the fearful eyes of the Travium Wizard to generate the maximum of terror.

"Hold him!" Suleiman commanded. Two men and a woman rushed forwards to do his bidding, drawing back the head of the Wizard with great effort.

"Open his mouth!" Suleiman commanded again, his enthusiasm building at the prospect of a fresh tongue for his necklace.

The cultists raked the side of Timon's mouth with dirty fingers. He clamped his jaw shut, refusing to yield. One of them jabbed a finger in his eye when Timon reflexively opened his mouth to scream, fingers shot through past his teeth before he could stifle the urge.

Timon savagely bit at the fingers, feeling hot blood erupt into his mouth as they found purchase. A cultist squealed in pain, then screeched for help. The crowd roared with laughter, as thirsty for the blood of their own as for anyone else's.

Other fingers pushed insistently into his mouth and the mangled fingers retracted sharply to more wails and sobs. Timon could not bite or resist them any longer. He tried to scream defiance but it came out as little more than a panicked gurgle.

Suleiman dragged the injured cultist away sharply, moving him out of his way. The flensing knife gleamed in the sunlight as it approached nearer and nearer. Timon shook in powerless rage; his strength and magic could not avail him as the tendrils of the summoned blood magic beast held him tightly.

A chime rang out loudly; a single peal of sound struck with such force that it caused the air to vibrate in harmony with the note.

All around the Diabolist rabble, portals of Ghyr-magic opened and Travium reinforcements rushed out to do battle. The war-cry of House Travium rang out fiercely as soldiers and Crystal Bearers poured out from the openings.

Suleiman turned in surprise, and his gaze settled upon a massive, robed monk that had appeared at his side from nowhere. The monk dwarfed even the prostrate Wizard at his feet.

Suleiman had less than a moment to consider this new variable before he was struck with great force by the huge man's bo-staff and then pitched backwards by the follow up strike. His spinal cord had been shattered in so many places that his head flapped weakly in the wind as he sailed away from the blow.

The huge monk, swung his staff again, dispatching one of the cultists gripping Master Timon with an appalling crunch. The female cultist turned to run, but it was too late. She also had her skull caved in as the staff came down with outrageous force on her head.

The circle of Diabolists, roughly organised just a few moments before, had become an unruly mob in the confusion and dread. They were quickly engaged and defeated by the well-drilled soldiery of House Travium.

Crystal Bearers - acolytes from the Temple, floated through the air behind their allies in a serene battle-trance. Where they went, the magic of Ghyr was amplified by the strange quartz they held before them. Through great skill, they directed this power down to the soldiers, adding strength and vigour to their bodies. Within a few moments, the Diabolist rabble lay dead or dying.

With the shadow-demon's link to the waking world diminished, the infernal bonds holding Timon Gentah dissipated into wisps of foul-smelling smoke. He drooped to the floor, relief moistening his eyes.

The monk extended a thick hand to Timon, and drew him up effortlessly from his knees. Master Gentah smiled warmly at his saviour. "Abbott Vekh!" he said bursting into a broad grin. "You chose your moment well, for I would not have been able to greet you as warmly had you been just another second..."

Baiy Vekh, Abbott of the Crystal Temple, offered a small bow of his broad head. In a thunderous and thickly-accented voice, he replied "Then perhaps I was too hasty! Your whining always grates harshly on my sensitive ears!"

Both men laughed and grasped forearms in friendship. They were old allies, but in recent years had few opportunities to relive past adventures. Only the direst straights could now summon Abbott Vekh from his work at mining channelling-crystal for the great purpose of Travium.

The corpse of Suleiman shook and convulsed as unhallowed life flowed back into it. The bones in his neck repaired themselves, forcing it to writhe slowly from side to side like some horrific serpent. The Diabolist's blackened tongue lolled out from between yellow teeth and a wracking laugh followed his first heavy breath.

Vekh lifted his weighty staff, intending to bring it down again on the skull of his enemy, but Master Timon knew better and held his arm.

"Your effort may well be enjoyable but unfortunately not final, my friend. Dark powers conspire to keep this wretch in the waking World. It is said that death can only claim him when his infernal masters have decided who shall win his diseased soul." Timon sighed. "Sadly, today doesn't seem to be that day," he said wistfully.

Baiy Vekh shrugged and stepped forwards, intending to give those evil powers yet one more chance to decide the fate of the Diabolist.

More ruined laughter rose from Suleiman's prone, convulsing form. An arm shot up, fingers and palm extended to urge restraint.

"You... you" Suleiman rasped as his larynx slowly reformed from bloody pulp. "Have fought well, Southlander. My first wave has been annihilated!" he coughed, his tone never veering from cruel amusement.

Suleiman painfully pushed himself on to his side and slapped the bloody ground with his open palm. A plume of pungent red steam rose from the point of contact. "Thankfully," he cackled, "I still have a gambit to play. After all, only a fool relies on foolish."

In response to the signal, a drum sounded in the distance.

Vekh and Timon span around, following the direction from which the sound originated.

The drum sounded again, now slightly louder as it moved closer. A faint sound accompanied it, weak but just possible to make out. The chanting of unified voices... Many voices.

Dark clouds filled the sky overhead, and the breeze blew cold on the Travium host.

Ignoring their fallen rival for just a moment, Vekh gestured to his forces. Few had fallen in the brief fight and the rest stood defiant to this new threat, the confidence of a quick victory emboldening them.

"Form up!" Vekh bellowed, a deep pitch like the rumbling of a rockslide.

Soldiers with spears and shields formed a line opposing the direction of the sound. Behind them the remainder of the host was quickly arrayed, proud House Travium swordsmen and Crystal Bearers, floating in the ever strengthening wind.

The Drum broadcast again, louder still. Although they could not yet be seen, the chanting voices could now be heard more clearly.

"Sampuran! Sampuran! Sampuran!" they chanted with great fervour.

Master Timon, furrowed his brow. His face darkened to match the skies above.

"We must be cautious, my friend." He murmured to Vekh. "Some of their number escaped into the archives. We must not let them withdraw with anything."

Vekh shook his head. "My objective is clear, Timon. I am here only to protect you and to shield you from harm. The Abbott of the Crystal Temple is not summoned merely to collect dusty baubles." The big man adjusted his stance, keeping one eye on the dangerous Wizard at their feet. "If things bode ill, then we must retreat to safety."

The Diabolist laughed at their exchange. "Then you should run now, and fast. You Southlanders cannot hope to defeat him!"

Thummp! The Drum sounded once more, now visible as it passed round an outhouse. It was carried by a troupe of five near-naked Khethelian drummers. They were accompanied by a group of dark robed men, thirty or so monks of a similar origin to the drummers. They bore a shining palanquin above their shoulders. On it sat a lean man, his gaze fixed upon the Travium line. "Sampuran! Sampuran! Sampuran!" The chant continued unabated.

Timon grunted derisively. "Whatever baying dogs you send we will put them down." He gestured down the line of soldiers. "We are of Travium, and you now know the power of our House."

“It is foolish thing I think,” Suleiman mused, “to prepare oneself to face dogs when you shall yet face a lion,” With a grunt he pushed himself upright. “He will fight you without assistance and he shall defeat you without difficulty.”

The confidence and finality in those words made Timon feel a gnawing concern in the pit of his stomach. He said nothing more, gesturing once as another bolt of lightning broke through the thick storm clouds and struck the Diabolist. Suleiman writhed as his body was wracked with the fury of the heavens and the smell of burnt flesh filled the nostrils of those nearby. *At least he will be quiet for a few moments*, thought Timon.

In less than thirty seconds, the Diabolist procession arrived. Despite the dark clouds overhead, the light was still fair and a great deal could be discerned by the Travium host about their new opponents.

The man sat on the palanquin was youthful, despite not giving the impression of being particularly young, and decidedly healthy looking - with bronzed and flawless skin. On closer inspection, for those of keen sight, the skin was almost flawless – an angry red scratch pointed up to intricate tattoos on his left shoulder. Though it was a small cut, the wound looked sore and infected.

The seated man stared at them with a fiery intensity, yet remained silent. His dark eyes flickered to the ground, settling on the still smoking corpse of Suleiman. A momentary smirk crossed his lips, and a look of complete loathing for the charred ruin, and then his eyes were once again on them. Watching. Evaluating.

The man rose a hand and one of his bearers approached Timon and Baiy Vekh to make parley. The other bearers wordlessly adjusted the balance of the load leading to a barely perceptible movement. The seated man raised an eyebrow and the bearers groaned in misery as though they had been struck. The drumming ceased and all was quiet, save the call of a gull far above.

The envoy threw himself prostrate on the ground before the assembled Travium host. He raised up his arms before throwing them down once again, a curious custom of his homeland. One not dissimilar to those adopted by servants to House Qing, Timon noted silently. The envoy raised himself to his knees, then stood.

“Bear witness, fortunate ones!” the Envoy shouted in Common. “Before you is the greatest of men, blessed beyond compare. Marvel in his presence and pay worship to his glorious being!”

The Khethelian monks roared “Sampuran!”

The envoy dropped to his knees as they shouted, throwing his hands up in ecstasy. “My lord has deigned to bestow upon you a great honour. Know now that you will see sights as few have seen, and fewer that have lived to tell. Give thanks for whatever happenstance has led you on this day, at this time, to be so blessed with his presence. Take solace as you meet your death at his hand, that you have been touched by greatness.”

Suleiman’s body gasped back to life in a spluttering fit. Deranged mirth rattled out from ruined lungs. “Make this quick, oh perfect one!” he raggedly spat to the man on the palanquin.

His words dripped with false humility, a mocking tone that betrayed neither of the Diabolists shared any affection. The Khethelian monks murmured their disapproval at the Tattooed Wizard for his impudence.

Three Khethra appeared from within the gateway of the archives; one of them carried a small canvas sack. Smoke billowed out in their wake. Seeing the lines arrayed, the flow of the battle having turned from their side to a less certain direction, the Khethra paused and evaluated how best to re-join their compatriots. A force of battle-tested Travium warriors stood between them and their battered and beaten master.

With a great struggle, Suleiman rose to his feet, wisps of acrid smoke still rising from his torn and blackened robes. "You are late!" he called over at the Khethra. "Sampuran-" he started.

"Ar-Sampuran!" Thundered the man on the palanquin, albeit in a surprisingly melodious tone. His common speech was flawless in its intonation. He rubbed at the scratch on his shoulder, and his eyes flashed with barely restrained violence.

Suleiman spat a tooth onto the ground and offered up a wide, gap-toothed smile. "Near-perfect one, then." The Diabolist gestured to his Khethra beyond the Travium line. "Our master desires this trinket greatly. We must have it, and soon."

Ar-Sampuran stood sharply, the palanquin bearers struggling to re-balance his weight. "Your master!" he sneered. "Not mine. I am here only to pay off a debt incurred by my mentor. My time is better spent than engaging with such weaklings as these."

Baiy Vekh's amused wheeze reverberated off the stone of the surrounding buildings. "This weakling may give you more entertainment than you imagine, little one!"

Ar-Sampuran regarded him coolly. He stepped forwards and the palanquin was swiftly lowered so that he might step onto the ground. His eyes never left the Abbott. "I think not," he eventually replied. There was no malice, no vainglorious boast in his words. There was merely an utter certainty.

A thunderclap sounded in the clouds overhead and the skies opened. Rain poured down on the combatants; a light shower anointing the combatants.

Ar-Sampuran turned to Suleiman. "Deal with the old Wizard. My sanctified flesh must not feel the touch of his magic." He extended his arms and two monks, giddy with excitement at what was to come placed long, bladed weapons in each hand. Khatya, they were called, the preference of skilled warriors of the Khethelian Empire.

Suleiman nodded, an overly long bow. Ar-Sampuran's jaw muscle tightened marginally in distaste.

The Khethelian warrior sprang to attack. Baiy Vekh barely dodged the first blow, and felt the stinging welt as the second scratched across shoulder. Surprise registered in the monk's mind as his enemy moved with a speed that should not have been possible without the aid of magic.

Suleiman shrieked words of dark power, flicking out a hand and sending droplets of his own blood in the direction of Timon Gentah. The blood blossomed into a red mist and surged towards the Travium Wizard. Timon reflexively pushed upwards and a heavy draught of wind sent the red clouds hurtling skywards. The Diabolist reached into his pouch, drawing out some spoiled flesh which he quickly shoved into his open mouth.

Dark magic flowed around the Diabolist; an aura of dark splendour that raised the hairs on the back of Timon's outstretched hand. Rents in tattooed flesh reknit in the blink of an eye and the Diabolist's unsanctified body swelled with power.

Suleiman drew his long curved dagger and leapt at Timon. The larger man threw out a fist to receive him, but it failed to connect. Suleiman slipped to his side and scored a long gash along Timon's forearm. The blood hissed as the wound opened, and Suleiman seemed to draw further power as the gore flowed.

The soldiers of Traviium loosed a fierce cry and rushed to the aid of their leaders. Baiy Vekh was an accomplished fighter, yet he was wilting quickly under the relentless flurry of blows. Ar-Sampuran flowed around his defences like water, a thrust here, a slice there. Each time Vekh swung his staff to deflect the blow, the true strike contacted him in an unguarded place.

None of the attacks seemed designed to kill, but merely to impair Vekh's ability to respond. The Khethelian fighter seemed to be playing with the monk, proving his superior skill, and showing his exultant entourage just why they followed him with such devotion.

Crystal Bearers descended from the air, carrying the augmenting crystals closer to better amplify the power of Ghyr that streamed around the Abbott. Vekh felt a renewed surge of energy, and his ability to predict and intercept strikes improved. Spears darted out to aid him from every angle, as his men sought to find their mark on the Khethelian warrior, momentarily driving him back.

Ar-Sampuran immediately altered his strategy, identifying in a glance the shift in the balance of the fight. He made as if to kick downwards, drawing Vekh's staff lower to meet the blow, but instead swung away, allowing two spears to flow past him as he span. The soldier's thrusts intersected with Vekh's staff, bringing the three men crashing into each other.

In the moment of confusion that followed, Ar-Sampuran drove the wide blade of his right Khatya through one man's neck, launched a vicious kick at the sternum of the second man, and then pounced up onto the outstretched knee of Vekh.

From there, he stepped on to the back of the kicked man, doubled over from the blow that had broken two of his ribs. Ar-Sampuran launched himself upwards, slashing out with both his blades as he flew through the air. Two heavy crystals, bodies, and heads fell to the ground as he landed gracefully behind the Abbott.

Without hesitation, he struck out at another soldier, a precise strike that pierced the leather breastplate as a hot knife through butter. Again and again he landed blows as the soldiers swarmed his position; each man dispatched with a single exquisite attack from his deadly weapons. As each man died, a cheer rose from Ar-Sampuran's entourage. They made no attempt to intervene, and in truth were not needed. Where Ar-Sampuran walked, death followed.

Timon was vaguely aware of the parallel combat going on, from blurred images in the corners of his eyes, the shouts and the screams of the dying. His focus was on the Diabolist Wizard Suleiman, however.

Despite his thin frame and odd style of fighting, Suleiman was proving to be a capable opponent. Timon was unable to direct the power of the storm at him while he was so close by, for while it was true he had mastered the art of calling it, he could not withstand its fury any more than his adversary. While Suleiman was likely to rise again from any damage, Timon was surely not.

Suleiman slashed with his blood-encrusted dagger, and Timon stepped back to avoid the blow. The Travium Wizard brought down both his fists upon the back of the Diabolist as the blade passed by. He heard a satisfying crack and Suleiman cried out, a mixture of pain and enjoyment.

The Diabolist dropped to the floor, grasping at a handful of dust and throwing it into Timon's eyes as the Wizard stooped to grasp him. Timon recoiled in shock and Suleiman stabbed the point of his dagger forcefully into the Wizard's thigh.

Blood spurted as the dagger was withdrawn, and Suleiman spoke a word of darkness. Pain lanced through Timon's body, an agony the likes of which he had never experienced before.

Vekh stepped over a dead soldier, steadying himself on another that was still doubled over, coughing up blood. Behind him, his opponent was surrounded by ten men – veterans and accomplished fighters all. But they all fell like chaff, man by man.

Vekh was covered in shallow cuts, and though the blood flowed just a trickle from each, the cumulative effect was wearing him down. The Crystal Bearers had fallen, and he could no longer rely on the additional energy they provided.

Turning, his eyes tried to follow the movement of Ar-Sampuran, but it was a thankless task. The man moved with such grace, speed, and cunning of intent that it was impossible to predict his next attack. In that moment, Vekh knew their only choice was to flee or they would most certainly die.

A polite cheer went up as one soldier died with a blade in the heart. A louder cheer followed, celebrating the skill needed to use that man as a shield from his fellows, their spears digging deep into the dying man's flesh. Ar-Sampuran withdrew his Khatya and whirled around to the others, who were still trying to retract their spear points from their dead companion.

One of Ar-Sampuran's deadly blades went upwards through a chin strap, though the jaw and into a brain. Another swiped low, almost severing a leg at the groin. As quickly as the blades flew out, they retracted.

Blade repelled spear blade with such fluidity that the fight appeared to be staged – choreographed by an unmatched master of dancing. Not a single blow could be landed on the Khethelian warrior. The energy of every attack aimed toward him instead redirected and used against his foes.

Vekh instinctively jerked towards the slaughter, eager to save even a single life if he could. It was depressingly clear that even had they double the men, the outcome should be the same. He paused as he registered the sound of Timon screaming out in pain; quickly scanning for his friend.

He saw the Diabolist had run Timon through the leg, and now the Wizard was at the mercy of the foreigner's blood magic. Baiy Vekh swung his massive frame and launched at Suleiman with the last vestiges of his strength.

With fortuitous timing, the huge body of the Abbott intercepted a blow meant to finish his friend. The dagger plunged into his chest, puncturing a lung as he passed through the gap between the magic-users. Timon collapsed to the ground in a heap. Vekh joined him there shortly after, landing with a thud, a nimbus of dark magic swirling around him. The Diabolist's blade still protruded out of his chest, and his frame contorted under the effects of the agony incantation. Suleiman

laughed. Both men were now his to play with as he wished. Tonight he would feast on the freshest of meat!

Ar-Sampuran continued his whirlwind of death. Each new foe received a different manner of demise; each designed to be observed and acclaimed by his coterie of aesthetic monks.

These men had raised him since birth, trained him each and every day to become a living weapon, one to be turned upon the foes of the Great Wurm, and the enemies of Khethelia.

Ar-Sampuran was a fighter without an equal within the crucible of the world – he had proved this beyond doubt in the kingdom of Ralthas. Proved beyond the doubts of others, anyway. The slight scratch at his shoulder that burned every moment of his day gave him a quite different opinion.

Timon had blacked out for the briefest of moments. The smell of blood was everywhere; metallic and pungent. A large leg – wide, pale, and heavy was resting on his chest. He knew instinctively it belonged to his friend and fear ran through him.

Timon subtly reached out with Ghyr to determine if Vekh was still alive. He sensed the presence of life, despite the monk's many injuries, still strong within the big man. Timon was truly glad; a piece of fortune at long last.

He saw that Suleiman stood above them, but his attention was elsewhere.

"Dog!" the Diabolist hissed.

Timon adjusted his head slightly, trying not to draw attention to himself.

"I have it master, as you instructed. Setting the Archives to burn took longer than anticipated."

"Give it to me," Suleiman demanded. There was a rustling sound as something was passed to the Diabolist. Timon could not quite see what it was, and he chose not to make any further movements while he tried to come up with a way out of his current predicament.

Suleiman cooed. "Yes! This is certainly what the master desires. You shall be... rewarded for your efforts, Khethra."

"My thanks, Lor... urk." A wet rasping sound cut off the man's words before he could finish. There was a dull thud as his body hit the ground.

"Your efforts merited such a reward, dog." Suleiman chuckled. He licked his dirty blade clean of his unfortunate underling's blood.

Someone approached them from beyond Timon's line of vision. The smell of smoke hung in the air, masking much of the acrid smell of blood. The distinct crackle of a blaze thrummed in the background. His Archives, the work of many years of hard toil, was no more.

"They are all finished?" asked Suleiman.

“Do you doubt my skill, Kush peasant?” Came the haughty reply from Ar-Sampuran. These two are the only ones that remain breathing.”

He held out both his blood-slicked arms and retainers hurried to remove his Khatya.

“Our bargain is now settled, and my mentor’s debt with your patron is paid in full.” Ar-Sampuran seemed to derive a great deal of satisfaction from the words.

Suleiman chuckled and nodded. “My master shall be pleased,” he agreed. “With such a performance even such a great debt is well paid.”

Timon felt sore all over. The dull throb of pain radiated throughout his body and his head ached to the point where it was difficult to concentrate. He evaluated his options quickly. With these enemies arrayed against him, he had little time in which to act.

Escaping would prove difficult, more so considering the unconscious mass of his friend and ally on top of him. Timon would not, could not abandon Vekh to such torments. He resolved that the fate of one would be shared by the other.

Ar-Sampuran beckoned to his followers. Three men approached wordlessly with a pail of water and fresh linen cloths. They gently cleaned him of blood and viscera, carefully checking his body for any sign of damage. Of course, they were delighted to report, there was none. They had trained him for a lifetime so that he would never feel the kiss of a blade. At least, not a second time.

“Dog of the Kush,” warned Ar-Sampuran. “Our business is now concluded. Do not call on me again unless you feel tempted to meet your end.” He dismissed his cleaners with a slight wave and stepped over to the palanquin. The drumming started again as it was lowered for him to climb onto it.

“I am no stranger to death,” Suleiman mused. His devious eyes watching for the response of his Khethelian rival.

Ar-Sampuran reclined into his cushioned chair, reached out a hand to pluck a grape from a cup on the floor of the palanquin. He popped it into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. “Do not challenge me to discover the secret of your final death, Kush ape. For if any man alive can find it, then you are looking at him.”

Timon seized his chance. He drew sharply on the Root of Power, and for the first few moments no one was any the wiser. Within a few seconds, the build-up of energy was unmistakable to any with the second sight.

Suleiman turned his gaze back to his prisoners. As he turned, Timon sprang up and snatched at the canvas bag the Diabolist loosely grasped. Bolts of lightning flew down from the sky, indiscriminately striking targets. Timon pulled the bag away with a great heave and allowed himself to fall backwards.

Suleiman threw out an arm to cast a bleeding curse upon the Mellorians, and released a stream of profanity as they both disappeared into a portal in the ground. His eyes grew wide with fury as he watched history repeating itself.

“Assist me!” he screamed at Ar-Sampuran and his entourage. “The master’s prize is escaping!”

Ar-Sampuran laughed cruelly. He ignored the bolts of lightning that still fell from the sky; one blasting a drummer less than five paces from where he sat.

“The debt has been paid, lack wit fool. You shall have no more aid from me.” He gestured to the still open portal. If you wish to claim your prize once more, then your path is clear.”

Suleiman grit his teeth and pointed his dagger at Ar-Sampuran. “I have many lives with which to repay this treachery,” he spat. He laughed once, a manic and chilling sound, before jumping into the closing portal. The sky fell silent as it closed.

Ar-Sampuran laughed once more. “I shall enjoy watching you try.”

He snapped his fingers and was hoisted into the air.

The lead bearer called up, “Where to, oh perfect one?”

Ar-Sampuran absentmindedly stroked his hairless chin. He smiled as he considered that despite all the cost and effort, the Kush Wizard was still denied his aim. To repay a great debt using his art and also to see that dog fail, these were the true pleasures of life.

He became aware that his followers were all waiting for a response. They gazed up at him with the usual maddening mixture of love and terror.

His enjoyment was cut short as he felt the familiar burning sensation on his shoulder. Ar-Sampuran reflexively scratched at it, reopening the wound once again. His mood immediately soured. “Back to the cult safe house in the next village. From the portal there, back to the embassy at Metohs.”

Ar-Sampuran’s eyes glazed over for an instant. “Our search continues,” he murmured.

The palanquin jerked into movement. Each step falling in line with a low drum beat.

“Sampuran! “Sampuran!” Sampuran!”

He felt a trickle of blood run between his fingers as it flowed from the small wound he wouldn’t allow to heal. Ar-Sampuran, stared at the blood on his fingers, mutely reaffirming a pledge that it would not close until he redeemed his honour and killed the man that had caused it.

Timon did not have the time to prepare the portal spell correctly, which was a grave risk. While he was confident that it would lead them to materialise safely, rather than within solid rock or some other horrific location, he had not been able to establish an exit point. However, circumstances being as they were, it was still a better plan than waiting to find out what tortures the Diabolist would visit on them.

Timon and Vekh fell through grey mists for a few moments - the realm of ephemeral magic that bridged the gap between realities, before re-entering the waking world.

The mouth of the portal opened out some way above the canopy of a great forest, and the two men fell from the sky, hurtling through tree branches and crashing into the ground. Pain lanced through Timon's legs and he cried out, before the heavy form of Vekh landed on him, and sent him into blackness.

The Diabolist gasped as he was deposited from the sky, realising that he was once more about to feel the pain of death. As he fell through the tall trees at a great speed his head got caught between two thick branches and his neck snapped. His limp body flopped down, barely hanging from the skin at the neck.

In the darkness beyond the waking world, three voices argued in harsh languages that the Diabolist could not fully understand. One voice, the voice of his patron, rang through the darkness.

"I still have need of this one..."

Suleiman came to with a start, gasping for breath but finding his windpipe torn by the near decapitation he had suffered from the branches. He felt the bones in his neck pop back into place, still insufferably painful, despite the many deaths he had endured. Eventually, the holes in his neck closed as the skin fused together and he was able to greedily draw in draughts of air. Life, sweet life once again.

His head was firmly snagged so he could not see how far he was from the ground. Not enough for another death perhaps, but likely far enough to cause more pain. His arms pulled at a branch, trying to shake his body free, and he dropped to the floor of the forest like a stone.

A kneecap popped out of position, a painful but short lived cost of the fall. Laying just a small way from him were the bodies of his enemies, and most importantly the canvass bag that was worth more than all his remaining lives combined.

Suleiman pulled himself along the ground towards his prizes. He intended to avail himself of all three, and to take his time enjoying the Wizard and his guardian. His knee popped back into place, and he let out a low groan.

One of his tattooed hands closed on the bag and he quickly felt inside to check on the contents. Suleiman let out a huge sigh of relief to find the artefact still present. With this, the day could still be salvaged. It could still turn out very well in fact. He drew the bag back to him, tying it around his rope belt tightly. He would not lose it again.

Now comfortable that his mission was successful, he turned to other business, giggling with delight. He looked around for his knife, which had fallen free as he hung in the trees above. A dull glint caught his eye and he was happy to see his beloved dagger once more. Such work they had ahead of them this day! The groans of the two men nearby as they stirred in pain were like soft notes of a melody, a crimson tune of great beauty to him.

He pushed himself to his knees and reclaimed the knife. He was eager to subdue them before they could offer any more unpleasant surprises. He grabbed the wizard's ankle and scored the soft flesh there with the sharp tip of the blade. The Wizard moaned but was not yet conscious. The smell of fresh blood welling from the scratch set Suleiman's mouth to watering.

"That's not very friendly," said a rough voice, surprisingly close by.

Suleiman cursed. *"By the great one's teeth! Will I have no peace this day to conduct my work?"*

The Diabolist looked around for the owner of the voice, and spotted a broad, bald man dressed in drab forest apparel, leaning on a tree nearby. The man held a crude wooden flute in one hand, and a dirk in the other.

"The Mother aint going to like this," said the man. "She aint much fond of company."

Suleiman beamed his least worrying smile, hoping to try and send this simpleton on his way. There was a crashing in the woods, which interrupted his thoughts. Small trees and bushes shook as something large crashed towards them. A ferocious-looking Grizzly Bear burst through the tree line and growled angrily. He sniffed the air once, and then let out a fearsome roar at the Diabolist.

"Now, now Vushka," croaked an elderly voice. "Will you stop your yammering? I can't hear myself think."

With the clanking of vials and clicking of bone charms an old lady shuffled her way into the clearing. She was small and ancient; and her fierce, grey eyes betrayed a great wisdom. She held a scowl on her heavily wrinkled face as she squinted over at Suleiman and then to the two other interlopers. Her sharp mind quickly made out the facts, for even in this far flung corner of the land she had heard stories about the strange tattooed man that plagued Mellorian.

Suleiman stood and bowed, drawing another warning growl from the huge bear.

"I have no quarrel with you, Forest-Witch." He mustered his most charming tones, "These two have stolen from me and I only seek to claim justice."

"Stole from you, eh?" Mother Yulia scoffed. "I see nothing on them save the robes on their backs and many nasty cuts. Cuts that I assume came from a filthy blade like the one you are carrying?"

Suleiman spread his arms wide. "You see clearly. I fought them to reclaim ownership of my property."

Yulia peered over at the bag at his waist. "And now you have reclaimed it. What is it that they took from you? Something valuable, hmm?"

Suleiman drew back. "An heirloom of my master, nothing of note to you."

Yulia coughed and spat some rheumy phlegm on the floor. "I judge what is of note and of value in my realm. Show me, or we will take it and then see what it is soon enough.

Suleiman pursed his lips as he considered his options. "Very well," he said as he untied the bag and drew out some mouldy looking cloth from within. "Some old fabrics taken from Far Khethelia long ago." He turned the bag upside down to show nothing remained, and then dropped it. He held the cloth in his hand tightly, not wanting to let it out of his possession again.

Vushka sniffed and growled at the cloth.

“Yes old friend,” Yulia agreed. “I can smell its power too. The ghosts of the wood cry warnings to me. They fear it, for it can hurt them.”

Suleiman took another step away, his plans close to unravelling yet again. “My master will reward you greatly if you allow me go in peace.”

The bald man whistled, interrupting the discussion. “How much?”

A jeer from the old woman cut him off. “Fie! We don’t need anything from this one, Will. Everything he touches is as tainted as his black heart and will bring you no happiness. Just a great deal of pain.”

Will shrugged. “He aint done nothing to us. Why not let him on his way and make a little something for our troubles? If I can take your complaints he has no pain that can scare me.”

Yulia shook her head. “Half right, as usual, you foolish bark chewer.”

She gestured to a gap in the trees across from where she stood.

“That trail will take you North out of the Glimmerwood - provided you don’t annoy anything that might cross your path. You will reach the edge of the wood before the light fades if you go now and go quickly.”

Suleiman bowed again, with careful courtesy. “My master shall reward you hand-”

“I want nothing from any devil that commands your evil deeds,” Yulia interrupted. “Be gone soon, or else you will feel what it is like to have the jaws of a bear crush your skull. I suspect that even you have never felt that before.”

Suleiman snickered, shaking his head. “No, never that one. Another day perhaps.” He looked down at the Travium Wizard and his guardian, regarding them with sadness. His hunger would not be sated this day.

Will started to play a tune on his flute, a thin reedy sound that bore little similarity to any song the Diabolist had heard before. The trees creaked and parted, making the path more obvious.

“Another time then, Forest-Witch.”

“If I’m unlucky, then perhaps so,” came the curt reply.

Suleiman laughed deeply and sheathed his dagger. He turned and walked away, whistling an old Khethelian song to cleanse his thoughts of the odd flute-music. It was a favourite that his grandmother had once taught him long ago in their little village in the Kush, beneath the mountains. Suleiman felt certain that he would indeed see them all again. Probably far sooner than his enemies would all hope. Life was sweet. There was always tomorrow.

Yulia watched the Diabolist leave, waiting a few moments before turning to her hairy companion.

“Make sure he leaves the forest Vushka,” she instructed. “Kill him if he tries to circle back.”

The ornery bear growled a low assent and lumbered off.

The bald man scratched his beard, disappointed to lose money he could use at his favourite tavern. To make matters worse, he knew an command would soon come for him, as it always did from his mistress. He enjoyed making her ask anyway; playing dumb drove her crazy.

Against Mother Yulia, that was a big enough victory for him.

“Will, my lad,” Yulia asked in her least aggressive tone. “Help Mother and drag these fools back to my shack. I need to treat their wounds soon before they get infected and turn septic. I owe a favour to Balavan Cek, and it’s a lucky day when two idiots fall from the sky to help me pay it!”

“Yes Mother Yulia,” said Will, groaning in exasperation as he thought about the weight of the big one...