

Chapter I Life As Usual

Every large city has its own heart and soul.

This is an essential, universal truth; that every growing settlement will take on its own spirit distinct and individual from even the nearest communities, regardless of the culture, intention or events behind that development. Each such place will have its own features, its own landmarks, its own remarkable face and essence, as individual as a living person. With a large city, this is even more evident, as the lives of its many inhabitants shape its growth into something unique and extraordinary.

The inverse is also true. Like any person, a city has its darker aspects as well. As with people, some characteristics will be widely known and reviled: where a person may be known as a thief, a city may be known for pervasive crime; an individual might carry great prejudice, while a community could languish under a corrupt ruling body.

Other times, this “darker side” may be more esoteric, or at the least, less conspicuous to the casual observer. Case in point: Ylelon, nicknamed “The Lonely City.”

Ylelon was the name both of a tiny desert city-state located on the fringe of its mother continent and of the only major city in that country. Separated from the surrounding landmass by an imposing mountain chain and bordered by ocean where it was not touched by such rough terrain, Ylelon had grown from a desert wasteland to an economic power in ancient times, when it was discovered that the same mountains isolating the supposedly worthless expanse of land from its neighboring countries were a nearly incomparable source of mineral wealth. People of myriad descriptions came from across the globe to seek their fortunes in the new land, seemingly unfettered by a simple problem: Ylelon was already inhabited. The semi-nomadic and warlike Yd nation was hardened by living among the harsh sands since time immemorial and would not yield to the invaders without a fight.

Fight the Yd did, fiercely and proudly, but the conflict ended as such invasions of colonization usually do, with victory going to the side with superior technology and numbers.

There were other inhabitants in Ylelon, too, dark things that were whispered of in countless Yd horror stories and campfire tales. The foreign invaders met these terrors many times in the early years, but as decades became centuries and the Age of Exploration gave way to the Age of Reason, the constant violence, strange murders, and unnatural phenomena that plagued the people of Ylelon began to be attributed to mundane, “rational” causes. This mindset remained strongly rooted in the bulk of the populace into the modern age--which helped explain how the horrid creature that lurched through Ylelon’s downtown alleys on a cool-but-clear Saturday evening in early November, 2043 T.E. had remained hidden for so long.

The thing was more or less humanoid in form, walking on two legs, with a torso sporting two arms and a large round head on top. Its skin was slimy and featureless, the sickly white color of cataracts. The large, lumpy masses that passed for the beast’s feet were devoid of digits of any sort, while its arms ended in fleshy knobs adorned by three massive, grotesque black claws that closed inwardly, with the tips meeting at a point. The monster’s head was a vision from a nightmare, for where a face should have been there was only an enormous, vertical mouth lined with jagged teeth. Two dull black ovals that might have been eyes covered the sides of its head. One other feature marked the strange being as it hurried through the dark and garbage-choked alleys of the city: a bullet wound on its chest near its right shoulder. The wound oozed a viscous black sludge and was ringed by tatters of singed flesh, as though the round that caused the injury had been tremendously hot. The creature huffed and panted in deep, guttural breaths as it ran, but it was impossible to tell whether this was from the pain of the wound or the exertion of its pace.

The beast, for all its appearances, was not merely a brute. It was in fact quite intelligent, which is what had allowed it to hunt undetected in a city of nearly seven million people for the past two years. Every few days the clawed horror stole through the darkened alleys and back streets of Ylelon searching for victims, preferably ones that could easily be judged as the sort that would not be missed. On those rare occasions when the creature miscalculated, the disappearances of its victims invariably went unexplained and were lost among the other unsolved murders and disappearances that so plagued the city.

Tonight, though, had been different. The creature did not believe that it had become careless or lazy when it hunted, but it had somehow been noticed as it stalked three youths lounging on a grade school playground in the early evening. The teenagers had been lost to the effects of the cheap, street-grade narcotics they were using, making them almost completely oblivious to their surroundings. The monster's plan had been to dispatch the lot of them, then drag them to its hiding place to be devoured at its leisure. As it stalked across the open playground toward them, a feat that would have been impossible without the youths' altered states, a shot rang out and the creature experienced pain like it had never known. The hunter turned on its heels and fled, believing that it must have been seen either by one of the local peace officers or any of the city's criminal populace that carried firearms, which was the majority.

Now the beast fled through the dark paths back to safety. At first it had thought itself alone, but soon the thing's sharp senses alerted it to pursuit. A male of its prey species was keeping pace with the creature as it lumbered toward its destination, no doubt the same one that had inflicted its wound. Not worried in the least, the creature increased to a full running speed, one that only the most champion of mortal runners could ever hope to match. It knew there was no way its pursuer could reach it before it arrived at its destination, which was all the creature needed.

Yet as the brute hustled down the last stretch of a very long alley toward its goal, it felt a strange, hot piercing sensation on its lower back at the same time another gunshot echoed between the darkened buildings. Coming to a stop, the abomination felt at its back and found, to its astonishment, that it had been shot again. A quick glance back down the alleyway revealed the same male prey, almost lost in the distance but determinedly approaching at a dead run. A third gunshot rolled from his direction and the creature heard the buzz of a bullet pass by just overhead.

Annoyed, the monster turned and ran at its best speed for more of the alley's length. Near the end it stopped and pushed open a decrepit door to an abandoned tenement and hurried inside. The building was long abandoned, the exterior windows and doors locked and boarded up, save the alley door, which had been cleared some years before. Squatters shunned it: though it appeared to be an ideal place to spend a night, it had not taken long for word to spread that those choosing to sleep in the building often vanished. This afforded the monster a great sense of security, as it knew it could come and go at will without fear of discovery.

The door opened into a long hallway, lined along both walls with doors to empty living spaces. The creature wasted no time in running to a stairwell just inside the door. Though it knew it could easily dispatch its pursuer, the monster had decided it was simpler to reach its destination, where it could not be followed. That destination could only be reached from where the beast was by climbing to the second floor and entering the third door down on the left.

Shuffling along and leaving double trails of gross black ichor on the ancient, moldering carpet, the monster knew that its time was limited. The pursuer had proven to be much more determined and capable than the usual stupid and soft members of its race. If the creature hoped to avoid a confrontation, it had no choice but to hurry.

It reached the door and blindly rushed inside. The apartment's short entryway hall led directly into the living room, which took up most of the domicile's floor space. The only light was city and moonlight that filtered through the double set of windows on the far wall. The apartment had long since been cleared of all of its furnishings, even the carpet. The rough, bare living room floor now had a strange adornment: the edges of a complex series of painted lines and interlocking geometric shapes contained within a massive circle touched the middle of each of the room's walls. In one far corner, just beyond the reach of the circle, stood a low plinth of smooth white stone that reached to just about waist height. It supported a flat and level panel about the size and thickness of the playing boards of many games. The panel appeared to be of the same stone as the plinth, but its top surface was covered by a weaving interplay of abstract shapes and colors. While an onlooker might not have understood the meaning behind the images or the complex patterns they orbited each other in, there could have been little doubt that whatever the panel's primary purpose was, it had been designed to also be a work of art.

The creature ran to this panel and touched various shapes with the tips of its claws. The dancing lights moved into fixed formations as the beast directed them by dragging them over the panel's surfaces.

A grunt of frustration escaped its hideous mouth as it worked. The setting it required was complicated and, while it was certainly intelligent enough to use the panel, the display had been made by and for beings with very different digits. It was the difficulty of using massive claws on controls made for fingers, combined with the creature's brief pause in the alley, that allowed its pursuer to catch up.

He kicked the door open and stormed into the hall, holding two pistols at arm's length. With a harsh rasp of air that might have been a sigh of annoyance, the monster turned to face the man as he slowly made his way into the living room with the consummate caution of a veteran of risky situations. Though the creature was color-blind, it noted with detached interest that the short, spiky hair on the man's head was a very light color.

That was the extent of the detail the creature cared to observe. Opening its mouth so wide that its head appeared to be unfolding, the monster unleashed a feral, throaty bellow that was bizarrely high-pitched and charged the man.

The man was ready. He fired two shots from each pistol. Three bullets slammed into the monster's torso while the fourth grazed the inside of its left arm. The force of the impacts didn't even slow its approach and the man ducked just in time to avoid a trio of thick black claws that were aimed at his head. Instead they gouged a massive hole in the drywall behind him.

Without missing a beat the blond man rolled away from the monster and came smoothly up onto his feet with his guns at the ready. Great black talons slapped them out of his hands just as he was pulling the triggers, then twisted back and lunged forward, aiming at his heart. Instinctively his hands came up in a well-trained parry, pushing the claws upward just enough for him to twist out of the way and avoid injury, but the creature twisted and caught the man on the shoulder with its forearm, knocking him prone.

In a flash the stalwart warrior drew a slender dagger from a holster hidden in one boot and slashed it across the creature's arm. The edges of the wound were singed and the monster understood that the blade of the weapon was made, to some degree, of silver.

The man capitalized on the creature's hesitation with a sudden lunge to his feet and thrust the knife at the creature's head. In a single instant, its massive mouth opened and snapped shut on the blade, sheering it off cleanly halfway down its length. The man held the sundered blade before his face with an expression of disbelief, while the beast spat out the dagger's point and made a hollow chuckling sound. When it lurched forward to attack again, it made the mistake of assuming that the man was now helpless--and paid for it by having the remainder of the broken blade jabbed to the hilt in its left eye.

The creature let out a bone-chilling scream and lashed out blindly with its arms, clubbing the man full in the chest with one massive forearm and hurling him onto his back six feet down the hall. With one set of claws the monster picked at the hilt lodged in the ruin of its eye even as it turned and raced back to the panel on the plinth. Half-mad with fury and pain, the thing made a shortcut in its manipulations: two more quick shifts of colorful shapes and the beast took a single step back to stand within the confines of the circle.

At that moment the man was struggling to his feet. Though the wind had been completely knocked out of him and his chest ached where the monster had struck him, he refused to let his guard down for even a moment. Fighting to catch his breath, he rolled onto his feet and stood facing toward the living room, half-expecting the monstrosity to charge and try to finish him off. Instead he was blinded by a brilliant flash of white light. When his vision cleared, he found that the monster had vanished.

"Damn," Will rasped through his shortness of breath.

"*Are you all right, William?*" George asked.

"I'm fine," Will wheezed.

"*You're lucky it didn't re-break your ribs.*"

"Don't start, George." Will hurried to pick up his guns from where they had come to rest against the wall. "This is big. Do me a favor and get the others. Tell them I found another circle."

"*Do you think it's wise to stay there? You have no way of knowing where the target went.*"

"That's why I'm going back to the alley. Keep me up to date."

Will did just as he had said, leaving the building and taking up watch in the alley. He was too

courageous and selfless to fear much for his own safety, but he kept keenly aware of his environment out of sheer pragmatism. For Will, spending this cool Saturday evening skulking through Ylelon's shadows hunting supernatural monsters was life as usual. In the wake of the destruction of Mr. Knight's home three days before, most of the Lonely Winds had chosen to take a break from active field work while they came to terms with everything that had transpired. Will was the exception, dauntless as always, venturing along into the field while the others stayed behind. It was only the discovery of the circle that prompted him to call for the others; it was, perhaps, the only thing that would have brought them to begin with.

It took the other team members well over an hour to arrive. Jake was the first; his backpack rattled and clanked as he jogged to where Will stood leaning against the tenement building, which said to Will that Jake was carrying his usual assortment of tools, ammunition and interesting gadgets.

"What's the word?" he asked quickly as his eyes darted around the alley, taking in every detail.

Will shrugged. "It's been quiet. We'll go inside once the others get here."

"Fine by me," Jake said as he checked his guns.

"Why didn't you bring your armor?" asked Will.

"We were in too much of a hurry. George was practically chasing us out the door."

"Fair enough," replied Will. It was well within George's character to rush the other team members if he thought that one of them might be in danger.

Marc and Nails appeared next and soon after, Cynthia arrived.

"Just what George babbled as he drop-kicked us out of the Mansion," Jake replied. "You stopped a gross, white, clawed...thing from eating some kids and followed it back to another summoning circle."

"That's the gist of it. I hope everyone's ready for this," Will said somberly.

"Less talk, more killing," Marc grunted. He pushed past Will and stomped into the tenement, leaving the alley door standing open.

"The man loves his work," Nails chuckled.

Will led the others inside at a jog. Marc was standing just inside, scanning the hallway and training his shotgun where he looked.

"Careful. This moldy old carpet could attack at any moment," Jake teased him.

Marc muttered something unrepeatable as he joined the team in climbing the stairs while Jake handed out flashlights to each team member. Will took point approaching the door to the apartment with his guns at the ready. Jake followed close behind, brandishing a submachine-gun in one hand and a military motion tracker in the other. When they reached the door, Will and Nails stood just in front of it and the others kept back with their weapons at the ready. Jake nodded to indicate that his motion tracker showed nothing moving inside the apartment. Will pushed the door open and led the others inside.

The apartment was exactly as Will had left it. His practiced eye saw no sign that the creature had returned, but he still did not lower his guard as he inched down the hallway and into the living room. He continued to study the abandoned domicile as the others entered the room and looked around.

"Well, this is different," Jake said as he swept his flashlight beam over the painted lines on the bare floor.

"Marc, Nails, check the other rooms," Will commanded. While they moved to ensure that the rest of the apartment was empty, Will asked Jake: "What's the best way to destroy this thing?"

"Just to tear up the floor, I suppose," said Jake pensively. "I had to use explosives on the last two, but they were carved into stone. This is just painted on the floor. What bothers me is how different this one is from the others."

"*I've been pondering that myself, Jake,*" George's said. "*The two different styles are disparate enough to bear little sign of common origin or purpose.*"

"Who cares?" sighed Will. "Let's just break this thing so whoever made it can't call any more teenager-eating monsters."

"Let's not be too hasty. We might be able to learn something about this one. You've got to admit, it will be easier to work with," Jake said dryly.

"Bedroom's clear," Marc huffed as he strolled back into the living room.

"So are the kitchen and bathroom," Nails said as he ambled back into the room and leaned

casually against a wall. “Did we miss anything?”

“Not so far,” Jake replied. He was kneeling in the center of the circle in the middle of the room, tracing the lines of paint with a finger. “I don’t get it. This is nothing like the other circles. It’s not underground, there aren’t any guardians and it’s not made out of the weird glassy stone. And,” he leaned back on his haunches and looked at the plinth, “it’s got *that*. I’m seriously beginning to doubt this is the sort of thing we’re looking for.”

“But that thing used it to disappear,” Will protested. “It did something with that panel, there was a flash of light and it was gone.”

Cynthia’s gaze drifted to the plinth. She wanted to examine it closely, but she was afraid of what the others would say, particularly Will.

Still, if she couldn’t make obvious, direct physical contact, she could at least try to get a general idea of the room’s purpose just being in it. Closing her eyes as Will, Jake and George continued their debate, she reached out with her mind to touch the walls, the floors, the very air of the room.

The first impression she got was one strangely like that she felt in airports, swimming pools, and other public places: one of many individuals passing through, but none staying for very long. This feeling of transience was so old and dominant that it almost completely overshadowed the distant memory of anyone actually living in the apartment.

Mixed in among the ethereal sense of countless minds passing through was a vague but steady mark, an impression of a common thought many of those minds had shared as they passed through the room. Cynthia frowned unconsciously as her mind finally closed around the thought, which was most strongly felt as the simple phrase: “Hit the bell!”

The moment this impulse was clear in Cynthia’s mind, the colorful shapes and patterns on the plinth panel brightened and began to shift about frantically, creating a kaleidoscopic display of hues in the darkened room. The brightness of the lights shone through Cynthia’s eyelids, startling her from her reverie. The other team members all flinched away from the panel instinctively.

“What the heck?” exclaimed Jake.

“*Get out of there!*” George urged desperately.

“Not argument here!” Will said. “Everybody out! I’ll watch for--”

A flash of blinding light filled the room. When it was gone, only the plinth and its dancing lights remained in the still apartment.

Chapter II The V. I. P.

The first thing Will noticed, even before his vision cleared, was the din. Had he known of Cynthia's feeling just seconds before of an airport, he would have thought it very appropriate. The pervasive noise all around him was that of a large crowd, a legion of voices each speaking on a separate topic.

The next thing Will realized was that he was no longer in the apartment building. He had not experienced any sensation of moving, yet his surroundings were completely different.

Now he stood in a perfectly square chamber slightly larger than the living room he had just been in. The floor, three walls, and ceiling appeared to be composed of slate-gray stone laid out in flawless square tiles in the floor and smooth elsewhere. The other Lonely Winds were all with him in the same positions and distances from each other they had been before. They all looked as confused as Will imagined he did himself.

No sooner had these details settled in than Will realized that he and his compatriots were not alone. The chamber they occupied was open on one end, giving way to some sort of tunnel. Just beyond the confines of the room itself was positioned a low wooden desk, occupied by a tall, husky man with black hair, beard, and mustache, wearing green robes. Lined up behind him were five men in simple cloth uniforms the same slate gray as the surrounding surfaces. They stood at attention, perfectly still. Each of them held a firearm of some sort, but curiously smooth and lacking in detail, as though they were molded from a single, solid piece of black metal.

Before any of the team could say or do anything else, the man at the desk straightened, cleared his throat, and spoke above the crowd:

"Do you have any fruit to declare?"

Will froze. What was going on? Had he lost his mind?

"Do you have any fruit to declare?" the man asked again more forcefully. The team members looked at each other helplessly. Presently the man at the desk raised a hand and the five men behind him all shifted their stances from attention to battle-ready, pointing their weapons at the team.

"*Do you have any fruit to declare?!*" the man at the desk and the five guards demanded in perfect unison.

"Brock, stop messing with them!" a voice snapped from somewhere behind the guards. The man at the desk chuckled, the guards lowered their weapons and the Winds were more confused than ever.

The owner of the voice appeared, walking out of the tunnel and through the line of guardsmen to stand next to the desk. He was small of stature, very slender and slight of build, with a two-day beard. He wore soft green robes much like Brock's. He couldn't have been much more than twenty, but he carried himself with assured confidence.

"I must apologize for my associate," he said hastily. "You see, he's a bit of a prankster."

"Uh...sure. No problem," Will said and exchanged a confused glance with Jake.

"You must be the messengers. We've been expecting you," the man said. "My name is Matthias Stillwater. This way, please."

He turned and began to walk briskly away into the tunnel. Will looked at the others, shrugged helplessly and began to run after Matthias. The other team members followed him for the same reason.

"Excuse me, sir, I think there's been some kind of--" Will began as he jogged out into the hall, but his voice simply died in his throat.

The tunnel was actually some sort of causeway that ran in a massive curve, as though it followed the contour of a circular building. The outside curve of the causeway was lined at regular intervals with chambers identical to the one the team had just emerged from, each staffed with an official seated at a desk and backed by five guards. The inside curve was lined with numerous open archways that seemed to lead into a variety of small shops or other areas. The whole of the surroundings was composed of the same slate-colored stone and lit by a series of brightly-glowing white orbs the size of cantaloupes that hung in empty air, without any visible means of support, just below ceiling level along the walls.

What blew Will's mind, however, were the people. Will was Ylelon-born and raised and so was used to a vast mix of ethnicities and culture. What he was seeing now was far beyond his ken, however, for the teeming masses in the causeway and chambers represented not only unfamiliar races, but completely alien species as well. Most of the crowd was made up of humanoids that resembled jerud to varying degrees. A few were taller, many were shorter, and quite a few were ordinary-looking but for an unusual feature or two, such as pointed ears or odd hair or skin color.

Here and there were more exotic individuals. A three-legged, three-armed, fog-colored creature with a body the size and shape of a broomstick and three eyes like black beads strolled past Will, apparently oblivious to his blank stare. A waist-high being that looked like a glossy-black, bipedal ant chattered angrily at the vendor of a nearby shop stocked with various breads, apparently disagreeing on a price. Something that looked like a cross between a fern and a cluster of vines floated past at chin level, resting in a shallow ceramic bowl set atop a humming, levitating platform.

Mathias had taken several steps down the causeway before he realized that Will and the others were stopped in their tracks. "Is everything all right?" he asked calmly as he walked back to where the team stood in a tight group, staring dumbfounded at the scene all around them.

"I... we're... I'm not sure," Will stammered.

"Just answer two questions for us," said Jake.

"Yes, what are those?" Mathias asked.

"Where the hell are we and what the hell is going on?!" Jake blurted.

"I'm going to guess that you're not the messengers," Mathias said flatly. "I'll take you to the Arbiter and we should be able to sort things out there. Keep your weapon down!" he said sternly to Marc, who was nervously brandishing his shotgun. "We have all this security here for a reason. You're not in any danger as long as you behave, but believe me, make a wrong move and you'll be dead before you hit the floor."

Marc grumbled and sneered, but he laid his shotgun back across his shoulder. Mathias motioned for the group to continue, only this time he was careful to walk with them instead of ahead of them.

"So, where are you from?" he asked casually.

"Well, I'm from Attenz, and everybody else here is from Ylelon..." Jake ventured.

"What? No, I mean what *world* are you from."

"Rond, of course," said Will. "What other world would we be from?"

Mathias stopped dead. "You mean, you guys are--you don't--oh, wow."

"What? What does that mean?" Nails asked in exasperation.

"I had no idea--" Mathias continued. "Ok, it's really simpler if we just go to the Arbiter. We'll explain everything there, I promise."

Mathias led the Lonely Winds at a brisk pace through the crowds to one of the tunnel entrances. This took them down a short hall that ended at a massive stone spiral staircase, which the party climbed for a distance that Will guessed was easily seven stories. When they reached the top, they stepped out into a broad hallway. Like the one below, it followed a curve and was lit by the floating globes, but instead of square cells and archways leading into shops, the walls were lined as far as the eye could see with rounded recesses containing statues. Each statue was unique and together, they depicted a mind-boggling array of warriors of every imaginable sort, each with their own style of weapon and armor. They also ran the gamut of races, representing every people the group had seen in the causeway below and many they hadn't. The roar of a multitude, like that at a sporting event, could be heard resonating through the walls.

"What's all this?" Cynthia asked as Mathias led them down the left stretch of the hall.

"This is the Hall of Champions," Mathias replied. "Every figure here represents a past warrior--depicted at their prime, of course."

"The prime of what?" asked Jake.

"You'll see."

Presently the curve of the hall rolled forward to reveal its end: a huge set of double doors made of black stone, each reaching to the ceiling, with a massive iron ring set in its center. On either side of the

doors stood a guard in black plate-mail armor, holding tall black spears. As the team approached, the guards took hold of the rings and pulled the doors open. The distant roar became loud and clear.

Beyond the door was a lavish private viewing box that overlooked a great arena. A table covered with an assortment of food ran along the back wall, while the front of the room was an open balcony. Sitting in a deep-blue easy chair on the balcony was a small, portly man who turned at the sound of the doors opening. He was balding and appeared to be in his late forties. He wore simple, dark gray robes and clutched a staff of black metal much taller than himself, topped with a sculpted hand clenching a large, clear crystal sphere.

“There he is!” he exclaimed happily at the sight of Mathias and hefted his rotund girth out of his chair. “Better yet, he’s brought company!”

“False alarm, chief,” Mathias said, “these aren’t the messengers. They’re lost travelers or something.”

“Oh? How unfortunate!” the little man said. “Let us endeavor to help them as we can.” He bowed as low as his ample bulk allowed. “I am your humble Arbiter. On behalf of everyone who makes this possible, I bid you welcome to the Pit.”

“Yeah, that’s nice and all, but what the hell is going on?” Jake snapped.

“They have no idea where they are,” Mathias said in response to the Arbiter’s questioning expression. “They’re from Rond.”

The Arbiter’s eyes widened. “I see. Perhaps you should all sit down. There’s a lot to go through.” He made a simple gesture and a large rectangular slab that appeared to be made of incandescent light appeared, hovering just before the Arbiter. Numerous groupings of text ran across its front surface, like a complex menu. The Arbiter tapped a single point on the slab and moments later a servant appeared through the doors. At the Arbiter’s instruction, he quickly left and returned with a small team of workers bearing extra chairs and drinks for everyone.

“All right, let’s start with some basic information,” the Arbiter said. “Do I miss my guess that you are mercenaries?”

Jake looked at Will, who had his eyes fixed on the Arbiter. “We kill monsters,” Will said. Given the bizarre nature of the situation, he didn’t see the point in trying to conceal the truth.

“Oh, so close!” laughed the Arbiter. “Would I be correct in saying that you have absolutely no idea where you are or how you got here?”

“Wait, we’re lost?” said Marc.

“Of course we’re lost, dummy!” Cynthia snapped. “Where did you think we were?”

“I just thought I’d hit my home brew too hard before George called us,” Marc said with a blank expression.

“Don’t panic,” the Arbiter said. “Start at the beginning. Tell me how you got here.”

Will told Mathias and the Arbiter an abridged version of how he had followed the creature into the abandoned apartment. He gave what details he could about the circle and the panel. All the while, the Arbiter listened pensively, sipping from a massive mug of mead.

“Ah, this is much simpler than I feared,” he said brightly when Will had finished. “From your story, it’s clear that you all are much more aware of the workings of the world around you than most of your people are.”

“Wow, my first left-handed compliment of the day,” Jake grumbled.

The Arbiter sipped his mead. “My apologies. All I meant was, you are familiar with such things as the existence of the supernatural, whereas most of your people are not. The shock comes for you here in the form of learning, first-hand, that yours isn’t the only world, nor yours the only people in existence.”

“Yeah, we got that already,” said Will. “Could you get to the part where you tell us where we are?”

“Very well.” The Arbiter took a deep breath. “You are no longer in Ylelon, or even on Rond. You are, in fact, no longer even in your own universe.”

Silence broken only by the murmur of the masses beyond the booth followed. Nails had his eyes

fixed on the Arbiter, while the others shifted in their seats, trying to come to terms with what they were hearing.

“Well, this is interesting,” Jake said. “If all this is true, then over a century of theoretical physics just became concrete reality. But if we’re not in “our” universe, then where are we?”

“If you like theoretical physics, you’ll love this,” said Mathias. “You’re in a pocket dimension.”

“We’re in a thing that nerds use?” Marc asked, still wearing a blank expression.

Will and Jake both slapped him over the head. “That’s a pocket *protector*, stupid!” Jake said. “A pocket dimension is a universe of very finite size.”

“Quite so,” affirmed the Arbiter. “In this case, the Pit is a coliseum that is a reality unto itself.

“There are a huge number of different dimensions, many of which are spatial universes like you are familiar with. Each of these is inhabited by countless species, many of which eventually learn of the existence of other worlds as you have--albeit usually in a less abrupt and more culturally inclusive way.

“Anyway, I’m getting off-track. When people from races that reach dimension-spanning levels of magic or technology want to kill time, they often come here.” The Arbiter rose from his seat, walked out onto the balcony, and gestured for the others to join him.

What the team saw took their breaths away. The viewing booth was mounted near the floor in the interior of the most enormous arena any of them had ever seen. There was easily enough seating to accommodate over one hundred thousand people and the recessed pit below the stands was an area of several acres. Roughly a third of the seats were occupied. Directly across from the booth was a space devoid of chairs with no one sitting in any of the seats around it. The stands were broken periodically by archways leading back into the arena structure. High above, a flat stone ceiling enclosed the great expanse. Other private boxes like the one the team now stood in ran along the rim of the seating area in regular intervals, broken only below the space without chairs.

The pit area itself was full of small buildings, with an open park area taking up a full quarter section that ended abruptly at the walls, as though some immense force had scooped a portion of a modern city off the face of a planet and set it down into the pit. The buildings that had been tall enough to rise above the first row at the pit’s edge had been sheered off uniformly at that level, a story and a half high. Observers in the stands could easily see down into offices and living spaces that were left roofless. The side of the pit was a single, smooth stone wall, broken at regular intervals by gated archways which looked very out of place in the midst of an abruptly ending alleyway or the trees of a park.

Two figures were darting around among the bases of the buildings; several others lay motionless here and there on the terrain. The lighting in the pit itself was somehow muted, much more like a city evening than a magically illuminated stadium. The fighters were silhouettes that winked in and out of sight as they darted through the alleys and streets of the little slice of city. Momentary glints of light made one thing very clear: both of them were carrying guns.

“Blood sports,” Will said with an edge.

“Yes and no,” replied the Arbiter. “We have a huge number of games here. Most of the time, I try to keep them non-lethal. It’s hard for a crowd favorite to return and draw revenue if she gets herself killed. The fighters you see lying prone are stunned, not dead.”

One of the fighters was making her way down an alley in the direction of the booth and the team could see her quite clearly. She was dressed in leather biker clothing with black boots and had short black hair frizzed up into a wild mane. The gun she carried was very small and slender-barreled, but she moved with a smooth grace that suggested great confidence in her skill and the effectiveness of her weapon. A glint of metal on the side of her face drew Will’s eyes and he realized that her left ear had been replaced with a cybernetic device of some sort. Will knew that such things existed on Rond, but were prohibitively expensive, usually experimental and often rather ugly. On the other hand, the past half-hour had made it abundantly clear that the beings in this place had access to things that were much more advanced than anything Will was familiar with.

A hush fell over the crowd as the shadow of the other fighter loomed behind the woman from around a building corner. The woman continued to walk slowly forward, apparently unaware that her opponent was quickly sneaking up behind her. The stalker raised his weapon, but at the last instant the

woman whipped around on her heels. Three shots rang out. The stalker fell flat on his face and lay still.

The crowd went wild. Though the seats were only a third full, the total number of fans present was still more than most stadiums on Rond could support. The stone walls and floors of the Pit trembled under the force of many thousands of feet and voices being raised.

The Arbiter made a simple gesture before his face with an open palm. A small orb that appeared to be composed entirely of multi-colored light, like the slab, appeared there. A circular object, like a gong, made of the same bright energy materialized in the air to the Arbiter's left. He struck the gong with his staff and the sound rolled loud and clear through the entire Pit. Then he spoke into the orb as though it were a microphone and his voice resonated through the stands:

"Here is your winner and *still* champion of the Alley Crawl League, Lis-An "The Dart" Bramar!"

In the pit below, Lis-An strutted triumphantly and waved to her fans with a confident smirk on her face. The crowd loved every bit of it. Several of the pit's gates opened and numerous guardsmen appeared carrying stretchers, which they used to bear the losers away.

"I gotta admit, that was pretty cool," said Nails.

"Oh, you ain't seen nothing yet," the Arbiter chuckled. "The next match is going to be great. Which reminds me, I need to reset the pit."

With another wave of his hand, the slab drifted to his side. As the Arbiter chose different options by touch with practiced speed, the sections of text shifted, detailing changes that were being made and offering more options.

As the Arbiter worked, the scene in the Pit below changed dramatically. Very abruptly every surface and object--the buildings, the streets, the trees in the park--began to glow with a soft blue-white light, which lit the pit with an unearthly but beautiful glow for a few seconds before the "city" faded away like stars at dawn. The pit was left utterly empty, with a floor made of large, perfectly square tiles. There was no sign that the cityscape had ever been there.

"Ok, I *gotta* know how you did that," Jake said.

The Arbiter had returned to his easy chair and sat sipping his mead. "In concept, it's very simple. Like I said, the building is its own universe. I had it custom-made by a cabal of wizards who specialize in the oh-so-rare art of creating miniature planes of existence. It cost a *fortune* to have done, but I have a huge amount of control of everything here, right down to the physical laws. You might have noticed that we conveniently speak the same language? We actually aren't. It's one of the nifty settings I have in place: a universal translator."

Jake muttered something about "sci-fi clichés," but the others said nothing.

"Terrific," Will said. His impatience was beginning to show through his rarely-broken somber exterior. "So you have your own little corner of Creation you get to play God in. How did *we* end up here?"

"That's simple enough. The circle you found was for transportation," explained Mathias. "It was probably made for the express purpose of going to and from here."

"The security checkpoints where you appeared are a safety feature," the Arbiter added. "Normally anyone with the ability to teleport through dimensions could theoretically show up anywhere they wanted. That's a really bad idea for more reasons than even just the obvious ones. So, another one of our private universe's nifty features is that any form of dimensional travel is shunted into a random checkpoint."

"Isn't that a lot of security for a sport center?" muttered Will.

"We're more than that!" Mathias protested. "This place is part city. Many of the vendors, fighters, and even a lot of the fans live here fulltime. We have stores, manufacturing facilities, banks..."

"That still doesn't explain why the circle brought us here," Jake complained. Here and there people were beginning to filter through the archways into the stands and take seats. The ambient noise in the stadium was steadily rising in intensity.

Mathias shrugged. "You said you chased a monster into it, right? The thing was probably left primed to transport again. Some of the cheaper models are kind of hair-trigger when they're powered-up."

"You mean, the cheaper, less well-made magical circles of dimension-spanning instantaneous travel," quipped Nails.

“But none of us even touched it!” Jake exclaimed.

“Are any of you psychic or users of magic?” the Arbiter asked absently. “Many races make artifacts that will respond to those sorts of power.”

Cynthia blushed and lowered her eyes as the rest of the team turned to stare at her.

“Ok, this is all very interesting, but we have our priorities right now,” Will said coolly. “We need to find that thing and kill it, then get back home.”

“That...might be difficult,” Mathias said.

“What? Why?” demanded Marc.

“For one thing, the Pit is neutral ground,” said the Arbiter sternly. “Violence of any sort is expressly prohibited here.”

“You’re kidding, right?” scoffed Nails.

The Arbiter sipped his mead. “Not in the least. There are fans here that are members of civilizations engaged in centuries-long campaigns of genocide against each other. Some of the races here are actually *food* for some of the others. Suffice it to say, it’s not good for business if your audience wipes itself out. If you want to mix it up here, you do it in the pit. Period.”

“Wonderful,” said Will icily. “You’re going to let a murderous monster run around this place?”

“As long as it behaves and pays the cover, yeah.” The Arbiter shifted in his chair to face Will. “Bear one thing in mind: these rules apply to everyone and everything here, without exception. They also obviously only apply as long as an individual remains here.”

Though still upset, Will understood what the Arbiter was saying. “All right, what’s the other problem?”

“You might have some trouble paying for your journey home,” Mathias said apologetically.

“What? Why?” Marc growled for the second time.

“Most of the people who come here have some plan for going back,” the Arbiter said flatly. “Mass transport programs, regular schedules, that sort of thing. Making an unplanned trip to an obscure location is likely to be...costly.”

“Great,” Jake groaned. “So, through no fault of our own, we get stranded in this sci-fi anthology series nightmare. *Now* we can’t even get a ticket home, because, hey, what we thought of as the entire world until forty minutes ago is just a little whistle-stop place to you?”

“Relax, pal,” said Mathias. “If I know this guy, and I think I do, he’s got something in--”

A knocking that sounded like someone was trying to batter in the booth’s doors cut him off. “Right on schedule,” Mathias muttered as the booth doors were pulled open again. In strode the most ridiculous-looking fellow Will had ever seen.

He was a thin wisp of a man with beady little eyes and greasy black hair. He walked with the confident air and raised nose of royalty, yet the robes he wore were threadbare, patchwork rags befitting a beggar.

“Allow me to present the Lord Yepp,” Mathias said, but his voice dripped with malice. Marc laughed aloud at the sound of the name.

“You have a lot of nerve barging in here, you arrogant ass!” the Arbiter blurted.

“Yes, being right, and knowing it, is often mistaken for arrogance,” said Lord Yepp with incredible pomp. “I am here, once again, to correct your errors.”

“Ok, I am now officially lost,” said Nails.

“This pissant is the agent for a couple of fighters,” the Arbiter explained, his tone laden with steadily-increasing ire. “One of them thinks he deserves a title shot, but he’s just not in the same league as the reigning champion.”

“Incorrect,” Lord Yepp said, as though he were amending an obvious fallacy.

“Who’s the champion?” Jake asked.

“You might know of her,” Mathias said. “I think she’s from your world. She’s called the Crown of Thorns.”

The Lonely Winds were silent.

“At any rate, the point is moot,” said the Arbiter. “If the fighters had even a fighting chance

against the Crown of Thorns, I still couldn't make the match."

"Clearly, that is a lie," Lord Yepp said as he strode onto the balcony and stood looking out over the Pit as though he owned the place. Will could actually hear the Arbiter's knuckles cracking as he made a fist.

"Actually, it isn't," he said as he set his mead down and brandished his staff threateningly. "Oh, Yepp?"

Lord Yepp turned at the sound of his name and caught the hand-and-crystal top of the staff in his face as the Arbiter swung it in a crushing roundhouse. The ragged, self-proclaimed lord toppled over the balcony and tumbled into the pit, landing on the unforgiving stone with a sickening thump. A roar of shock and confusion ran through the still-gathering crowd.

"That's for calling me a liar," spat the Arbiter, and turned to Mathias. "Get some security and get that worthless sack of crap out of my arena. Don't worry about being gentle."

"You're not a very nice man, are you?" Cynthia muttered as Mathias rushed out the door.

"I make a living charging people to watch partially-controlled violence. Of *course* I'm not a very nice man," was the matter-of-fact reply. "I will tolerate many things, but I will *not* tolerate being called a liar."

"What's wrong with you making the fight?" Jake asked as he suppressed a shudder at the thought of the carnage the Crown of Thorns had surely wrought in the pit.

"The Crown's only the champion here by default, because she's killed all of the previous ones," the Arbiter sighed. "She's never had a formal match. About three hundred years ago, she turned up and ripped the newly crowned Grand Champion to pieces as he was awaiting a challenger." The pudgy little man paused for a sip of mead, his hand visibly trembling.

"We never know when she's coming. All we do know is that any time a fighter works their way through the ranks to become acknowledged as the *best*, their days are numbered. Sometimes it's a period of months, sometimes only hours, but sooner or later, the Crown appears and murders them in front of everyone here. She kills great warriors from throughout existence, my forces are powerless to stop her and that ass down there calls me a liar for saying I can't control what she does!"

"So who are the messengers you were expecting?" Will asked in an effort to change the subject.

"Just never you mind," the Arbiter said with enough forcefulness to deter further questioning. "What you should be concerned with is figuring out how you're going to pay for your way home."

Nails raised an eyebrow. "Yeah? You have a suggestion?"

"I thought you'd never ask!" the Arbiter chuckled. "I don't think it's too much of a stretch to assume, based on your professed occupation, that you are accomplished warriors?"

"Not a chance, mister!" Will exclaimed. "You may be in charge of your own little house of horrors here, but don't think you can force us to take part in your barbarism!"

"Easy, Will," Nails said as he laid a hand on the team leader's shoulder. "I don't think he's trying to force anyone to do anything."

The Arbiter sipped his mead. "Quite right. Far be it from me to make use of gladiatorial thralls. Everyone here competes of their own free will, fully aware of the circumstances and consequences.

"I'm offering you the chance to compete as a means of earning your way back home. You go into the pit. I select appropriate opponents for you, making as fair a fight as possible. If you are triumphant, your winnings will more than pay for your way home."

"And if we lose, I suppose the winnings will pay for our burials?" Will asked.

The Arbiter shrugged. "As I said, it's your choice."

"Isn't there any other way for us to earn money here?" asked Jake.

"Certainly. You could try to find work with one of the vendors, but with your limited knowledge of local customs and practices, it's a long shot. You can beg for spare change in the causeway. Or, your attractive friend could, shall we say, pursue a performance career in one of the local clubs."

"Oh, *hell* no," said Cynthia.

"Take some time, discuss it among yourselves," said the Arbiter. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to announce the next fight."

The stands were now more than three-quarters full. The expectant crowd's murmur filled the arena. Taking a deep breath, the Arbiter spoke into the globe and his voice flooded the great coliseum once more.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Fight fans of all creeds! I give you the battle you've all been waiting for! Welcome, one and all, to the title match for the Heavyweight Championship of the Archaic Melee League!

"First, please welcome the challenger, Maarro Thuhl!"

One of the gates to the left of the booth rattled open and a huge, lumbering mass of muscle strolled into the pit. The creature was easily seven feet tall and nearly four feet in width, all of it thickly muscled limbs and strong, heavy bones. All but the palms of its hands and its sloping, ursine face were covered in soft, short brown fur. The challenger wore no clothing, but carried a colossal war hammer that looked to be made of one solid piece of black metal. Its handle was longer than Nails was tall and its doubled head was larger than an anvil. Will couldn't begin to guess how heavy it must be, yet the fighter carried it without apparent effort.

The crowd's greeting to Mr. Thuhl was dubious. It was hard to tell exactly what portion of the crowd was cheering and what booing, but the volume was undeniable. Maarro raised his war hammer one-handed in a salute to the crowd, then waited patiently in the center of the pit.

The Arbiter paused for a moment while the furor died down, then spoke again. "And here, the reigning champion, holding the AML's title for a record twenty-one weeks, ladies and gentlemen, I give you: Silver!"

The gate directly opposite Maarro opened and the other fighter slithered gracefully across the gray stone pit floor. The word "slithered" applied because the female fighter had the serpentine body of an anaconda from the waist down. Her upper body was that of a slender woman, clad in stylized plate-mail armor. She had six arms and in each of her hands she carried one of a set of identical, curved short swords. All of her body, her humanoid skin and her serpent scales, was a uniform silvery sheen that was little different from the color of her weapons and armor. Her only headgear was a dark band of plastic over her eyes.

There was no ambiguity about the greeting the crowd gave Silver. If Maarro's reception had been loud, Silver's was deafening. Silver worked her way to within striking distance of Maarro, curled her snake body up beneath herself and bowed. Maarro returned the gesture by saluting with his hammer. The crowd grew silent.

"Here you go, big guy," the Arbiter said as he causally tossed his staff to Nails.

"What do I do with this?" Nails asked.

The Arbiter held an open hand out toward the floating gong. "Hit the bell!" he commanded jovially. Nails looked at the others, shrugged, and struck the gong soundly with the staff.

The moment the tone echoed through the arena Maarro raised his hammer with amazing speed and brought it down toward Silver. She dodged the blow by uncoiling her lower body and springing to one side. The massive hammerhead crashed into the pit floor and crushed one of the tiles to rubble. Silver's swords flashed in a unified strike toward Maarro but were turned aside when the giant again moved with speed belied by his size, twisting his hammer in a twirl like a fan blade that struck each of the six scimitars aside.

Silver was not caught off guard. She kept her hold on all of her weapons and weaved gracefully away from the line drive swing Maarro made in retaliation. Maarro spun on his axis, continuing his swing, and stepped toward Silver again. This time, she did not dodge away from the attack, but went under it, lunging at Maarro's legs with blades outstretched.

The hulking warrior saw the attack coming and reacted just in time. Again there was a surprisingly quick motion, the enormous hammer being swung with the ease and grace of a baton and the head arced downward toward Silver's skull. She twisted out of the way, barely. Her serpent tail lashed behind her as she wove away from the attack.

Maarro wasn't about to let her go. He continued the circular motion with his hammer, swinging the enormous handle out directly in Silver's path. She ran into it shoulder-first. Without wasting a

moment, Maarro raised one foot to plant in Silver's back and pin her to the ground.

But Silver had outmaneuvered Maarro. Her apparent flight, even the calculated risk of being stopped by the hammer, had been a clever feint. In one smooth motion her lashing tail whipped around behind her looming foe and struck the back of the knee in the leg that bore his weight. Maarro toppled over backwards, landing on the stone floor with a thump that was audible in the first row of the stands.

In a flash Silver was on top of him. Her tail wrapped around his ankles as she laid one sword across his throat while holding another one point-down just over his heart.

Utter silence gripped the crowd. Very slowly, Maarro scooted out from under Silver and her weapons and stood, leaving his war hammer on the cold stone floor. For a breathless moment the two fighters stood silent. Then, Maarro enclosed one of Silver's uppermost forearms in a massive fist and held it above her head in victory.

Applause and cheers shook the arena. The Arbiter motioned to Nails, who struck the gong with the staff again.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the winner and *still* champion, Silver!"

The crowd continued to roar as Silver and Maarro both left through their respective gates. There were flurries of activity here and there in the stands as bets were collected.

"That sucked!" Marc shouted over the cheers. "The fight was over in what, eight seconds?"

"That's how it often is here, snow globe," replied the Arbiter. "The fighters agreed to the terms of this match. They could have decided to go to first blood, or to the death, but it wasn't worth it to them."

"Wimps," muttered Marc. "When I fought down by the docks, we didn't stop until the other guy couldn't fight anymore."

"Then you'll fit right in here. Despite my best efforts, some of the Leagues and fights here get downright bloodthirsty--"

The Arbiter trailed off as his control slab suddenly began to flash rapidly through the visible spectrum. A look of primal terror crossed the Arbiter's face and he leapt to his feet, dropping his mug of mead. The microphone-orb broadcast his frantic voice through the arena:

"Clear the south stands! Security to the arena!"

The Lonely Winds once again looked on helplessly, this time at the mania that resulted from the Arbiter's cries. The same patch of seat-less stands had remained empty even with the arena filling up for the last fight, but now all of the fans that were sitting within a stone's throw of the shunned region picked up and ran as though fleeing some natural disaster. Here and there members of the security team filtered into the stands through the many gates with weapons at the ready.

Presently a gate directly above the empty section of the stands opened and a group of about fifty balls of light drifted out of it. They greatly resembled the Arbiter's microphone orb, but were each the size of a medicine ball, and glowed brightly enough to cast incandescent light over the surrounding area. The group descended over the clear area and spread out, separating until they came to hover tracing the curve of an enormous dome covering the unoccupied space, large enough to enclose most houses.

"What is it? What's going on?" Cynthia cried as the balls of light began to glow steadily brighter.

The Arbiter's eyes were wide and his voice fearful when he answered. "The V.I.P. is coming."

The orbs quickly reached a blinding level of brightness, then winked out of sight, leaving the throngs of onlookers blinking. When her vision cleared Cynthia gasped. Even Nails took an involuntary step backward.

Standing in the seat-less region of the stands, towering and huge even across the distance of the pit, was the dragon, Terek Domar.

Chapter III The Return of Mad Marc Schaeffer

Time seemed to stand still as all attention in the arena fixed on the great wyrm. Will caught a strange thought making its way through his mind. He had seen the dragon once before, along with the others, but only briefly and at night. What struck him as strange was that seeing the creature in strong light did nothing to make it seem any less fearsome.

All at once the heavy veil of silence in the arena was shattered when Terek Domar let out a roar. The sound made the crowds tremble and the Lonely Winds take another unconscious step back. That sound was all too familiar to them; the feral call that sounded as much like rolling thunder as the voice of a living creature.

Immediately the Arbiter began to punch away at his control slab. "Matthius! I hope your people are in gear!" he said, then settled back into his chair with his eyes fixed on Terek Domar, who was staring at the announcing booth with his head lowered, rumbling like a volcano.

"That's--he's--what is *that* doing here?" stammered Jake.

"He's the V.I.P. I told you that." The Arbiter's tone was heavy with both irritation and nervousness.

"Did he follow us here?" Marc whimpered.

"What? Of course not!" snapped the Arbiter. "He comes here now and then. He likes the violence."

Will and Jake exchanged glances. The others were quiet.

The Arbiter trembled as he got up from his chair and walked to the table at the back of the booth to pour himself a fresh mug of mead, then turned to the Lonely Winds. "I'm sorry, but you'll have to leave the booth for now. Mathias will escort you to the quarters I have assigned for you, pending your decision regarding my offer."

"You're probably tired of hearing us ask this, but what's going on?" queried Will.

"When the dragon comes here, he always wants to be...fed, first," Mathias said quietly.

A nearby pit gate opened and several men in soft green robes marched across the floor, heading toward Terek Domar. Each of them was leading a fat cow by a length of rope. The cattle quickly became fidgety and nervous, sensing something was wrong. Terek Domar watched them come with the steely gaze of a hungry predator.

"You probably don't want to watch this part," the Arbiter said. The Winds hurried out of the booth with Mathias and his guards. The doors closed just as the frightened lowing of cattle began to drift upward to the booth from the pit below.

"Have I gone insane, or is it just everybody else?" Jake complained as the group made their way through the Hall of Champions. "This place isn't crazy enough on its own, it has Terek Domar, too?"

"Is that what he's called where you're from?" Mathias asked distantly. "'The Thunder That Stalks the Plains,' huh? That's creepy enough for him, I guess."

"The Thunder what--who?" snarled Marc.

Mathias shrugged. "Sorry. Maybe you're using an older name. I'm getting the literal meaning through the translator."

They walked in silence as Mathias led them to a separate staircase from the one they had used before. They descended roughly two stories below the arena and came to a narrow hall lined with widely spaced doors.

"These are the living quarters of the fighters," Mathias explained as he paused by one of the doors. "Make yourselves at home. I'll try to be back for you when things are more secure."

Two of the security force stayed outside the door as the Lonely Winds went inside. The space within turned out to be a luxurious multiplex, with several bedrooms, a swimming pool and sauna, and a large, eerily featureless white room that the team avoided. After the group had finished exploring their

surroundings they gathered in the multiplex's spacious common room

"So, what do you think, Jake?" Will asked.

"In a word, I'm overwhelmed," replied the inventor. "I feel...kind of numb. I know I should be ecstatic. We've seen proof of countless theoreticals and postulates in the last hour. Alien races, other dimensions--we're standing in a place that could expand our entire culture's consciousness, but it's just too much to absorb, somehow."

Will blinked. "I meant, what do you think about how we're going to get out of here."

"Oh."

Nails had found a bowl of exotic alien fruits on a table and taken to juggling the contents. "Don't sweat it, gang. We should be able to get back easily enough. These guys seem to know their stuff, so all we gotta do is exploit the system."

"You're taking all this rather well!" remarked Jake.

"I take everything in stride."

"What are we waiting for?" growled Marc. "Let's just make the match and be done with it."

Will flinched as though he'd heard a gunshot. "Are you nuts? You want to go fight for money with that monstrosity watching?"

"I didn't think that Arbiter guy was *that* bad," grouched Marc.

"I meant Terek Domar, moron!" Will shouted as he lobbed a cushion at Marc. "Don't you think it's a bit odd that it turns up here just after we do?"

Jake's eyes widened. "You think he's here to hurt us?"

"But that guy said the dragon comes here for the fights," Cynthia said. "I think he was telling the truth."

"Why? Did you read his mind?" asked Will, with a bit of an edge.

"No. I looked in his eyes."

"Who? The Arbiter's?" asked Jake.

"No," replied Cynthia. "The dragon's. He saw us when we were at the crazy wizard's house. When you guys were running away, he turned around and watched us for a few seconds."

The only sound in the room was the steady series of thumps made when Nails stopped juggling, letting the fruit fall to the soft carpet.

"Ok, I am now officially creeped out," Jake said.

"Is this supposed to make us feel better?" snapped Will.

"Look, I'm just making a point," Cynthia groaned. "If the dragon wanted to hurt us, he could have done it the other day. I think we just came to his favorite hideout, or something. Maybe he's the one that made the circle we found!"

"She's got a point," Jake admitted. "I did think it was kind of weird that they gave us that whole speech about security checkpoints, then the dragon appeared right in the seats."

"Being the V.I.P. must come with a lot of privileges," muttered Nails.

"Why are we still talking about this?" snarled Marc. "Let's just kick some ass and get out of here!"

"I still don't like it," Will said. "Just the thought of risking our lives and others' for money...it leaves a bad taste in my mouth."

"What, you mean, not like when we risk our lives for free every single day anyway?" Marc sneered. "Fine, you won't do it, then I will."

He stormed across the room to the front door, opened it and leaned outside. "Tell the fat man I want to fight," he said to the guards before slamming the door and marching back to the others.

"Great," Jake said. "Just what we need: for our lives to be more interesting."

About twenty minutes later, Mathias returned at the head of a squad of guardsman. He looked as though the previous half-hour had been a tremendously harrowing experience. "I got word you want to sign up," he said without preamble when Cynthia opened the door for him.

"I do," Marc corrected him over Cynthia's shoulder. "How soon can I start cracking skulls?"

“In a couple of hours. First, we need to run you through some tests and fit you in a league.”

“Skip it,” Marc growled. “Just put me in the damn ring with some mooks.”

Mathias’ face darkened. “Look, pal, I’m sure you’re used to being the local tough guy wherever you’re from, but there are some heavy hitters around here and you’re going to end up a red paste if you don’t get evaluated properly.”

“I said, skip it!” Marc virtually shouted.

“You know what? It’s your funeral!” Mathias relented. “Grab whatever you want to fight with and follow me. The way things are going, you’ll be fighting inside of ten minutes.”

Marc was happy to comply, grabbing his duffle bag and returning at a run. Will had the others bring their own gear with Mathias’ permission. Apparently, weapons and fighting were in no way taboo in the Pit: only the misuse of them was.

“So what’s with waiving these ‘evaluations’?” Jake asked on the way to the Arbiter’s booth.

“The V.I.P. came at a bad time,” replied Mathias. “Not that there’s really a good time for him to turn up. Anyway, we had just about gone through all of the planned fights for today. The boss is going into conniptions trying to find a steady stream of fighters for exhibition matches. He’ll be only too glad to let baldy here join the roster.”

“Who is he going to be facing?” Will asked with little enthusiasm.

“The Arbiter likes to play things up for the crowd,” answered Mathias. “Knowing him, he’ll just drop a vampire in the pit since you’re all monster fighters.”

“Right on!” Marc laughed and pumped his fist in the air. Will just shook his head.

“Shouldn’t I be the one to do this? I’m the strongest and least vulnerable,” Nails put forth.

“No way!” Marc boasted. “They used to call me ‘Mad Marc Schaeffer’ down by the docks. It’s time these alien yokels saw a real man in action!”

“You might want to lose your little camera first,” suggested Mathias.

“Oh, right,” Marc said as he plucked his Jakecam™ from his shirt and unceremoniously dropped it into his duffle bag. Like most of the others, he had forgotten about George and their tiny links to the Mansion in the midst of all that had happened. The exception was Jake, who only quietly lamented that the Jakecams™ could not record on their own the remarkable events the team was bearing witness to.

Presently they came to a stairwell and paused. “Go with these guys,” Mathias instructed Marc as he indicated two of the guardsmen. Marc did as he was told, following the guards up the stairwell while the others continued on.

“Good luck, buddy,” Jake said. Marc flashed a thumb-up just before winding out of sight on the stairs.

When the team and Mathias returned to the announcing booth, the Arbiter was sitting in his chair as before, but he had exchanged his mug of mead for a massive stein. Like Mathias, he looked pale and shaken: his knuckles were white as he held his staff. Directly across from the booth, Terek Domar lounged on his side in the empty space of the stands, gnawing absently on the stripped remains of a beef flank. In the pit below dozens of bodies lay strewn about on the floor, which had been altered to the semblance of a small desert island flecked with sparse vegetation and the ruins of marble structures. Only a handful of gladiators remained fighting amidst the scrub, sand and stone, tearing each other apart with wicked barbed clubs and jagged blades in a brutal display.

“Brought some guests, did you?” said the Arbiter.

“It was quicker than taking them to their own seats! The cue-ball is downstairs getting ready for the next round.”

“Good! That will help a great deal,” said the Arbiter, sounding very relieved. “We’ve had another break: the Glass Man is here.”

Jake’s eyes grew so wide they looked comical beneath his glasses. “Again, please?”

“It’s nothing you need to be concerned with,” the Arbiter replied. “Another one of our special guests sometimes meets with Terek Domar. He arrived a few minutes ago and sent word for us to pause when this melee is done.”

“You just do what he asks?” pondered Jake.

“The Glass Man once laid waste to an entire platoon of my guardsmen and he addresses the V.I.P. directly,” explained the Arbiter. “I have no desire to provoke him, so if he and the dragon want an intermission to chat between themselves, they get it.”

One of the final two fighters in the pit finally fell. The victor raised his weapon triumphantly to the cheers of the crowd. The backdrop of the island faded away as the Arbiter stood to declare the winner’s name and guardsmen entered the pit to remove the fallen.

“Oh well. Plenty of other monsters here came from Ylelon of all places, I don’t know why one more surprises me,” Jake mused aloud.

“What are you talking about?” asked Nails.

“The Glass Man,” Jake answered. “He’s a figure in Yd legend.”

Horrorfied realization dawned on Will’s face. “Wait! The *Man of Glass*?! I thought that was only a story!”

“Yeah, me too. But then, it’s been a day to shatter disillusionment. I don’t think I’ll be surprised by anything ever again after all this,” said Jake flatly.

“Ok, I’m confused,” Nails exclaimed. “What’s all this about a ‘man of glass’?”

“See for yourself,” the Arbiter said as he pointed toward the stands to the left of the booth. The team gathered on the balcony and saw immediately what he was talking about.

A lone figure was walking the path along the railing above the pit. Even in this place, with its countless wonders and fantastic sights, the walker was unique. True to his name, the figure appeared to be made of opaque liquid glass, like an animate work of art formed with the trim lines of a male gymnast. The Glass Man’s walk was smooth and almost casually relaxed, showing no more malice than that of a person taking a quiet evening stroll. Yet, as the crystalline entity drew near the ranks in the front row, they shrank back as though afraid to even touch it. The Man of Glass made his way without incident to Terek Domar’s section of the stands and stood attentively at the dragon’s feet. The wyrm took his time finishing his beef flank before tossing away the cracked and singed bones and turning to loom over the waiting apparition. They carried on in a brief but animated conversation. Though they were much too far away for those in the announcing booth to hear what was said, they all felt and heard the dragon’s voice, like thunder rumbling on the horizon.

“What are they talking about?” Cynthia asked quietly.

The Arbiter shrugged. “No one’s ever had the courage to try listening in.”

Presently the discourse ended with the Glass Man saluting smartly and walking back to his private box. Terek Domar immediately faced the Arbiter’s booth and let out a voluminous growl that sent the few patrons seated within a stone’s throw of him scrambling for more distance.

“That’s it, break time’s over. You guys are on!” the Arbiter said into his microphone as he tapped a series of commands into his control slab. Almost immediately, a gate on the far right of the pit rattled open and Marc strolled onto the floor. Though he walked with characteristic boisterous confidence, Will was dismayed to see how tiny the big man looked in the huge, empty arena. Having never seen him before, the crowd was largely indifferent, while Terek Domar watched him with an inscrutable expression.

“Why is that thing looking at him like that?” Will lamented.

“I don’t know. Maybe he recognizes him from the other night?” suggested Jake.

“Don’t worry,” said Mathias. “The dragon never messes with the fighters, even when he doesn’t like the way the fight goes.”

“That’s reassuring,” Will muttered.

The Arbiter stood and began to announce with his best theatrical voice.

“Ladies! Gentlemen! Our esteemed special guest! We have a rare treat in store for you this evening! In the pit before you stands a renowned pugilist from an unenlightened world!”

Unenlightened, huh? thought Jake sourly.

“He is a combatant of many seasons! On his home world, he wages war against the supernatural! Shall we give him a worthy foe, good people?”

The crowd roared its approval. Terek Domar's expression was still difficult to interpret, but judging by his subtle sneer and narrowed eyes Will guessed he was growing impatient.

The Arbiter tapped away at his control slab and the gate directly opposite Marc's opened. "Then witness a worthy foe! Fight fans, I give you: Marc Schaeffer vs. Mutec Pyircam!" the Arbiter announced as a humanoid in a generic sort of martial discipline garb trotted into the pit and waved energetically to the crowd.

"What's our buddy up against?" Jake asked somberly.

"One vampire, a newcomer to the Pit," replied Mathias.

"Just one vampire? This will be short!" Nails chuckled.

"Yeah, I almost feel bad for the poor practice dummy," said Jake. "Um... Marc *is* going to use his shotgun, isn't he?"

As if in answer, Marc opened his duffle bag and reached inside, pulling free a single object without ever taking his eyes off of his opponent. The team saw with dismay which weapon he had chosen: a length of pipe. Will started impulsively forward, but Mathias stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

"The stubborn fool will get himself killed!" Will protested.

"Do you want to see what the V.I.P. will do if you stop the fight?" retorted Mathias.

The Arbiter struck the gong with his staff and the crowd roared in anticipation. Marc and Mutec began to circle each other in a rapidly closing pattern.

"Good luck, pal," Nails said softly. Jake nodded and Will bowed his head in silent prayer.

In the pit the two combatants came within lunging distance of each other. Marc suddenly stood up straight and held his hand in front of his face in an exaggerated mock yawn. Mutec charged the opening and paid for it as Marc easily stepped to one side and clubbed the vampire in the back of the head. Mutec spun on his heels and swung with a roundhouse punch that could take a man's head off.

Marc was ready. He weaved away from Mutec's clumsy assault and bashed him in the temple with the pipe hard enough to draw blood. When the enraged undead turned and lurched blindly, Marc gave a derisive snort and tripped him, causing him to flop onto his face. Mutec might have had the strength of several men, but he did not have a fraction of Marc's skill and experience, and he was paying for it.

Marc turned and faced toward the Arbiter's booth. "Is that the best you've got, fatso?" he shouted, to the crowd's voluminous delight.

That was when Mutec leapt to his feet and threw an arm around Marc's neck, grasping the big fellow in a crushing choke hold and squeezing until Marc dropped his pipe. The crowd gasped collectively and rumbled disapproval at this mistreatment of a newly-discovered, brazen champion.

Marc was far from beaten. Even as his enemy held him under one arm and his face turned red for want of breath, the big man twisted and brought one knee up to strike Mutec in a region even a dead man could not ignore. As the brute released him and doubled over, Marc retrieved his pipe with confidence and cockiness. He might have been a "mere mortal," but he was a mortal of world-class strength and physical conditioning, and he was determined to make certain that all the weirdoes in this pocket protector knew it. Playing to the crowd, he raised his arms in a gesture of triumph, then ended the fight with a pipe blow to Mutec's skull that made his earlier attacks look like love taps.

"Beer me!" he shouted triumphantly. Nails ran to the back of the Arbiter's booth, grabbed what looked like a bottle of beer from the refreshment table, ran back to the balcony and hurled it across the distance. Marc caught it, popped off the cap and guzzled most of the contents in one draught.

The crowd went wild. Will and Jake breathed audible sighs of relief. The Arbiter leaned forward to address the masses through his microphone orb.

"Ladies and Gentlemen! A round of applause for the triumphant newcomer! Is this a fluke, or does this slayer of monstrosities have what it takes to climb the ranks? Only time will--"

He was cut off as an angry peal of thunder rolled through the arena. Terek Domar was growling again, that same impatient, demanding rumble that overpowered the roar of the spectators and sent chills down everyone's spine.

"Oh, crap," Mathias whimpered.

"Yeah, tell me about it!" the Arbiter snapped as he frantically punched away at his control slab.

“Now what’s wrong?” exclaimed Nails.

“He’s not satisfied by what he saw,” explained Mathias. “If he doesn’t see a better fight in a big hurry, he’s gonna be *real* unhappy.”

“A better fight? You mean risking Marc’s life again!” Will seethed.

“You have an alternative?” the Arbiter grumbled without looking up from his frenetic work. “When the V.I.P. has a complaint, *this* is where he registers it, understand?”

The Lonely Winds were silent as the Arbiter finished with an emphatic keystroke. Immediately, two opposing gates in the pit began to open. Marc looked questioningly up toward the announcing booth, but the distance and the noise would have made it impossible for the team to warn him if they had even known what to say.

Two figures emerged, one from each of the gates, and proceeded toward Marc at a hurried pace. The first of the two was a centauroid of sorts: his lower body was that of a black scorpion the size of an alligator, the upper portion a perfectly formed, hairless humanoid torso of the same black tone. He carried a long quarterstaff with a ring of five barbed hooks running around each end, which he held lowered like a lance as he rushed toward Marc.

The other fighter was a thin wisp of a humanoid, androgynous and with a huge mane of wild white hair that was nearly as long as it was tall. The creature was clad in a navy blue leotard that was a stark contrast to its pale gray skin. Most remarkable, however, was this fighter’s means of movement; it did not walk or touch the floor beneath it, but floated in empty air as though it were weightless and propelled by willpower alone.

As these two unusual sights bore down on Marc, the smooth-scalped warrior hustled to his duffle bag and dumped its contents onto the floor. He had only enough time to retrieve his shotgun and a set of brass knuckles before the scorpion-man was upon him. Marc swung his shotgun around one-handed, but the other fighter batted it away with one end of his quarterstaff and struck Marc dead in the chest with the butt of the staff hard enough to knock him prone. When the arthropod soldier raised his staff for a killing blow, Marc kicked at his front legs to force him to step backward, then rolled away and swiftly got to his feet, only to have the floating warrior attack him from behind by bear-hugging. Marc broke free with ease--the creature was clearly not his equal physically--but this only paved the way for a worse shock: as Marc turned to confront his foe and raised his hand to strike, the floater made a pushing gesture and a sudden gust of wind hit Marc like a jackhammer, hurling him backward off of his feet again.

The crowd roared. In the announcing booth, Pit authorities and Marc’s teammates alike watched the grim visage of the scorpion-man and the wind creature stalking toward Marc. Nails paced the balcony like a caged animal, helplessly watching his friend come steadily closer to his inevitable fate.

“Ah, screw this!” he said suddenly and ran toward the balcony railing.

“Nails, no!” Will protested, but it was too late.

Nails made a fantastic leap over the railing, one that carried him far out over the empty pit to land with a hollow thud between Marc and the approaching fighters.

“Hiya! Am I too late to join the fun?” he said wryly.

A confused murmur ran through the crowd. Terek Domar eyed Nails with something like the manner of a scientist observing an interesting new specimen.

“What’s this, folks?” the Arbiter announced with staged surprise. “One of the monster killer’s companions comes to his aid! Shall we let him even the odds, good people?”

The crowd thundered its enthusiasm. Terek Domar’s eyes narrowed, but he did nothing else to express displeasure.

Now Marc had made it back onto his feet. His cockiness and swagger were gone. Nails still stood nearby, guarding but not hovering. Even in the dire situation, he knew that Marc’s pride would not tolerate being coddled.

The other fighters continued to approach the monster hunters-cum-gladiators, apparently unimpressed by Nails’ spectacular entry into the arena. For his part, Nails took barely a moment to choose his opponent. The floating thing could very well be capable of some unpleasant things beyond a little gust of wind, but the other fighter had scorpion claws, a vicious staff, and a tail-stinger like a curved dagger.

Nails chose the more obvious threat.

“I’ve got this one!” he shouted as he moved to face the scorpion-man. The fighter’s claws clacked with anticipation as Nails, unarmed and unarmored, moved within striking distance. One wickedly-barbed end of his staff swung upward in a motion that would have lodged hooks in Nails’ cheek, but for the quick, open-handed parry that stopped it dead. The anthropoid warrior’s surprise at the strength and quickness of his foe distracted him so that he barely avoided the roundhouse punch that missed his face by a hair’s breadth. His pincers lashed out to grasp his foe’s ankles, but Nails hopped backward out of reach with preternatural speed. When Nails lashed out with a retaliatory punch the scorpion-man was quick to bat it away. So the two warriors circled each other, looking for that one, fatal opening.

Not one to be outdone in a fight, Marc moved quickly toward the other gladiator, who drifted in effortless curving paths around the pit with the grace of a hummingbird. Marc was not normally known for his brainpower, but when it came to nearly any sort of violence he was a natural talent. He gambled that his opponent’s wind gusts were focused attacks and watched for the telltale shoving motion that warned of the pending attack. His guess turned out to be correct: his sideways hop put him beyond the reach of the next rushing stream of air. This was not the end of the problem, however, as a second gust unaccompanied by a somatic element hit Marc dead in the chest and knocked him prone yet again.

Before Marc had been angry; now he was seeing red. He kicked up onto his feet and lunged at his enemy with deceptive speed, forcing the creature to flit backwards quickly to avoid being pummeled. A twisted dance ensued, with the wind-warrior easily keeping out of reach of Marc. Unable to catch the wily and highly-motivated pit fighter with another hammering blast of wind, he circled and abruptly changed direction for just that purpose.

This stand-off lasted for several seconds, until the drifting fighter chose to resort to a much more lethal tactic. Quickly hurtling backward to put distance between them, the air-mage focused its will, and before it in the air appeared three crackling globes of electricity: ball lightning.

The buzzing spheres caught Nails’ attention out of the corner of his eye. He called, “Marc, look out!” His opponent capitalized on his distraction and bashed him in the temple with the quarterstaff at the same moment the air-creature unleashed his ball lightning, sending it twirling at Marc in a spiraling barrage of electricity. Marc dove and tumbled to the floor to avoid the lightning, which missed him by a hair’s breadth. The spheres traveled a stone’s throw before its angle of flight sent it into the stone floor, where the three orbs burst in a spray of crackling electric tendrils.

Nails had not even seemed to feel the blow his enemy had dealt him with the staff and stood poised on the balls of his feet, seemingly wrestling with the decision of finishing his own fight or helping Marc with his. His opponent made the decision for him by rearing back, then lurching forward with a flick of his tail that buried his stinger dead in Nails’ heart.

A roaring silence gripped the arena. Time stood still as the fans stared in disbelief at what appeared to be a mortal wound inflicted on an instant fan-favorite newcomer. Only Will, standing on the announcing booth balcony, shook his head sadly, for of the many thousands watching the grim spectacle he alone understood what was coming next. He understood that in this fight, as was usual, Nails was holding back, just as he had the evening he had beaten both Will and Marc unconscious with terrifying ease. Will could almost guess what ran through his mysterious comrade’s mind: the realization that if he and Marc had traded opponents, Marc would now be dead. The kid gloves were off: before Nails had sought to avoid doing any more harm than was necessary, but the killing move had evoked his wrath.

It began when he seized the startled fighter’s tail with both hands. He pulled the stinger free of his own flesh with a rather disgusting slurping sound, then dealt his foe a backhanded blow that flung him back three paces and left him sprawled on his scorpion belly. The crowd murmured in surprise at this twist of events.

The centauroid was still shaking the stars from his vision when Nails attacked him again. More on instinct than anything else he raised his quarterstaff. Faster than his eyes could follow, Nails swept around on his flank and hit him with a devastating punch that left him sprawled on his side, stunned and flailing about. Nails plucked the quarterstaff from the air as it fell and smoothly bent it in the middle until it resembled a nightmarish, oversized boomerang.

Even Marc and the air-warrior were mesmerized by the other fight, to the point of forgetting about each other completely. The mage was snapped back to reality by the sight of Nails turning and hurling the ruined staff at it. It drifted out of the weapon's course at the last instant and floated in place, looking reproachfully at Nails.

"Trade me dance partners!" Nails shouted as he ran to Marc's side with dazzling speed. Marc didn't need to be told twice. As quickly as he could, he retrieved his shotgun and was sprinting back toward the stunned scorpion-fighter. Marc led the attack with a bone-crunching brass knuckle punch that set the creature back on his haunches again. The shotgun roared three times and the scorpion-man slumped lifeless on the floor.

When Nails charged the wind-mage, it unleashed another wind gust directly into him. The powerful burst of air did little more than slow Nails' speed slightly. He struck the mage soundly in the sternum with a restrained punch that was still powerful enough to fling the creature onto its back, touching the floor for the first time. In an instant Nails was looming over it with clenched fists. The mage showed another first as emotion finally played across its features: fear. Near-panic dictated its actions as it unleashed another barrage of ball lightning at point blank range that struck Nails dead in the chest--and did little more than burn away the front of his shirt and singe small craters in his skin.

This injury did nothing to improve Nails' mood. In one lightning movement he seized a hunk of the mage's hair in his left hand and with his right punched past the mage's head into the center of one of the stone tiles. Huge cracks spider-webbed across the ruined tile. The wind-warrior saw this out of the corner of its eye at the same time the report of Marc's shotgun signaled the death of its partner. It raised its hands in the universal gesture for mercy.

Once again the Pit trembled under the cheers of the crowd, and again, the Arbiter addressed the masses.

"Ladies and gentlemen, after a sensational battle, your victors are the newcomers! Raise--"

Everyone else in the arena grew quiet as Terek Domar once more overpowered the voices of thousands with his own. Those in the announcing booth stared in disbelief at the dragon as the last echoes of the demanding growl faded: what more could he want after a spectacle like he had just seen?

As the seconds crawled by and even the Arbiter remained motionless with surprise, Terek Domar fixed his ominous gaze directly into the announcing booth and roared--not the previous throaty warning growl, but the ear-shattering call that in ancient times had given him the name the Lonely Winds knew him by. The stone beneath their feet trembled from his rage and the Arbiter hastened back to his work on the control slab.

"If you want to help your friends, you should hurry," he said without looking up from his work.

"This way, quickly!" Mathias instructed and led Cynthia, Jake and Will out of the booth.

When Terek Domar voiced his dissatisfaction with the bout, Marc had done nothing more than express annoyance by directing a series of very rude gestures toward the dragon. Nails was on guard, fearing what might be about to enter the pit for a command performance.

The reality turned out to be even worse than the suspicion. At first, as the Arbiter worked, only one of the pit's gates opened. Through it stepped a humanoid male with dusky skin and a compact musculature that would have passed as very normal on the beaches of Ylelon. He was naked to the waist, wearing only black silk breeches and leather sandals. At first he appeared to be unarmed, but as he exited the gate he held his right arm extended and made a fist. A scimitar made entirely of fire materialized there, shimmering with orange-red light of its own.

Presently the gate to his right opened and a serpentine warrior of the same race as Silver glided into the pit, brandishing a trident in the hands of his uppermost arms and wickedly curved daggers in the others. Then another gate a few arches down opened, and out of it staggered an addled-looking stick of a man covered in ragged animal skins, tribal tattoos and numerous ornaments of bone, carrying a short wand of gnarled wood topped with a rodent skull. From two gates beyond that emerged a red-bearded dwarf wielding a massive war hammer, and so it went around the pit until Nails and Marc were completely surrounded by over two dozen sundry opponents.

“Oh, come on!” Nails complained. “Don’t we at least get a break for a sports drink?”

“You know what’s funny? I always thought I’d die in a bar,” snickered Marc.

The two friends smacked clenched fists together, then Marc slung his duffle bag over his shoulder and hastily refilled his shotgun while Nails watched the steadily encroaching ring of warriors.

In Jake’s opinion, the path from the announcing booth to the nearest pit gate was needlessly complicated.

He realized there probably wasn’t much need for anyone to move from the one point directly to the other on a regular basis, but as he and the others followed Mathias at a frantic pace through halls and down stairs his worry turned increasingly to frustration. He tried to keep his mind busy by checking his sub-machineguns as he ran.

At last the group rounded a corner as they passed through what appeared to be a locker room and the pit could be seen at the end of a dauntingly long hall. “Good luck,” Mathias called after them as he lagged behind in the room. The three clicked off their safeties in a mechanical chorus, then the open egress to the pit loomed before them.

The man known to patronage and employees alike only as “the Arbiter” felt uncharacteristically uneasy about the melee taking place in the pit before him. The gorgeous redhead had been much more astute in her caustic remark than she realized. After all, being the master of ceremonies in a blood sport arena required a level of callousness and apathy toward life somewhere between drug dealer and politician.

Still, the Arbiter felt an unbidden pang of sympathy for the two newcomers as the circle of pit regulars closed in on them. He wondered if he had not gone a bit overboard calling so many high-tier warriors to combat, but the looming menace of the V.I.P. had shaken him to a state of near-panic. The current arrangement was certainly not a fair fight, not even with the two warriors’ comrades rushing to join them. Even so, the skinhead and the other fellow had put on a hell of a show. It was a shame that the V.I.P. seemed determined to stack the odds against the newcomers--they might have proven excellent draws given time. As it was, there was little the Arbiter could do beyond sitting back and watching the inevitable outcome.

It began when the man with the fire-sword, a seasoned veteran by the name of De Rhen Zhar, shouted a vicious battle cry and charged ahead of the rest of the ring of gladiators. Nails met him head on with a blindingly fast, but clumsily overconfident attempt to slap away the sword’s blade. The highly-skilled Zhar easily read Nails’ movements and once, twice, thrice, raked the weapon across his torso, then followed up with an underhand thrust in a stroke that would have impaled a man and scorched his innards all at once.

The crowd gasped collectively as the physics-defying scimitar of fire stopped dead after sinking barely an inch into Nails’ gut. The young Lonely Wind did not betray any hint of pain or fear as he seized the fiery blade in his left hand while swinging his right in a crushing roundhouse punch. Zhar let go of his weapon and raised both of his hands in a well-practiced parry, but he might as well have been trying to parry a falling tree trunk. It struck him dead in the chest and flung him backward head over heels to flop onto the stone floor, gasping around the pain of his broken solar plexus.

Nails promptly pulled Zhar’s sword from his stomach and spun it around for his own use. He was momentarily caught off-guard as the sword flickered into nothing, leaving him unarmed again.

Seeing his distraction, the serpent-man lunged forward, daggers flashing, trident held high--only to stop abruptly when confronted by the bizarre sight of Nails holding up a finger in a demand for patience. Nails held his other hand out expectantly behind himself, in front of Marc. As if reading Nails’ mind Marc took something from his duffle bag and slapped it into the bruiser’s open palm.

The entire ring of fighters had stopped in place, out of curiosity as much as anything else. They all had a good view of what Nails had wanted, as did the crowd: heavy fingerless gloves, each with a row of four thick, sharp, gleaming metal studs running along the back knuckles. Nails made quite a show of putting them on, adjusting the straps on the back for fit and holding them aloft at arm’s length so the

arena's light glinted menacingly off the studs.

"Now we can continue," he said calmly.

Instantly the trident was thrust at his face. He bent backwards and seized the weapon in both hands as the tines passed just above his face. Yanking the trident out of the warrior's hands, he swung the blunt end and smacked its former owner in the temple with it, knocking him out cold. Movement flared in his peripheral vision, and Nails spun with the trident raised just in time to block a blow from the dwarf's war hammer that broke the multi-pronged spear in half. With surprising grace and swiftness, the dwarf reversed his swing and struck Nails in the chest.

Nails was momentarily taken aback. He was so used to facing novice fighters that he had greatly underestimated the speed and ability of these warriors. Still, there wasn't an ordinary "mortal" born that could match Nails' speed when he played to the best of his ability. To Nails' heightened perception and rate of movement, even the quickest fighter seemed to be moving in slow motion, as though they fought underwater. He now put this ability to good use, beginning by pummeling the dwarf into unconsciousness and moving on to confound the others by striking them with bone-crushing blows, then dashing to the next opponent before the previous one could retaliate. Mortal or not, these fighters were each and every one of rare talent and ability and though Nails' raw natural speed allowed him to keep out of their reach, he still had to work to do so. What resulted was an odd sort of game of tag, with Nails trying to inflict injury that was debilitating but non-lethal while some of the greatest warriors from across Creation tried their level best to bring him down.

Marc, though less impressive, was working wonders in his own right. He had dropped his brass knuckles into a pocket in the interim between fights and now brandished his pipe in one hand, his shotgun in the other. His ability to use the latter weapon one-handed was certainly limited, but there was something to be said for intimidation value. While Marc hadn't seen many of the locals with firearms they definitely seemed to recognize one when they saw it.

Had Marc been alone in the pit the enemy would simply have overwhelmed him, but with Nails flashing around striking without warning at random targets, the ten remaining fighters that had set their sights on Marc were forced to watch for harm on two different fronts. When Nails zoomed past a line of five of them, dodged a swift swing by a warrior in legionnaire-like armor, and laid him out with a devastating series of open-palmed strikes, Marc lunged forward and clubbed a distracted opponent in the face with his pipe, breaking his nose and cheekbone. When the fighter on his right, an unarmored wielder of *nunchaku*, tried to retaliate, Marc swung his shotgun up and fired, forcing the other fighter to dive desperately out of the way.

Marc shuffled backward two steps to put distance between himself and the remaining fighters and felt a sharp pain run across the outside of his left bicep. Confused, he looked down and found a thin but jagged cut that wept tiny rivulets of blood, as though he had caught his arm on a large thorn.

Marc looked about for what had done this. That was when he saw the shaman standing behind the others, grinning broadly at Marc through crooked yellow teeth. Wafting around the pale man's body were at least a half-dozen shapeless wisps of strangely luminous gray mist, which circled the shaman like vultures. A knowing murmur ran through the audience: they were quite familiar with this bloodthirsty necromancer and his "razor spirits."

The shaman made a dramatic flourish with his macabre wand and his flock of glowing attendants gathered together and rushed at Marc, who stood his ground out of both stubbornness and uncertainty. The other fighters had backed away from the skinhead as soon as they realized what was happening, giving the razor spirits a clear path to their target. Though the magical constructs appeared to be shreds of cloud, they were in fact quite solid. As they hurled themselves at Marc and skimmed their edges across his body whatever they touched was laid open as though cut by a straight razor. After a single pass, the clouds returned to orbit the shaman, leaving Marc's arms, legs, and scalp striated with shallow, bloody cuts.

Marc, however, was unimpressed. In his mind they had done little more than give him a few nicks and scratches. Now it was his turn--which he took by cocking his shotgun, leveling it at the shaman's face and firing. One of the razor spirits threw itself in the path of the coming buckshot and disintegrated in a

puff of mist and light.

Nails turned at the sound of the second shot and paid for it by having a stiletto jabbed into his torso. He seized the wrist that held it, broke it with a violent twist, released it and dashed to Marc's side. Of the twenty-six original fighters, fourteen had been put out of the fight. Nails had limited himself to non-lethal force and tactics during the fight thus far, hoping to incapacitate the enemy without doing any permanent damage.

Now he stood back-to-back with Marc as the remainder of the enemy force closed in, some stepping over their fallen comrades, who lay unconscious or cradling crippling injuries--broken bones, shock and trauma from tremendous blunt force. Nails saw the shaman raise the wand again and braced himself to leap in front of Marc in case the mists were directed at his eyes or neck this time. Noble though it was, it was a futile notion. It was only a matter of seconds now before Marc fell. While Nails had a very good chance at managing a victory on sheer physical power the prospect of doing so coupled with losing a friend made him feel ill.

Then, as the enemy drew uncomfortably near and the shaman laughed in anticipation of triumph, a shot rang out and his wand shattered. Crowd, pit fighters, dragon and Arbiter all turned as one to see the other Lonely Winds running as fast as they could out of one of the gates.

Bless Will and his miracle aim, Nails thought.

"Everybody down!" Jake shouted as he held his sub-machineguns at arm's length. Will swept his pistols back and forth steadily between the opponents. Inwardly, even Marc was impressed. Will might be a pacifist sissy with reservations about silly things like shooting strangers, but he made a good show of appearing fierce. Cynthia, for her part, was aiming both her eyes and her gun more or less at the floor in front of her while hanging behind Will and Jake.

The fighters had begun to comply with Jake's command. Blades, blunt instruments and a handful of more exotic weapons were laid down or thrown to the floor. Great warriors or not, the old adage about bringing a knife to a gunfight remained true.

Marc laid his shotgun back across his shoulder, snorted, and began to strut about confidently while twirling his pipe like a baton. Nails kept his eyes fixed on the shaman, who was still being orbited by his murderous mists, rubbing the hand that had held his shattered wand and glaring daggers at Will.

The Arbiter ran his eyes across the crowd. A steadily increasing cacophony of boos and hisses filled the arena. The Arbiter's gaze drifted to the V.I.P. and he was amazed to see the intensity with which the great creature was watching the events in the pit below. With a few commands typed into his control slab, the master of ceremonies enacted a simple plan to force a more exciting finale.

Jake had just dared to look up at Terek Domar, wondering what the beast's reaction to the stand-off would be, when an invisible force tore his guns from his hands. The two sub-machineguns, along with Will and Cynthia's pistols and Marc's shotgun, all hurled directly at the ceiling as though gravity had been reversed for them alone. They plummeted upward and were lost from sight in the distance high above.

Instantly there was a mad scramble by the warriors to regain their lost armaments. Jake had not even had time to wonder why the guns had been taken before he was charged by a heavyset warrior bearing a massive, blunt mace. Though competent in hand-to-hand combat, Jake was not the fighter that Marc, Will and Nails were. It took only seconds for his opponent to overpower him, forcing him to the floor and pinning him down with a foot on his chest and the mace raised, ready for the killing strike.

Simultaneously, Marc reacted to the loss of his shotgun purely on instinct. He swung his pipe at the nearest warrior as the man reached for his sword and knocked him out cold. Marc turned to attack the next foe, the nunchaku-wielder, but he was ready for the assault. With a flick of the flail he disarmed Marc, but the skinhead's lunge carried him inside the defender's arc of attack and the two went down brawling.

At the same time yet the necromancer made his move in the form of a single mental command: *Kill him*. His razor spirits immediately surged like a swarm of locusts toward Will, who had drawn his

ruined knife from its holster and was momentarily distracted by Jake and Marc's fights.

"No!" Cynthia cried, and Will looked about at the warning just in time to see the razor spirits streaking toward him. He staggered backward and raised his arms--

--and the flock of deadly magical mists struck an invisible barrier inches from his face and scattered into the air around him. The razor spirits continued to attack Will by throwing themselves against the force field and bouncing off, only to circle and try again in another place. Nails took the initiative and rushed the shaman, taking him by surprise with one hand clamping around the man's jaw. The necromancer was forced to the floor and held there in a grip that could crumple steel, with the studs on the glove of Nails' free hand held threateningly close above his eyes.

Cynthia was about to cheer him on when her danger sense screamed warning in her mind. She tried to spin in place to identify the threat, but to no avail: one of the remaining fighters grabbed her from behind and held a knife to her throat. The fighter was a painfully thin woman clad in a tattered leather jerkin, with long black hair pulled back in a ponytail and a fearsome look in her eye.

Cynthia's reflexive scream caught the attention of the others and the fighting snapped to an abrupt halt. The club-bearer still had Jake pinned and ready for the finishing blow. Marc and his opponent had battered each other into bloody messes. Will had no choice but to cringe within Cynthia's steadily weakening force field as the razor spirits continued to batter it in a relentless effort to kill him, while Nails was poised to finish the spirits' controller but was too far away to help the others.

The arena was unnaturally quiet for a place holding so many people. Every eye came to rest on the dragon, to see if he would once again object to the fight's outcome.

Instead, he grunted once, curled into a ball like a lounging housecat and began to snore loudly.

The Arbiter shook his head, sighed to himself and shouted into the microphone orb. "Ladies and gentlemen, your winners after an incredible battle, *your* Pit regulars!"

The arena shook as the crowd leapt to its feet and cheered. Marc and his opponent exchanged one last murderous glare as they regained their feet. The club-bearer helped Jake up and shook his hand. The woman with the knife bowed to Cynthia, who clumsily returned the gesture. Nails waited for the razor spirits to dissipate before releasing the shaman, who clambered to his feet and glared hatefully at the Lonely Winds as he scampered for the nearest exit. All around the pit, gates were opening and security and medical personnel streamed in to provide aid and retrieve the fallen.

"And a hand, ladies and gentlemen," continued the Arbiter, "for our newcomers, for putting up a spectacular fight against impossible odds! I give you...hey, Mathias! What did these guys call themselves again? What? What kind of stupid name is *that*?...The Lonely Winds!"

Cheers and applause rose to the ceiling. Marc was shaking with rage and un-sated bloodlust, Cynthia wide-eyed as she unconsciously felt her neck, Jake trying to catch his breath. Will only sighed.

Chapter IV The Winner's Circle

Mathias arrived after a few moments, leading an entire platoon of security. They escorted the battered monster hunters back into the locker room-like area, which, it turned out, was more of a storeroom for the odd pairing of weapons and medical supplies. Several doctors of various races were present and quickly began to examine the team for injury.

Jake and Cynthia were shaken, but had escaped the fray without any lasting harm, as had Will. One of the doctors went to examine Nails and was shocked to discover that the burns, stab wounds and lacerations he had sustained were not only clean, but looked as though they had been healing for days, sealing and diminishing as the homogenous substance of Nails' "flesh" repaired itself. Nails answered the doctor's questioning stare with a casual shrug and leaned against a wall to await the others.

As for Marc, he actually frightened away a doctor that tried to examine him by *growling*. The man was a complete mess, drenched in blood and covered from head to toe in bruises and cuts, yet he refused any outside help, cleaning and bandaging his own wounds. He grudgingly accepted the spare security uniform Mathias offered him to replace his tattered and blood-soaked clothing, then the team went with Mathias back into the announcing booth. The Arbiter, as always, was seated in his chair, sipping mead.

"You have a lot to answer for, mister!" Will said icily.

"How so?" asked the Arbiter stolidly. "You went into the arena of your own free will, just as I described. Moreover, against all odds none of you have sustained permanent damage while putting on one of the best shows we've had in a very long time. Beyond that, you managed to inflict considerable damage to a number of my A-list fighters, which will cost me a small fortune to have healed and alleviated. Nevertheless, after your performance I feel compelled to compensate you appropriately."

The pudgy little man reached down beside his chair to grasp a small bag of heavy burlap and tossed it to Will. Before the team leader caught it, he knew from the bulges in its sides and the almost musical tinkling it made what it must contain. Even so, his eyes widened when he looked inside. Will had never had any use for avarice, but he still could not help being amazed by the surprisingly heavy load of small, thick golden-hued coins.

"I won't bore you with the details of our tender system," the Arbiter continued. "Suffice to say, what you hold in your hands is a small fortune. It will buy passage home for all of you, purchase virtually anything you could want in our shops and still have enough left over to open a sizable account with one of the banks."

Jake raised an eyebrow. "That seems a little excessive for a single fight."

"It is. Consider it an incentive to return and give similar performances."

"Now just a minute!" Will snapped. "In case I wasn't clear enough before, there is no way in hell we're coming back here. In fact, we're going to destroy the circle we came through once we get back to keep all this insanity where it belongs."

"I'm afraid that's out of the question," the Arbiter said sternly as he sipped his mead. "I did a little research in the interim and it so happens that the travel circle in question is Pit property. You'll have to leave it intact."

Will looked angrier than Cynthia had ever seen him. He raised a hand as if to say something, but the Arbiter deftly cut off his coming tirade.

"Before your coronary ensues, I'd also like to share some of the logs for the circle with you. Specifically, it has been used almost exclusively by a single individual on a regular basis for many months. Moreover, said individual has a scheduled trip back to your city in--" the control slab appeared, and the Arbiter consulted something on it--"just over an hour."

Though Will was still angry, the veiled meaning of the Arbiter's words was not lost on him and he managed to calm down into a much more Will-like state.

"Now, if you wish to have your arrangements made in time, I suggest--"

The Arbiter's recommendation was cut off by a knock on the booth's door. Unlike Lord Yepp's demanding pounding, this was a polite request for entry.

“My, but I’m popular today,” the Arbiter grumbled.

“Why haven’t the guards announced anyone today?” asked Matthias.

“An excellent question. Mathias, would you please?” the Arbiter requested.

“Sure.” Mathias jogged past the team, pushed open the door and recoiled as though he’d been greeted by a swarm of wasps.

The Glass Man strode into the booth. Beyond him in the hall the guards could be seen cringing back against the walls. The Glass Man stopped within touching distance of Jake and Nails, and Jake began to slowly back away. Nails held his ground. At such close range he could see simple details on the thing’s face: a small nose and mouth, a tiny round trench in each eye to indicate irises, shallow indentations for pupils.

“I was bidden to bring you word from Terek Domar,” the thing said in a surprisingly pleasant voice. “The great Lord of Ylelon is most pleased with your performance.”

Cold silence gripped the booth as the team members exchanged horrified glances and the Pit authorities watched the Glass Man steadily.

“Our ‘performance’?” Nails finally asked.

The Glass Man answered immediately, and the Lonely Winds were surprised, for it did so with an entirely different voice and cadence. This time, it spoke like a wizened sage, with a smoky voice that came in halting speech. “Terek Domar desired to see all that you are capable of. He is most gratified to see where your strengths and weaknesses lay.”

With that, the bizarre automaton of liquid crystal turned and left the booth. One by one everyone present turned to look at the dragon. He was awake, staring into the announcing booth and continued to watch as the travel spheres appeared around him again and whisked him away in a flash of light.

Before becoming a professional monster hunter, Will had been a police officer in Ylelon, one of the most notoriously violent cities in the world. Strange and violent situations were nothing new to him, and one of his outstanding character traits was the ability to keep a level head in stressful situations. Yet as the Arbiter and his minions escorted the Lonely Winds back to the security checkpoint where they had arrived, it was all he could do to keep his hands from shaking.

The dragon had followed the team to the Pit, or at the least, had capitalized on their being there. The fact that the beast was using a major figure in Yd mythology as a lackey and messenger was not lost on Will, either. Had Terek Domar been genuinely trying to get them all killed by demanding more fights? Or did he just think it was funny to taunt and play games with them?

Will was so distracted by this line of thought that he missed the off-handed question the Arbiter asked as their checkpoint came into view. “I’m sorry, I missed that,” he said.

“I said, are you sure you won’t stay on for a while?” the Arbiter repeated. “After the show you put on, word will get around. People will come in droves to see you.”

“No thanks,” Will said with a tone that could etch curse words in metal.

“I dunno, you can make a lot of money here, right?” Marc drawled.

“Drop it, big dog,” advised Nails. “Just do something charitable with our leftover cash,” he told the Arbiter.

“Very well. You know where to find us should you change your mind,” was the reply.

“I’m just bummed that the V.I.P. left so quickly,” Matthias said suddenly.

Jake grimaced. “What the hell for?”

“These folks’ name for the V.I.P. inspired a new recipe,” Matthias answered. “I was going to present it to him as a tribute. ‘Teriyaki Domar: the Flavor that Stalks the Plain’.”

That was all Will could handle. He marched ahead of the others into the checkpoint area. The team fell in around him and turned to look back at the Pit authorities.

“Happy hunting,” the Arbiter said wryly. Matthias waved farewell as the walls, floor and ceiling of the incomplete cube that was the checkpoint area began to radiate a soft white light. The hooded man, still sitting at his desk flanked by security, suddenly jumped to his feet and shouted.

“For the last time, do you have any fruit?”

Then the light flashed and the Lonely Winds were again standing in an abandoned apartment in downtown Ylelon.

Will glanced at his watch. If the estimate the Arbiter had given him was accurate, they had just under twenty minutes, plenty of time to get ready. There was still work to do.

The creature stalked down the Pit causeway with purpose. Its wounds were largely healed--even its eye had scabbed over and improved slightly, healing a wound no natural animal could. This combined with the gnawing hunger it still felt had prompted it to arrange an early return to the hunting ground. There was constant temptation to take one of the prey in this place, but the creature knew that the moment this happened, the other prey would retaliate. It was the only strength these pathetic beings had: herd mentality.

Sauntering past the line of prey that stood interminably before the gateway, the creature clicked its teeth together impatiently until the light came and carried it away. The journey was as flawless as always. Thoughts of revenge received a triumphant flair when the living space replaced the pathway and the creature saw that the same light-haired prey male that had injured it before was still in the room.

This triumph was followed quickly by apprehension as the monster's superior peripheral vision revealed that there were others in the room as well, spaced equidistant around the circle. The creature had just enough time to perceive the array of weapons pointed at it before its days of prowling the Lonely City ended.