

The Opening Portal

by S. Will Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

At the end of pike-sized pole glinted a wicked blade dripping with the blood of a hero. The spetum struck the hero again, knocking him back. He groaned a final groan as the sword fell from his hand. Three menacing figures now stood before him—one on horseback, one on a dragon and one on foot. The hero slumped against the wall. His eyes were slightly out of focus, but he could see the bodies of his allies littering the floor. He was the last one. He was the best one. But he could fight the fight no more.

He had no last words.

He tottered and then crashed onto the capital city's roadway.

The End

The Opening Portal

by S. Will Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Epil ogue

The stench of burning flesh and charred lumber hung heavy on the air of a windless summer night. Most of the crops outside the city had been trampled and crushed during the battle. The city was settling into a slow easy burn, and glowed eerily beneath the moonless sky. A newly widowed woman's cries for mercy were lost like a drop in the ocean as a crazed soldier struck her down without hesitation. The swordsman's lord, his face hidden from the light of day behind a cold steel mask, watched.

The masked one was the one of three leaders, each of whom stood out from the soldiers and minions gathered near them. He wore a crown of gold above his iron mask. A wine colored robe with a blood red sash fell from his shoulders and onto the croup of his speckled gray palfrey. The horse champed and stomped as the man, Pith the Witch King, surveyed the ruins. The fight was ended, and the last city in the last free nation had at last been crushed. The Witch King hissed like a body releasing its final breath. "At last..." His hushed words were just loud enough for the nearby general and bishop to hear.

"Our moment of triumph," General Omphu Skullshield replied as he shook his spetum at the smoggy moonless sky. The general's blonde beard glistened against the light of the burning city, as did his well-polished armor. He was perched upon fiery padded satins of a chair-like saddle. The throne-like saddle was strapped to the long and scaly neck of a towering chaos dragon. The dragon was colored in an explosive mix of black, white and magenta and its wings were so brilliant that they seemed to explode with the slightest move. The dragon

The Opening Portal

by S. Will Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

bared his terrible yellow teeth as he turned his mighty head to eye Pith with hunger and hatred.

Pith steadied his speckled horse as the mount sidestepped gingerly. The witch-king's steel mask revealed neither fear nor exuded confidence, but his voice quaked just a little as he patted his mount's neck. "Easy, Nightsky." The horse ceased its retreat, but its nostrils flared as the reflection of Omphu's magenta dragon filled its bulging eyes.

Omphu laughed. "Perhaps Pith..." Omphu's laughter stopped and his eyes narrowed as he spoke through gritted teeth, "perhaps, I can finally rid myself of you and your foolish bishop?"

Bishop Vrees leaned on his staff. It was ten feet tall with a wicked bloodstained brass hook at the business end. Bishop Vrees called this towering cane his "penance-stick". Like everything else about the Bishop, it was not as polished and washed as it should have been.

Indeed, Vrees was a dirty man—the kind of man who inadvertently collects grease and dust in every crevasse and fold of his skin. His vestments smelled of last month's perspiration and at times he annoyed even his patron Pith, but he was Pith's bishop nonetheless. Vrees rubbed his bristly chin and muttered: "So it begins."

"Begins?" Omphu sneered from his regal perch high above the reach of Vrees' staff. "I've long ago lost patience with your riddles, Vrees. I didn't like them when you were a beertender and they don't become you as a bishop."

The Opening Portal

by S. Will Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

“Then kill me now,” Vrees spat, swinging his staff at the dragon and then turned his back on Omphu.

Omphu’s dragon reeled away from the murderous swipe causing Omphu to teeter in his mobile throne. Vrees receded into a throng of lower priests, as Omphu shouted down to Pith, “What the hell is Vrees talking about?”

Pith shrugged impotently. As he did, Vrees tossed his staff a few feet straight up and caught it by the butt. Vrees stood for a second with one arm fully outstretched to the starless sky. Smoke from the smoldering city stained the sky to a dismal and dark canopy. Vrees stared upward at the inky covering. Suddenly, he grinned—“There!” — and dropped the staff straight down again.

“Pith!” Omphu shouted, “I’ll have you know this is the last time that so-called bishop will disrespect me.” The general reared his dragon to pounce, but both the dragon and the general pulled back, when the air unexpectedly crackled and burned.

A cloudburst of light bathed Pith and Omphu in the unforgettable odor of the Ether. Omphu shielded his eyes and steadied his dragon as Hell ripped a gash in reality. The berserkers, troopers and war monks that were gathered around the leaders fell to their knees, but Vrees grinned defiantly. Pith’s palfrey kicked up and whinnied but Pith held his ground.

The Ether swirled and stirred the smell of death that lingered in the city. Then, with a sudden bang, the winds ceased, revealing a demon with defiant hands on his waist and his legs set wide apart. He was a fiery creature rippling with an

The Opening Portal

by S. Will Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

excess of muscle set upon a powerful frame of sulfuric bones. With a tone of admiration and contempt, the demon said, “Gentlemen ... you have wrecked your world.” The demon laughed and hooted. Omphu squinted and his chin cocked sideways. Vrees smirked at Omphu and then turned to the demon and reverently tipped his head.

The Witch King’s eyes gleamed behind his iron mask. “So we promised, so we have done.”

Flames pranced across the demon’s body while smoldering chunks of brimstone dripped from him. He stared at *and* through Pith. His eyes narrowed and his fists clenched. The expression blasted loathing and disdain, pushing Pith back a step. For a second, Pith feared the demon might strike him, but the demon’s face loosened without warning. The demon chuckled a puff of smoke as he turned to inspect the damage. “Impressive ... mortals.”

“Mortal?” Pith squinted from behind his iron mask. “The world is in ruins, by oath and by contract of souls we are *immortals* now.”

The demon broke into laughter. “Foolish mortals.”

Pith’s charger bucked in terror as the demon slapped his thigh in thunderous laughter. The demon laughed until tears welled in his eyes and his stomach ached. Vrees looked up at Omphu and smirked.

Over the laughter, Omphu Skullshield yelled, “I have a deal with your master!”

“Do you know exactly what bargain you have struck, Omphu? Are you certain

The Opening Portal

by S. Will Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

exactly what price you will get for betraying your people? What will you get for raping your world? For dooming your universe to an eternity of subjugation?"

The demon looked up through the smoke that obscured the stars. As if on cue, the sky began to crackle and sparkle with fireworks of an unearthly nature.

Vrees muttered, "Here they come."

Omphu shook his spetum. "Don't trifle with me, demon ... I am your master!"

The demon ignored Omphu and turned in place again and again marveling at the meteors popping and burning overhead. The demon's eyes and face were cast skyward; his arms held open to the heavens. "See them!" He smiled. "See them all!" The light exploded into ten thousand fire blasts and even the steadiest of the berserkers clutched the earth at the demon's feet, cowering in fear. With each blast another of the hellspawn burst into reality. "This universe is ours," cried the demon

Pith's voice echoed in his helm as he shouted to the demon, "We have delivered this world—this gateway—to you. My men and I have been promised immortality!"

A flashflood of anger raged across the demon's face and almost as quickly the demon appeared before Pith's face. Pith felt his iron mask warming, but—in an effort to show no fear— he did not blink. Though he did not blink and his set his jaw with determination, Pith shuddered uncontrollably when he looked into the abyss of the demon's eyes.

The demon hissed, "My Lord cannot give what is not his to give, foolish ...

The Opening Portal

by S. Will Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

mortal.” Bursts of red light flashing in the sky reflected on the demon’s oily face.

“You promised to deliver Reality ... you have delivered a reality.”

Pith pulled his horse back from the demon. The Witch King was suddenly as unsteady as the mount beneath him.

Omphu shouted, “I’ll strike you dead where you stand if you are attempting some trickery, demon!”

Pith double-stepped back. “A ... a reality?”

Vrees winked at Omphu. “Just listen, Skullshield.”

The demon turned to Pith, “This universe you have betrayed is just one of an infinite number of realities.”

“But—“

“This is the end of just one battle in an eternity of battles!”

“But—“

“You may well live forever ... but I doubt you shall ever be immortal, Pith. Do you understand the distinction?” The demon clenched his fist and held it to Pith’s face. “Stupid mortal. You have served us well. If you wish, you may serve us yet again ... but you have not yet delivered what you promised.”

With a creak from his saddle, Pith dismounted and looked out over the wasteland that was once his world. For a moment he surveyed the corpse of this city, but then he recoiled from the view and shut his eyes shut tightly. But even with his

The Opening Portal

by S. Will Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

eyes closed, there was no escaping the vision. In his mind, he saw those who had fallen at his blade. He remembered victims of hexes brewed from his unholy cauldron. He recalled the agony of those who he had crushed, exterminated and betrayed. All this and more, he saw in an instant. Pith opened his eyes. He was speechless.

The demon paid the Witch King no mind. Beneath the fiery sky, the demon danced to the rhythmic sounds of Chaos warriors looting the dead and raping the living. "I like it!" He bellowed. "Tell me truthfully, Omphu, isn't this really heaven? You can have the harps and pearly gates ... I'll take this!"

The demon slapped Pith on the back, "Lighten up, *mighty* Witch King!" The demon cackled insanely. "This is *your* moment ... your moment in eternity. Savor it. Perhaps one day, when you are not so sure of yourself, I'll bring you back here and remind you what you can do with a little tenacity. "

The demon laughed roisterously, and then placed his arm around Pith and waved his other hand before the Witch King. "Observe." The demon made a fist and threw a puff of smoke. The smoke parted and the smell of sea breezes breathed fresh air onto the suffocating city. A seagull screeched from somewhere off in the vision. At seeing this, even the berserkers stopped to huddle around Pith. As they wiped the smog from their eyes and gasped at the sight before them: a world relatively untouched by war. The demon smiled wickedly, "This ... is Lharna."

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

One

Oregang Istlur—a ragged and gaunt dwarf—was easily lost in the crowd that had gathered to hear a nationalistic speaker who had come to the beerhall to politic for volunteers for a new group of ultra-patriots called the stouttroopers. It was the autumn of 921. Sometimes we forget how bitter those days were for dwarves. It was a desperate time when proud families were forced to trade their jewels and priceless gems to reavers and goblins in exchange for bread and rations. There was no money for smokes of any kind and the beer kegs were mostly water. In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, the dwarves gathered in beerhalls to whisper rumors.

The stouttroopers wore matching braids in their beards, and each one sported his clan rune as a stark reminder of the dwarven heritage that everyone present shared. In a boring monotone, the stouttrooper's speaker addressed the dwarves crowded into the beerhall. Istlur was just one of many dwarves who listened quietly to the speaker that day as he spoke of a growing gnome/troll threat.

The speaker warned of dangers that threatened the very existence of the dwarven nation—or the Mokka, as dwarves reverently call their homeland. He claimed that all of the problems troubling the dwarven nation could be traced to one of two influences: trolls or gnomes. Trolls attacked the Mokka from the outside and gnomes from within. As he hinted vaguely at rumors of gnomish conspiracies, he suggested that the gnomish threat, was far more insidious because gnomes lived within the Mokka. In a blank, even tone, he said, "Gnomes are corrupting the

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

foundations of our society.”

It was true that some gnomes had helped to negotiate a peace between trolls and dwarves, but it was also true that the years of war with the trolls had wrecked the dwarven economy. Under-employed and half-starved, the dwarves were desperately seeking answers and they patiently listened to the speaker’s tale ... but they didn’t quite believe it. It was too much, too wild to swallow as presented.

Tales of a twisted gnome connivance to destroy the proud heritage of all dwarves almost seemed laughable. Gnomes were at every level of dwarven society. They were friends, allies and trading partners. When the dwarves suffered, the gnomes suffered. When the gnomes prospered, the dwarves prospered.

The speaker looked out over the dwarves who gawked at him with their arms crossed over their chest. Their jaws were set grimly and when the speaker finished and the room fell silent for a moment.

But at least one dwarf— a scrawny and undernourished specimen of a dwarf named Oregang Istlur— heard the message and he believed it in his heart. Istlur was the fourth son of a carpenter—a profession held in low esteem by dwarves, as they prefer to work in stone whenever possible. Istlur had spent five bitter years in the Folksmakt (or “*People’s Army*”) fighting trolls in Vrakland. The trolls had contested every inch of Vrakland and Istlur and his comrades had made many sacrifices for the cause. When his unit was at last called back from the front, the dwarves were forced to concede every gain that had been made. Istlur and many

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

soldiers felt betrayed by their leaders' actions, but what they couldn't guess is that if the Folksmakt had not been pulled back, there would have been no Folksmakt to pull back.

Istlur return to his hometown Invliesche and took up work with his father the carpenter. But, Istlur never was his father's favored son, and after much petty bickering with his brothers, Oregang was asked to leave the family business. He took up work for some time in a stone quarry, but the long hours of intense physical labor did not suit his temperament. He briefly took up an apprenticeship with a jeweler, but his master determined that Istlur lacked the artistic talents needed to become a true dwarven jeweler. (Some say that Istlur's master retained a gnome apprentice.) As it turned out that evening that the speaker came into the bar, Istlur had just pawned his war medals for a pittance. His fortunes in life had been reduced to little more than the coins he held in his pocket. Those coins jingled just a little as stepped up onto a planked table and at the same time up on the stage of history.

Otten Gurstkeine was there, in the back of the room at the time. He later recalled that Istlur had the deportment one might expect from an oft-beaten dog: nervous and shifty ... but still potentially dangerous. Istlur's eyes were cast down and he mumbled at first. Where the first speaker had been monotone, Istlur was barely audible. Every dwarf leaned forward straining to hear him as he mumbled something about dwarven unity. He looked out over the crowd and saw every eye fixed on him. Something inside him sparked. He knew he would never be a

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

carpenter or a mason or jeweler. He said to himself, *THIS is where I am supposed to be.*

Istlur held up a fist and shouted, “There is not one dwarf here worthy of his father’s beard.” The timbre of his voice shocked the listeners. His urgency and volume grabbed their attention and then he slowly began to work himself into a terrible anger. The crowd shifted in their seats uneasily.

Ragged and gaunt though he was, he slurred them all. He challenged their honor. He questioned their loyalty to their children and to their forefathers. Then he concluded, “Each one of you scrounges for coins like a lowly goblin. Sluggards and dullards fill this room! Each one of you has turned your back on the traditions that made our Mokk a union of ancient clans.” He crossed his arms and paused. He could see that the listeners were growing tired of his insults, but at the same time, he knew he had touched a deep and buried sense of guilt.

Oregang shook his finger at them like an scolding father as he shouted, “How can you sit idly by while our precious Mokk, falls in disrepair!?” He nodded. “I’ll tell you how ... for I myself have almost slipped into that seductive trap of apathy laid by those so like us, and yet unlike us. “

He held his hands up as if pleading with them. “Never, never forget my brothers, you are descended from heroes—heroes one and all. Our ancestors have battled trolls in bloody snow covered passes. Your grandfathers fought mighty giants and dragons. Dwarven ships have crossed distant seas and our science is

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

unequaled in this world! We are a people with no limits, save those we place on ourselves.

“It is not your fault ... it is not our fault our nation is broken. Our leaders have betrayed us on a scale that we can barely fathom. Our leaders hold counsel with gnomes who call for peace with the trolls. I cannot understand how peace with trolls benefits dwarves so I can only guess that peace with trolls must somehow benefit gnomes. How is it, I ask, do gnomes eat when dwarves must scrounge for coins to buy a few beets? How is it that gnomes prosper in OUR lands? Is it a coincidence that gnomes counsel peace with trolls? Or, do we have one enemy in the troll and worse yet, the trolls’ ally within our lands?”

Istlur crossed his arms and shook his head affirmatively. A few heads nodded in reply and some dwarves grudgingly tipped their heads. They were skeptical still, but even those who disagreed with Istlur could not deny the passion in Istlur’s voice. It rang like a bell of patriotism and it sounded with the urgency of a miner’s warning-horn. He now turned his fury and love on the crowd in the same flaming tirade. He screamed, “For our children, for our Mokka for all that is dwarf, we must pick up the axe of honor! We must obliterate all mercy for our enemies and reserve all generosity for dwarves.

“Yes!” Istlur shouted with wrath as he spat and cursed and danced. “Today is the day we take back our Mokka from those who would let our nation die ... from those who would betray their heritage. If gnome traitors mean to sell us to the trolls, then I say no! I love my clan. I love my Mokka. Call me a murderer! Call me a

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

villain! I don't care. If it means killing every troll and gnome in the world, so be it. I'd strangle them all with my bare hands in defense of the Mokka. Let nothing stop us from preserving our dwarven way of life."

Istlur dropped his head and his hands as if he was exhausted. The crowd was stunned for a moment, but then one by one they began pounding their beer mugs on the table. The leader of the stouttroopers leapt up onto the table beside Istlur and paced the table. He waved his hands high to encourage every dwarf present to pound harder.

Termon Gount, an old and respected graybeard, called out, "This is madness!" Termon stepped up upon another tabletop.

Istlur shouted, "If defending the Mokka is madness, then I am a madman!"

Termon's bushy silver eyebrows bounced wildly and his eyes darted about seeking an ally. "Don't you see what he's saying? War is what put us in this mess in the first place." Turning to the others in the room, Termon pleaded, "He is preaching more war."

A voice from the crowd said, "His partner is a gnome!"

It was no crime to have a gnomish partner. And ordinarily there would be no shame in having a gnome for a partner, but the atmosphere in the room was so charged with dwarven nationalism, that the "accusation" struck Termon like a forty-stone maul. His knees wobbled and he touched a hand to his stomach. He

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

looked around at the unfriendly sea of dwarves lapping at the edges of his table.

“Yes,” He said weakly, “Itzak Bronhoss has been my neighbor and friend for years. The very idea of a gnome conspiracy is preposterous!”

A mumble passed through the crowd as they traded opinions.

Istlur spat the gnomish surname, “Bronhoss, eh?” His eyes tightened and he hissed, “Selling troll wares no doubt.” Oregang pulled his stubby arms up on his belt. “Traitor.”

Without warning, stouttroopers pulled Termon Gount from the tabletop, drew their clubs and began striking Termon mercilessly. That was how the nightmare began.



Eighty years later on a spring afternoon in far off Sinepaxia, a gust of wind blew with the refreshing promise of a new life and better days. The wind lied.

The first man over the hill was a tracker—a savage wearing not much more than a cape and loincloth. His mohawk was stained with bright colors of wild berries and his skin was covered in geometric tattoos that spoke of strange and difficult ordeals. The tracker took a handful of soil and crumbled it in front of his nose. One of his *izgin* (a tracking beast) came up next to him and sniffed as well. The tracker looked down on the unsuspecting village and the motte-and-bailey castle down below. The castle’s gates were flung open and the town’s citizens moved

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

with the slow steady pace of civilization attending to daily errands. The tracker had selected a perfect approach to this remote town in Sinepaxia. There would be no warning for the town of Dobriigrad.

Crouching low, the tracker held a low profile against the hill as he looked back at the striking figure of Alsoomse. Lightly armored as usual, she was dismounted, holding the reins of her horse Wildfire. Alsoomse's raven hair gleamed in the morning sunlight, as did her deep brown eyes. The tracker nodded at her and she climbed onto Wildfire and closed her eyes. Her head was slightly cocked and she held a hand aloft. A variegated host of savages from a multitude of tribes and cultures watched her hand. Then, at some unseen cue, the hand dropped.

Without warning the horde poured over the hill like rolling ash from a volcano.

In the town, a child asked, "Mommy, why are all those people running?"

His mother took one look at the orchestrated chaos rushing forward and reacted instinctively. As she scooped up her child and ran for the town gates, she screamed a warning. In an instant, the town awakened, but even as the townsfolk ran for their weapons and the guards hurried to pull the gates shut, it was too late. Feathered and painted savages, who had patiently stealthed into the town's perimeter, fell upon the guards. As the guards drew weapons to defend themselves, the gates slowed to a halt long before they were closed. Barbarian horse lords on muscled chargers thundered freely through the castle's gates.

The town succumbed so quickly that the pagan war witches scarcely had the time

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

to work a single wonder before the prisoners were rounded up and marched before Alsoomse. As the hovels and buildings behind him crackled and burned, Ely Ulrich, one of Alsoomse' captains bowed to Alsoomse. At his feet were the corpses of eight men, and he looked up proudly. But Alsoomse paid him no mind, as usual her eyes and mind were elsewhere and she seemed only vaguely in touch with reality. She trotted her horse past him through the ranks of her allies and troops.

The bold and blond warrior Gavril Gorin was among those caught unaware by the sudden attack. His town lay bleeding and burning, many of its inhabitants dead. He had been cut in the shoulder—but not badly. He gave up the fight when a berserker's axe snapped a bone in his sword arm. Gavril was thankful though, for many things. His arm looked like it would recover eventually, but more importantly his twin brother Grigorii had been captured with little more than a cut leg.

Together Grigorii and Gavril might be prisoners, perhaps even slaves, but at least they would survive and most importantly it would be together. Though Gavril did not know the barbarian chief's name, Gavril and Grigorii were both prisoners of Ely Ulrich. Gavril observed how Ely's eyes followed Alsoomse's every move. The other barbarians seemed to worship her as a living goddess, but Ely watched her differently. He had a hunger in his eye. When she approached he strutted and posed, eager to catch her eye.

Alsoomse took no notice of Ely as she spoke the fateful words to all the

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

barbarians gathered in Dobriigrad. She spoke in a tongue foreign to the village of Dobriigrad. “The god of war ... awaits your sacrifice.”

When she spoke these words, the conquerors whooped and cheered.

As the savages danced and shrieked gleefully, Gavril leaned towards his brother and said, “Grigorii, what did she say?”

But before Gavril could hear Grigorii’s answer—the back-end of an axe-handle crashed against his temple so hard that Gavril saw stars. The blow was unexpected and dizzying, and he heard an accented voice command, “No talky!”

When Gavril’s vision returned, he could see the barbarians were busy tying the hands of all the captured warriors. Gavril held his unbroken arm out to his captor to tie him as well. Snatching up Gavril’s limp and broken arm, the barbarian slapped it against Gavril’s outstretched arm. Gavril tried not to wince but a single tear ran down his face. The captor paid him no heed and his wrists were lashed tightly with a coarse cord. Though it cut into his wrists, Gavril knew he could count himself lucky if this was the only discomfort he suffered in the hands of the barbarians.

The barbarian grabbed Grigorii next. Grigorii’s eyes were wide and his bottom lip trembled nervously. He struggled for a moment against the barbarians who wanted to tie him and looked to Gavril.

Blood from the blow to Gavril’s head was already matting his long blond hair, but

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

he smiled at Grigorii as if to say, "We'll be alright, brother." Gavril nodded to Grigorii and his twin no longer resisted.

No doubt, Gavril thought to himself, we'll be lashed in a line and marched back to the Barbarian Empire to toil as slaves. It was a grim thought, and he knew that just surviving the march would take every bit of determination he and his brother could muster.

In the distance, Gavril could hear the barbarian war witches chanting their heathen rites, and soon another barbarian came along and tied Gavril's feet together. Gavril felt a little unsteady with his ankles lashed together so tightly and he fought to keep his balance as the barbarian checked to make sure the knot was secure. He thought to himself, *How will we walk to the barbarian lands with our ankles lashed?*

When the barbarian was certain the rope was tight, he gave Gavril a gentle shove. Powerless to resist, Gavril flopped to the ground, landing squarely on his broken arm. Against his will, he let out an audible yelp.

Gavril lay there for a moment with his face in the dirt and blood oozing from his hair. He stifled a whimper and ignored his tears, then with a struggle he rolled himself over. The blood and dirt on his face and in his hair mixed with the tears to form a sticky black mud that caked in blotches. As he craned his neck about and could see that all the captured warriors were being tied in this way. Moments later, only the barbarians were left standing.

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Ely Ulrich came upon Gavril and looked down. Ely used his foot against Gavril's chin to pull Gavril's gaze around to meet his. Ely nodded and spoke in the language common to Sinepaxia and the Empire. "I salute you."

Gavril clenched his teeth and glared up at Ely, but he said nothing. Alsoomse spoke a few words that Gavril did not understand and the barbarians cried out in joy again.

Grigorii screamed out, "*Bolshe Moi!* Gavril, they're going to massacre us! They're going to kill us all."

Screams of terror erupted all over the town. Gavril stared at Ely. "Is this true?"

Ely nodded. "Yes. Of course it's true."

"The children ... the women?!"

Ely shook his head. "Just the warriors. The women will be ours and the children will be taught our ways."

Gavril screamed out, "For God's sake! Not my brother! Kill me, but spare my brother!"

Ely's face was like stone.

Gavril shrieked, "Why! Merciful God, Why?!"

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Ely did not answer, but instead he motioned to a pair of subordinates who used a pole to lift up Gavril's brother. Tied wrist to wrist and ankle to ankle, a pole slipped under the restraints could easily hoist Grigorii much the way a hog is carried to slaughter. Grigorii screamed and squirmed, but resistance was futile. "Brother!!"

Gavril shouted at Ely, "I beg of you, take anything from me but not this ... my only brother."

Ely ignored Gavril's plea and motioned to a berserker who was standing by with an axe. The axeman steadied the blade on Grigorii's neck and then raised the axe up high.

Gavril screamed, "NOOOOOOOOOO!"

The axe fell with unerring swiftness. Grigorii's head dropped cleanly and rolled away.

"Grigorii!" Gavril shouted.

Ely fetched up Grigorii's head and nodded to the bodiless head. "I salute you."

The eyes winced, and the mouth gasped at air. No doubt, Ely's face was the last thing Grigorii saw before the light faded from his eyes.

Gavril angrily and futilely fought against his restraints as he spat and cursed.

"Damn you to Hell. Damn you all to Hell!"

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Gavril was to be next. He showered the barbarians with obscenities as they hoisted him up in the air, but a calm voice of reason penetrated his shouts. It was Alsoomse. “Ely.”

Ely Ulrich spun about.

“Not that one.”

Alsoomse pointed at Gavril and then spoke in a heavily accented Sinepaxian that Gavril barely understood. “The *Ti-Qorem* have decided that he won’t die today.” She didn’t look at Gavril (or at Ely for that matter); her eyes were cloudy and looked up and away.

Ely spoke, “But he—“

Alsoomse cut him short. “The *Ti-Qorem* have spoken. Your destiny is bound to this *noh-yerukka*. Together you will seek Lost Bear.”

“Lost Bear?” Ely said. “But isn’t he dead?”

Alsoomse replied, “Lost Bear is not dead. He is simply living the life of the hermit. Together you must fetch him. And together, you will find your destiny.”

Gavril shouted, “My destiny is to avenge the death of my brother, so kill me now or face the consequences.”

Alsoomse’s bronze skin glowed in the light of dusk, as did her eyes, but neither

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

her eyes nor her tone seemed to indicate that she had heard Gavril speak. “You must away swiftly. For now ... time is our enemy.” Alsoomse sheathed her longsword and place her hands on her nearly bare hips. As always she wore little more than a loincloth and a brass brassiere. “Lost Bear hunts alone in the foothills of the Southern Elfin Divide. You will find him near the pass at Prester Falls on Mount Orhn. Take only the *noh-yerukka*.”

Ely said, “B-but why?”

Alsoomse said to no one in particular. “The *Ti-Qorem* are awakening, as they never have before. They will come to us in many forms and we must be ready—ready to serve—ready to fight—ready to die.”

Ely nodded, “I am ready to fight and ready to die, but this sounds like work for witches and shamans ... not warriors.”

Gavril’s broken arm ached, but his spirit was numb. His desire for revenge had some how been washed away in a sea of despair and his mind went so blank he wasn’t sure if he was among the living or if he was a ghost trapped in some realm that was neither Heaven nor Hell. He was aware of the setting sun casting long shadows on the ashes of Dobriigrad, but Gavril was oblivious to the savages dancing around funeral pyres and reavers playing their music. The barbarians were feasting on the town’s winter stores and among the victors there was laughter, ease and joy. Gavril muttered to Alsoomse, “I’ll not walk or ride away from my brother’s bones.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Alsoomse turned her back on Ely and as she walked away she said over her shoulder, “Then throw the *noh-yerukka’s* bound body over the back of a horse ... but leave tonight.”



The trees in Elvas Minor are most often hardwoods—oaks, elms and maples with broad leaves and luxurious canopies. In those forests grow ancient trees, and between those trees wind roads whose paths have not changed for dozens of millennia. In this land, seasons change, but the passage of time seems slow and easy.

In this sanctuary of elfin power and prestige the Moonrock (in elfin the *Lhuna-do-Arna*) juts up out of the forest as a reminder of days long past when giants ruled the earth, and a time before humanity came to Lharna. In these sacred forests, it’s impossible to imagine a time when silver elves will not rule these forests and all that live therein. Just as their brothers, the golden elves will forever rule the unending grasslands called Elvas Major, the silver elves fully expect to defend the forests of Elvas Minor for eternity. But in a land without change for time unremembered, surprises *can* happen.

Leng son of Leng was standing erect and proud in the court of the Yendor—*or prince*. But when he heard the news, Leng was suddenly a bit tottery and felt a bit of vertigo. He reached for the arm of a chair to steady himself and shook his head, tossing his coffee-colored mane, as if he could somehow throw the news out

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

of his hair. His fine suit of plate mail dragged at him, its weight seemed to pull in all directions as the news swept through him. Then Leng stabilized himself again. “Impossible,” he concluded. His pointed ears pulled back a bit as his jaw clenched.

Penthor, another elfin warrior, had also been summoned to the Yendor’s gathering hall to hear the news.

“Believe it,” the Yendor replied. The Yendor was a mature elf—nearly 950 years old—but he was still as spry and nimble as Leng, 59 decades his junior. Though he looked young by human standards, his misty gray eyes and his silver hair betrayed his age. He spoke calmly, with a temperance and tranquility that bespoke the wisdom of his years. “The word first came through the trees, a day after the riders arrived at Jingo Pass. Then the birds confirmed it today.”

Penthor son of Denthor pursed his thin lips and his violet eyes burned with vengeful anger. “I don’t believe it, because it didn’t happen. It didn’t happen because it can’t happen and it will never happen.”

The Yendor settled back in his throne and sighed. “So we were taught, but we were taught wrong. The fact is, our sister nation has surrendered its sovereignty to the Mokka. Even as we speak, dwarven stouttroopers are marching over the most hallowed lands of our brethren.”

Leng stammered, “How can this be?”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Penthor was tall by High Elf standards and thinly built; though one would not suspect it by the great cape of elfin mail that he wore. A great warrior and a leader of elves, he most often like to lead from the front, where his troops could be seen flocking around the golden tassel (cut from his own hair) atop his helm. He swung his sword at the air. "I say we march to Elvas Major and just recover that which is elfin. Yendor grant me your leave and on the morrow, I shall take my soldiers and what allies as I can muster to challenge any army the dwarves dare to field."

Yendor Bhondouth shook his head and scowled. "Penthor, sheath your sword! You act as rash as a young and foolish elf. It amazes me sometimes that you have actually seen 754 summers but still lack the prudence of young Leng. First things first: we must secure our own borders. In addition we can always count on trouble with the trolls. And I have no doubt that the goblin and barbarian fight in Elsylvania may spill over on to our lands."

Penthor growled, "Reavers and goblins will always fight. We can not just sit idly by, while dwarves—"

"We shall not sit idly." Bhondouth replied curtly. There was no question to the Yendor's authority. Yendor Bhondouth paused a moment to make certain he had the full attentions of Penthor and Leng. Bhondouth continued slowly, "There is much work to do, but we shall not act in haste."

A guard in a fine coat of elfin mail and a great tasseled helm entered the hall and

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

bowed. “Yendor, they are here.”

A look of distaste raced across the Yendor’s face like a gust of spring air carrying the scent of a nearby skunk. His arched eyebrows settled low and he brushed a long wisp of white hair out of his face as he limply motioned to the guard. “Send them in.” He glanced from Leng to Penthor and muttered, “A necessary evil.”

The doors to the Yendor’s hall swung open and a pair of short green goblins entered. Both of them wore big friendly grins that contrasted the devious wild look in their eyes. They strode together, full of confidence and with great swaggering steps as one might expect from heroes come back from war. Their chief beamed. “Yendor Bhondouth.” His tongue dripped with honey when he spoke. “We honor you.”

Then, as if on cue, the goblins both bowed at the waist. They bowed so low that one of them (the voodooist) dropped a beaded necklace on to the polished stone floor. The voodooist snatched up his necklace and quickly shot his wicked little eyes back on the Yendor.

Bhondouth smiled thinly as he waved his hand. “Yes, yes ... get on with it.”

The leader of the pair, Igggin, removed his bristled helm, revealing his bald green head as he said with a murderer’s grin, “It is my sad duty to bring ill tidings, Yendor.”

Bhondouth’s face was stone. “Speak, Igggin.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

“The dwarves have taken Elvas Major.”

Igggin’s voodooist Shogggrazzin shook his head negatively and added (with a broad smile), “It is a very sad day.”

“No doubt.” Penthor’s purple eyes fixed a stony gaze on the goblins. “You’ve lost a customer.”

The Yendor waved his hand at Penthor and shook his head negatively. “This much we know Igggin. “

Igggin nodded. “We’ve heard stories ... well I suppose you’ve heard them ... about the cairn ring at Eyletha ...” His voice trailed away and Igggin suddenly took notice of the fine drapes that gilded the windows of the hall. “Are those drapes—”

“What!?” Penthor blurted.

Bhondouth said, “What are they doing with the Ring at Eyletha?”

“Nothing ... yet.” Shogggrazzin replied,

Igggin said, “They offered to sell us the stones, but we would have no parts of it-”

Shogggrazzin piped in, “Very bad omens.” Shogggrazzin rattled his beads and held up a pipe as evidence.

Igggin said, “Take heart though, my elfin friends, Greeggga the Great had a

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

saying: 'Crisis spells opportunity, and opportunity ... equals profit.'

"Profit?" said Leng, "How dare you suggest that we should profit from the fall of our brother nation?"

Igggin shook his head. "No ... that's not what I mean. In your language it is hard to say. There are many many words for profit in our language, but your language is impoverished in this regard. What I mean to say is that ... well, good comes from bad—like a flower can spring from manure? As I see it you have an opportunity here."

Penthor snarled, "The Yendor doesn't need a lecture on politics from a goblin."

Igggin bowed deeply. "Agreed."

Bhondouth was always keen to hear another opinion before taking actions, though. He tossed his head to throw wisp of white hair out of his eyes as he said, "Go on, Igggin. What is your point?"

"Much as it breaks our hearts, neither the goblins nor the elves of Elvas Minor have the strength to challenge the dwarves for Elvas Major. But the dwarves won't be marching across the Elfin Divide anytime soon. They have their hands full with trolls in Vrakland and all of the barbarian lands lie between Elvas Major and Minor."

Shoggrazzin piped up, "Trolls and barbarians? Don't they hold that port in

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

northern Elvas Major ... Mhenir?"

Igggin shook his head, "Well yes, although the trolls call that port Wirga now ... "

Penthor fumed, "Wirga? Mhenir is temporarily held by a few trolls and barbarians."

Bhondouth knew better. There were more than a few trolls and barbarians in Mhenir.

Igggin raised an eyebrow and grinned. "Temporarily? You call fifty years of barbarian and—er—troll rule temporary?!"

Bhondouth waved his hand, "Enough of this idle chatter." Bhondouth's thoughts were churning. *Surely, the trolls and barbarians recognize the dangers of the Mokka?* He glanced at Penthor as he tallied the troops he might need to recover Mhenir, but his face didn't show it. "What have you brought to trade, Igggin?"

Grinning ear to ear, Igggin bowed deeply. "All that you might need, great Yendor." He looked up. "Oh, and Yendor? Should you decide to attack Mhenir? I'm sure that I could arrange for a few goblin warriors and wolf-riders to come to your aid ... no charge, of course."

"Igggin." Yendor paused. Penthor set his jaw grimly and Leng eyed the goblins suspiciously. "I will keep that in mind."

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

TWO

Sinepaxia is a humid and hot land on a summer afternoon, but in the basilica St. Zadius of the Fire, beneath vaulting stone and behind leaded glass, the air was damp and chill. A young human priest—thurible in hand—chanted as he jangled a slow rhythm, scattering sweet smoky incense that defined long rays of scintillating stained light. His mumbled prayer and clanging thurible echoed through the lonely palisades of glass and stone. The great cathedral was empty except for the priest and two souls in the vestibule. A pair of massive arched doors, of which one was open, separated the vestibule from the nave and the priest, and his chanting (though hushed) reverberated across the great cathedral.

Standing before a towering marble statue of St. Zadius, Philipe seemed small and clerical. He wore plain black vestments that veiled the warrior's physique that he possessed. Philipe had golden hair, cropped short and shaved on the pate, as was fitting his station in the clergy. In his hand, he held no sword, but instead prayer beads. In front of Philipe stood a man tough and leathered, tall and gaunt with a small scar through his smashed upper lip. Philipe's first knuckle of his first finger fixed the spot whence his devotions had been interrupted. "Why do you disturb me here?"

Rogelio Cortiz' dirty collar was flipped up awkwardly. Rogelio grumbled in a deep baritone, "I wanted to talk with y-you."

"And you could not wait until after my prayers?"

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

“ALL things can—“ Rogelio stopped to knock some trail dust out of his brown moustache. “—can wait I suppose.” Rogelio dug at his nose, looked at his finger and then flicked.

Philippe’s eyes shot off in rapid pursuit of the nasal debris, which had already landed on the stone floor. Philippe stood dumbfounded for a moment and then he looked back at Rogelio who was resting a hand on the pommel of his family sword. Philippe’s lips curled in disgust as he gasped, “Baron Cortiz, this is a house of God!”

Rogelio looked a little confused. “Yes, I know that.” Rogelio’s deep voice—which rumbled like the warning from a tiger—was always difficult to understand, but Philippe had grown accustomed to accommodating Rogelio because of his value as a warrior.

Philippe pursed his lips and clenched his teeth as he pinched his prayer beads until his knuckles turned white, but then he exhaled and hid his clenched hand behind his back. “Since I have already interrupted my devotions, perhaps we should just go on with it.”

“The elves are on the march.”

“What say you? Have they attacked?”

“Not yet, but they will soon.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

“Have they entered your barony?”

Baron Cortiz replied, “No.” He looked at his callused hands. “They are not attacking us, they are going to attack the trolls and some of the trolls’ barbarian allies.”

Philippe shook his head. “How did you come by this information?”

“Goblin traders. I hate those little green skunkers, but they do have a way of knowing what’s going on.”

“I see.”

“I came to you because I want to strike the elves while they are weakened. While they are fighting in the north, we’ll strike their bellies.”

Philippe pondered the thought. “It is tempting, to at last recover those lands lost after my father’s day.” Philippe paused. “But I have no desire for another war.”

“If we don’t strike now, and the elfin venture is successful, who knows how powerful the pointy-ears will become. The ‘pointies’ are tenacious devils. Once they dig their heels in, it’s tough to root them out.”

“The Justice Monks are sworn to defend Sinepaxia. It is not our charge to invade foreign lands.”

Rogelio growled, “We’re talking about taking back lands that used to be ours.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

“And used to be there’s ... “

“You don’t sound much like your father...”

Philippe stopped suddenly and coldly. His blue eyes burned with fire. “That’s not the issue. I shall not follow his path. M-my father was a great—but fallen—warrior.”

Rogelio pulled at his moustache. “That’s what some say...”

Lord Philippe’s head recoiled a bit and his lip curled. “Baron,” his tone stressed the difference between a baron and a lord, “I shall not discuss my father with you—or with any other man. Do you understand?”

“Not really.” Rogelio grunted. “But I can obey.”

Philippe abruptly followed up. “Make ready for war. We will march on the elves.”



Almost eighty years ago Oregang Istlur stormed to power in Dagmökk. Under his guidance the Mökk was honed into a powerful machine of war. The Folksmakt (patriotic dwarven volunteers) and Mökk’s Army were on the march on all fronts. Croal, a member of the Folksmakt of some renown, was one of those dwarves.

Croal looked at the flat sea of grass stretching from horizon to horizon. In all his days, he never once thought he would find himself in a land so foreign as this one.

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

His army, large by the Mokk's standards, disappeared in the remoteness of this place. Croal marched south along a column of stouttroopers that stretched for miles. He cast a pitying eye at the haggard band of unarmed elves marching north under the watch of their dwarven captors.

These elves were a downtrodden lot, unaccustomed to marching on foot like dwarves. Their warpaint was gone and their battle plumes were now missing or mangled. Each elf wore the expression of one whose family is missing, whose nation has been conquered and whose fate lies in the hands of the conqueror.

Croal tipped his head in a very subtle salute to their bravery. These same elves had fought a masterful campaign that took advantage of their fleet-footed mounts against the heavily armored stouts. But even in the face of countless defeats, the dwarven will had been unbreakable. They marched south in spite of deprivations caused by elfin attacks on their supply train. They marched south in defiance of constant elfin harassment. Time and time again, the elves ran away from battle and only fought when favor suited them.

But when the dwarves reached the cairn rings at Eyletha, the dwarves at last forced the battle that they craved. The elfin army was fast and mobile, lightly armed but with little sticking power. Their strategy had been built around denying their enemy a target. Finally, when the dwarves threatened the holiest site in Elvas Major, the elves were drawn into a battle they could not win.

Dwarven artillery (cursed at every step of the road from Dagmokk to Eyletha)

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

proved too much. Stouttroopers shrugged off volleys of elfin arrows. Dwarven engineers threw-up stifling charge-breaks. The elves tossed themselves desperately into hand-to-hand combat and were dispatched with relative ease. But the final blow came when the elves found that they did not possess the one advantage they believed was theirs: magic.

Never in all their days of war did dwarves rely upon magic of any kind, and the elves did not and could not expect to be slammed with such supernatural force. However, in response to the elfin magic the dwarves had dealt openly for the first time with warlocks like Otten Gurstkiene, who now walked alongside Croal. Croal never even pretended to like the shaggy thin dwarf who was his army's witch, but he knew that without Gurstkiene's witchcraft the day might very well have been lost. Croal grunted and looked at Otten, "It's a long road back to Dagmökk, but I'm glad this is nearly over."

Gurstkiene turned. "What's that?"

"Nothing." Croal shook his head.

Gurstkiene huffed alongside Croal in the half-run that dwarven columns used when marching. "The goblins offered to purchase the stones from the cairn rings."

Croal nodded without a hint of surprise. "Nothing is sacred to a goblin—except perhaps gold."

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Gurstkiene smiled. “Gold is sacred to us too.”

Croal pounded along. “Dwarves have more. We have duty and honor, these things are sacred to us.”

“And Istlur. He’s sacred.”

Croal grunted something, but Gurstkiene did not hear what Croal said.

Otten said, “I refused their offer of course.”

Croal nodded. “Yes, we gave our word.”

“Well, yes ... but ...”

Croal scowled and turned to Gurstkiene. “But? But what?”

Gurstkiene started to slow his pace. “I didn’t know you were serious, you know ... about all that.”

Croal stopped suddenly and he snagged Gurstkiene by the arm and spun the warlock around. Croal’s nostrils flared. “What are you talking about?”

“I gave the order to have the stones from the cairn ring pulled to send back to the Mokka for study.”

“What!? We ... I ... made a promise to the elves.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Gurstkiene shook himself free from Croal's grip. "Oh, come on, Croal. This is war. They're only elves."

"We promised them. You told them as well! If they surrendered Elvas Major we would leave the cairn rings intact."

"Oh your pretense of naiveté is really quite annoying at times, Croal. We said that BEFORE they surrendered. We don't have to honor promises with nations that don't exist. Elvas Major does not exist."

"I don't give a damn who you *think* you are, or where you get your supposed mandate—"

"From Istlur himself and the power vested in me by the newly formed state of Aelfmökk."

Columns of dwarves continued to march behind Croal. "Are the stones in motion yet?"

"No, I've scheduled to have them rolled out tomorrow."

Croal started trotting again, as he yelled over his shoulder, "We'll see about this tonight." Croal and Gurstkiene were expected to meet up with the Stautmeister (leader of all stouttroopers) and General Garn later that evening.

Gurstkiene stood still as Croal jogged away and the dwarves marched passed him.

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

He yelled out so Croal would hear, “We all know those stones are a source of elfin magic—that’s why we need to study them. There’s no time for petty bickering, an undead army is gathering to challenge our gains. We must be prepared to deny them with every possible weapon!”

Croal ignored Gurstkiene and picked up his pace just a little.

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Three

“Hello?” A big toothy grin spread across the face of the troll chieftain Eosos.

”What’s this!” He rolled on to his big knobby elbows and looked out from the rocky carapace where he and his band of thugs hid in ambush. Eosos had picked this spot because the rocks offered good cover, but still gave a commanding view of the road in either direction. In the distance Eosos spotted the approach of a single figure and his horse. He squinted and muttered, “Yes, closer my friend. Come to us.”

At first glance the figure looked to be unarmed, but the great horns on the helmet were the first clue that this was not a peasant. As the figure moved, he glinted where the sun caught his armor as he moved. Then at the stranger’s belt Eosos spotted a great scabbard that swayed in the rhythm of the strider’s gait.

A troll muttered, “He looks like a warrior.”

Eosos said, “Are you afraid?”

“I – I ain’t a-feared a nuthin’.”

Eosos bonked the troll on the head. “You don’t sound like it.” Eosos looked at the horse that the warrior led. It was laden with pouches and bags of all sizes.

Ungah Laysum, a troll held high in Eosos’ regard, spotted the bags too.

“Provisions?”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Tsarly Gnash was a hill giant and a member of Eosos' band. He was crouched down uncomfortably behind a boulder. Tsarly was tracing patterns in the dirt with his big fingers, but his ears perked up. "Pervisions? I don't know what a pervision is but if it ain't poison, I'll eat it. I's hungry."

Eosos' tongue dripped with sarcasm. "What else is new?" Eosos' band (except perhaps for Tsarly Gnash) was lightly armored. Eosos had no desire to risk good trolls for a few provisions. He hoped the warrior would give up with out a fight, sparing everyone bloodshed. As the figure approached, Eosos explained his plan of attack to the trolls and the giant.

Ungah interrupted him: "Eo, there's another one with him. He's on the horse."

Eosos spied out over the rock. The second human was now plainly visible. He was thrown over the back of the horse, almost as if he was a dead body. *Probably not dead though*, Eosos mused, *his wrists and ankles are bound*. Eosos leaned back and said, "There's a story in that."

Tsarly smacked his hands together gleefully. "I like stories! Tell me a story."

Eosos smirked, "How about the story of the giant who got poked in the eye by a troll?"

Tsarly clapped a big hand over his eyes. "I don't like that story."

"Alright then ... shaddup. Do you all know what you're s'posed to do?"

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Tsarly kept his hand over his face but he spread open his fingers so he could peek out at Eosos. “You talkin’ to me too?”

Eosos poked Tsarly in the eye quicker than a blink and said, “A-course I’m talking to you too!”

Tsarly’s big leathery face twisted up and he ground his immense fist into his now watery eye. “But you told me to shut up?”

Eosos balled up his fist. “Why I oughta ...”

Ungah interrupted with a whispered yell of urgency, “Eosos!” Ungah’s eye’s motioned toward the approaching humans.

Eosos leaned forward and looked. The lead human stopped and cocked his head, while the horse continued to move, until the human pulled at the reins and stopped it directly beside him. The human crouched and his head bobbed back just a little. The human stood and rested his hand on his sword handle. Eosos said to his trolls, “He suspects us. Move now!”

A dozen trolls rolled out from the rocks with amazing quickness. As they spread out in front of the human, he drew his sword and bent his knees in a warrior’s stance. “Relax,” Eosos said with a smile. “What did you think? We were gonna eat you?”

The barbarian called out, “Who among you is the leader?!”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Eosos grinned. “You’re looking at him. I’m Eosos, what’s your name, barbarian?”

The warrior put his back to the horse and counted the trolls silently. His prisoner, who was still bound and laying over the horse, grunted and looked up at the trolls.

The barbarian answered, “I am Ely Ulrich. You know our peoples are at peace right now. Why do you threaten me?”

Eosos grinned. “Threaten? I ain’t threatening you. We just wanted to have a look see. We was all wondering why a barbarian and his prisoner are so far from barbarian lands?”

The prisoner, Gavril of Dobriigrad shoutly weakly, “Kill the barbarian! He has lots of gold.”

Eosos shot a look of greed to his friend Ungah. “Is that so, barbarian?”

Ely was almost penniless. He growled and held his sword up, “Does it matter?”

Eosos said to Ely, “Who is your pal on the horse?”

Ely shot back, “My affairs are not your concern, troll.”

Eosos laughed. “My prisoners affairs *are* my affairs.” Eosos look turned suddenly black and baleful. “Don’t tempt me to kill you.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Ely charged the old troll, and Eosos bellowed a horrendous battle cry so full of fury and power, that Ely suddenly skidded to a halt. Never in his life had Ely felt fear like this fear. It rippled through his being and soaked his marrow in hesitation.

Eosos' eyes bulged and his nostrils flared and he shouted, "Get outta here!"

Ely fought the urge to back away, but he found his body turning and running from the menacing trolls. He spun around and began to flee so suddenly that he blindly crashed into a stone wall—or so it seemed. Ely had run smack into the giant Tsarly Gnash. Ely lay sprawled on his back and his sword clattered to the ground.

Eosos slapped his foot over the blade and smiled. "Search the bags."



Utu Ekong wore the same orange dashiki, the same plate mail and the same tattered orange cotton crown that he had worn on the day of his death. He carried the same scythe that he had wielded for nearly five hundred years. Although the flesh had long ago fallen away from his bones, the skeleton of Utu Ekong did not molder and rot in the grave. Utu Ekong was neither dead, nor alive. He was suspended in the eternal twilight that was undead, twisted and evil.

Though Ekong had spent many more years undead than alive, he had not yet grown accustomed to it. At times he still hungered for life; remembering the

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

laughter of his wife and the smell of honeysuckle. Secretly, he marveled at the miracle of life. One would expect his heart was blackened and rotted away like the flesh that once held it, but Ekong liked to believe that he still retained a spark of the humanity that was once his. This is what he believed made him different from those with whom he was to counsel on this new moon night. Of course, just because he believed it, that did not make it so.

In the absence of the moon the stars seemed bright and all else seemed dark—especially those three unlit figures gathered around Utu Ekong. Utu now looked over his allies in war, his accomplices in murder. Their faces, like his, were no more than skulls with hollow eyes and bare teeth. His flesh had rotted away years ago, so it was easy to conceal his disgust behind the bony expressionless mask of bone that was his face. Seeing the monsters that were his cohorts, he tried to remember what had sparked his long descent into hatred so long ago. But an insect scurrying past his foot distracted him and he crushed it quickly and without hesitation. The act of killing instantly brought him back to the task at hand. It brought him no joy, but death (and killing of any kind) filled a constant hunger in him. Utu Ekong spoke, with a voice reminiscent of rusty chains rolling in a barrel of sand. “Among the willful in my army I find you three the least abominable.”

Cardinal Finn wore the tattered vestments of a priest and the tall miter of his life’s station perched upon his hairy skull. Long ago, he had been a man of some influence, and his death had done nothing to quell his ambitions for an even

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

greater position. He said (with a good measure of sarcasm), “Never have I been so highly praised.”

The Deathmaster snapped back, “Never have you deserved it less.” The wind was still that night and the smell of rotting flesh and decaying bone straddled the low valley where the undead army was gathering. Utu looked at those assembled before him and said, “I have heard the words of the Dark One.”

Luther Rielly wore a great sword at his waist and a suit of the finest platemail. After a century of use, the heraldry and colors he long ago wore with pride were tattered and faded, but his armor, though rusted with age, was still formidable. Luther kicked his legs wide apart and rested his hands on his belt. “Whenever you claim to ‘hear the words of the Dark One’, you have some order to give us. So out with it!”

The Deathmaster nodded. “Luther, you remind me of my son Ime. I suppose that’s why I keep you near me.” Everyone present knew that Utu Ekong had murdered his son. “And that too is why I keep my scythe well sharpened.” To reinforce his threat, the Deathmaster’s eyes—mere pinpricks of firelight in vacuous sockets—bore into Luther Reilly.

Luther shifted his stance. One day Luther would challenge the Deathmaster—but not tonight. Tonight Luther merely bowed and whispered, “Yes, milord.”

Damien Suth cackled with amusement. Like Finn, Suth wore the vestments of a

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

priest and a great hat of some forgotten station. In life, Suth was a priest who yearned for forbidden knowledge, a man consumed with his ever-growing library. His centuries in the afterlife now gave him the time he needed to read the books and scrolls he had voraciously collected in life. “The book of Hyth tells us, ‘Before the gates of Hell, the vain doth bow, the foolhardy doth flee and the hopeful doth despair.’” Suth quoted.

Luther snarled, “You forever speak in riddles Suth.”

Damien Suth laughed the hideous laugh of the damned and said, “There is no riddle, Luther. You loathe and envy your master, That much is plain. Still, you fear him, and you fear the very power that death has brought you. “

“I fear nothing!”

Suth smirked. “You fear the Hell that follows death, for you know the wretchedness of our existence ... and Hell promises to be worse yet. The living can’t fully appreciate the measure of an eternity of misery ... but we can.”

Luther Rielly replied, “I don’t need your philosophy, Suth. You’re wasting my time.”

The Deathmaster muttered, “Time—plentiful amounts of time—is indeed the only thing you do have, Luther.”

Cardinal Finn, forever the politician, brought his hands together in a prayerful

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

posture and said, “Truly ... words to remember, Luther. So, why did you bring us here, Deathmaster?”

Deathmaster Ekong replied, “I’ve given orders to continue the march eastward. Tonight we four will break off from the army and head north where we will meet with our new allies.”

Finn choked on the words, “Alone? Set off without the army?” He was so startled his miter almost fell off his hairy skull. He caught the tall hat with one bony hand and steadied it back in place.

Utu Ekong said, “Is your hearing gone as well as your flesh? We set off alone ... to meet allies.”

Damien said, “What allies do the dead have?”

Utu answered, “We have allies ... new allies ... among the living. I’ll tell you more, on the road. For now, make ready.” The Deathmaster hoisted up his scythe and marched away from the gathering.

Damien Suth would not make any trip without his books, so he hurried off to make preparations. Luther Rielly needed only his horse, but as he made his way for the skeletal beast; a gentle arm came about him. It was Cardinal Finn.

“Luther,” Finn said with oily sweetness. “I just want you to know that if times get tough ... you have a friend.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Luther Rielly looked at Finn’s fingers of bone resting on his arm and then at Finn’s skull. “I’ll – uh – keep that in mind, Finn.”

Finn’s tone was nice—almost too nice. “All great warriors need a sponsor.”

Luther looked at the dead priest. “I don’t quite follow you ... “

“Just remember....” And with that Finn peeled away into the darkness.

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Four

At Philipe's command, the humans had prepared an army to invade the elfin lands. The Sinepaxian force was composed of many poor unmounted nobles as well as a large contingent of the famed Sinepaxian archers. In addition, many of the richer nobles arrived on fine chargers armed with lances and swords. However, even the finest of these chargers could not match the great steeds of the Legion of Justice. Finally, to this almost irresistible force, was added an army of orcs.

Many orcs, accustomed to fighting in the hot canyons of Orcroft where armor is more of a hindrance than an aid, wore little more than a tattered cloth to feign some modicum of modesty. They were a loud and boisterous lot given to recreational fighting and hard drinking. The stern and better-disciplined Legion of Death orcs watched with quiet amusement as the orcs in the camps wrestled and gambled and argued.

However, while the orcs were rough on all edges, they were not a mean-spirited lot, and they got along famously with the rough and tumble Sinepaxian nobles. Sinepaxian nobles, especially the poorer ones, were generally close to the land and hard working. In fact, most Sinepaxian nobles were noble in but one respect—they owned land. Indeed, most of the foot-knights (not unlike Rogelio Cortiz) spent time in their own fields from time to time, just like the serfs

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Though some folk scarcely believe it now, there was a time when orc and human were enemies. Before orcs guffawed in human pubs and a time before humans traded grain for orc pottery, there was a time, when the charge of orcs was met with steel rather than a rallying cry of human allies. There was a time before; when humans and orcs were bitter enemies who didn't understand or tolerate the finite differences between these two peoples.

In those days, Philippe's father Peppin was a great warrior. Under the tutelage of his spiritual leader, he persecuted elves and orcs alike with a single-minded, religious fervor. Peppin was not always victorious, but he always fought with savage determination and bitter resolve. He never passed up the opportunity to pursue a fleeing foe and he gained a reputation that put fear in the elfin heart and respect in his orc opponents.

Peppin's mentor was a powerful ecclesiastic and politician—a man who moved in circles that included the far away emperor, the pope and the highest officials in various churches of Lharna. His name, Cardinal Finn, was known and feared widely. Peppin quickly learned that when he followed Finn's advice, good things befell him. Through political adroitness and a penchant for unlikely luck, Finn managed to rocket through the ranks of the Church and amass a fortune in benefices and other land holdings. Unlike the other cardinals, Finn was not known for his merciful virtues. Finn had gained fame and fortune by helping Peppin crush orc guerillas in his lands. Finn promptly and proudly beheaded all orc captives. Their impaled skulls decorated the iron spikes that topped the walls

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

around his palace.

Cardinal Finn ingratiated himself to Peppin, and advised him on all matters political. Cold and precise, Finn was a master politician whose every move was calculated to increase his influence and prestige.

By all accounts, Finn was a ruthless man, who demanded the strictest adherence to the letter of the law. Finn cared not a whit for the spirit of the law. “Without our laws,” he was fond of saying, “we are nothing more than savage orcs.”

His love of the law, was perhaps a result of his litigious nature and he was quick to settle any scores in court. His preferred venue of legal action was a court in which he played both the plaintiff and the judge. As one might imagine, it was an unusual day that he did not succeed in court. Of course, on those rare occasions in which his claim was too bald faced to stand even in his own court, Finn’s opponent soon met with a sudden, tragic accident. Finn would point to this “divine intervention” as proof of his righteousness. Righteous or not, he eventually had no need to take anyone to court—as his enemies realized: resisting Finn was utterly futile.

After a long tenure in the College of Cardinals, Finn watched as the beloved Pope Chaste III was enfermed with pneumonia. Finn called a special session of the College of Cardinals, to judge the fitness of Pope Chaste and (more importantly in Finn’s eyes) to elect a new pope.

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Though Chaste was beloved, Finn's case was brilliant. His arguments were often so convoluted but powerful that his opponents merely shrugged and sat dumbfounded after he spoke. Yet just as Finn was about to make his last grab at Christendom's most influential position, one of Finn's closest allies betrayed Finn and revealed the truth behind Finn's gleaming palace.

It was early morning and Finn was freshly scrubbed with rosy cheeks and a big smile. He was riding high from his series of dazzling successes in the debate halls. He marched briskly up the steps and into the hallowed halls of the College of Cardinals, waving to everyone he saw and bowing his red-capped head respectfully.

But as he walked up the steps, something struck him as odd. His stride, long and prideful on the approach, staggered short as he came to the entry hall, as he noticed that everyone seemed to be avoiding his gaze. He stopped in the hall and put his hands on his hips, but young clerics hustled past him without a word. Finn's eyes fixed angrily on the polished cherry doors that lay before him and he gathered himself for a charge into the great hall to see what all this was about.

But before he moved, the doors opened. A pair of cardinals in scarlet had opened the doors for Finn. "What is the meaning of this?" Finn said, as he stamped forward.

As he entered the room, every cardinal rose to their feet, eyes fixed on Finn. He stepped forward slowly, and thought, *Did they meet here early to elect me pope?*

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Then out onto the floor of the assembly limped Pope Chaste. Leaning heavily on his cane Chaste's eyes cried without shedding a tear. "Oh, Finn." He sighed, and shook his head in pity.

Finn's body stiffened and a bead of sweat rose on his forehead.

Pope Chaste motioned to a hidden figure. "Com'on then."

Father Stanislaw Maczerowski stepped meekly forward. His eyes were thrown down and his hands fidgeted nervously with the rope about his dusty woolen robe.

The color suddenly and quickly left Finn's face as a stack of notes and papers slipped from his hands. As the papers slowly settled around him, Finn's voice was now weak and scratchy. "W-what is the meaning of this?"

For years Maczerowski had lived in terror, knowing what a monster like Finn could do to one who betrayed him. But as much as Maczerowski feared Finn, he more greatly feared an eternity in Hell for his silence. He looked up at Finn for just a second—and in that instant, Finn could see that Maczerowski had cracked. No doubt, all the Cardinals had already heard the tales of babies (orc and human both) sacrificed to demons and forbidden gods; tales of bloody rites and sex rituals led by the esteemed Cardinal Finn on the hallowed manor at Finn's favored estate. The silence was thick and heavy—almost suffocating. Every eye fell upon Finn. Finn looked at Maczerowski squarely, mustering every ounce of

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

intimidation he could. “What lies has this fool told?”

“It is my great dishonor to say”—Lord Peppin stepped forward wearing fine platemail—“that he has spoke...” Peppin’s voice dropped to a near whisper, “no lies.” Philipe’s father Peppin looked down in shame.

Finn pointed a finger angrily at Peppin. “What’s this! A layman in the Hall of Cardinals! Sacrilege! Armor and sword are forbidden HERE!” He spat as he screamed, “You are all blasphemers! I cast you all out in the name of the LAW!”

Chaste shook his head. “Poor, poor, Finn.”

Peppin’s eyes misted as he handed a cardinal his sword. A tear rolled down his cheek as he started to loosen his armor. “Just ... see to it that my son is raised right.”

Finn’s body suddenly tightened up and he spun to exit. Papal guards with halberds blocked the way. He looked down at Chaste and Maczerowski and then his eyes reached up at the domed ceiling and the window at the highest point in the dome.

He pulled a knife from his robes and charged at a throng of the elder Cardinals. “Aaaaaaaah!!!”

One of the Cardinals stood his ground, but Finn slashed at him and pushed past him into an adjoining room. Finn slammed the door shut and locked it behind

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

him. With his back against the door he let the bloody knife clatter to the floor and he paused to catch his breath. There were no exits from this room, but there was a desk and a few candles. He hurriedly knocked the papers off the desk and then knelt before the table to consecrate this as his unholy altar.

Chaste's feeble voice was barely audible outside the door. Chaste mumbled something about contrition and forgiveness, but then Peppin's voice burst through loud and clear. "Open the door Finn, NOW!"

Peppin turned to Chaste. "We've got to get this door open quickly. There is absolutely no telling what he's capable of."

Chaste motioned to the guards who immediately took their halberds to the door. As the thick wooden door splintered and gave way there sat Finn, bathed in sweat and kneeling before a hastily constructed shrine. Though Chaste was feeble, but his mind was not. He commanded, "Apprehend him."

Guards immediately raced forward, but Finn just as quickly lifted up and out of their reach. The cardinals gasped at the grinning Finn. The guards shook their halberds impotently, but Finn just grinned as he flew out the door and into the assembly room. The assembled mass was powerless to stop him. Peppin grabbed his sword away from a slack-jawed cardinal, unsheathed the blade and flung it end-over-end at Finn. The steel caught Finn's scarlet robe, tearing part of it away. Finn was cut, but not badly.

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Finn laughed. “Not today, soldier boy. Today you will die, but not I.”

Father Maczerowski screamed out, “Don’t let him get away!”

Finn smiled. “Too late.”

Finn flew out the door, raining a trail of blood down the hall as he exited. Peppin was determined not to let Finn escape and quickly gathered up his men to track Finn down. Following the trail of fresh blood, they soon came to a nearby inn, only to discover that Finn had again locked himself in a room. The guards pounded at the door with their halberds but the door resisted all blows with an unnatural strength.

Peppin backed up and clenched his teeth. “Burn it.”

The innkeeper cried out, but a pair of guards restrained him and wrestled the innkeeper from his business. With shouts and waving arms, several guards quickly emptied the inn of its guests and staff and then almost immediately, the guards started torching the building at every corner. As the confusion whirled around them, Peppin looked calmly at Maczerowski. “What is the punishment for conspiring with witches?”

Maczerowski looked deep into Peppin’s eyes. “Death by fire.”

Flames were already dancing behind the priest, when Peppin nodded.

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

A guard holding a scarf across his mouth coughed and then issued a muffled shout, "Let's go!"

But Peppin and Maczerowski did not leave. They got down on their knees and began to pray. The guard coughed loudly and shouted, "Com'on!"

But Peppin and Maczerowski's eyes were closed and their hands were clasped. The guards' eyes were watery and stinging with smoke. Even through the scarf he could barely breath without coughing, but Peppin and Maczerowski looked serene and peaceful. A flaming timber dropped across the center of the room and the guard ran from the building.

The building burned quickly and the flames rose high, but remain confined to the makeshift witches stake. The building collapsed upon itself, and only one timber at the center of the building remained standing when the ashes of the inn lay smoldering. The priests pitched holy water onto the site from a dozen thurbiles and as they chanted, the soldiers recovered the blanched and baked bones of Maczerowski and Peppin ... but the bones of Finn were never found.

Not long after that Chaste recovered from his illness, and though he ever after walked with a cane, his mind remained agile. Chaste was greatly troubled by what he had witnessed that day. He had been receiving scattered reports of witches in the countryside, but in the past he had scoffed them all off. Each day it seemed the number of tales grew along with the veracity of the sources.

Particularly disconcerting to Chaste was the story of a young priest named Father

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Nimenko who was wandering the countryside “performing miracles”.

A few years (or even a few weeks) ago Chaste would have dismissed this as idle chatter. He never was one to support witch-hunts and he always left the “miracle workers” to their own designs in the knowledge that they soon went quietly away. But something told him there was more to this. He put no stock in omens or any prophecy not found in the Bible, but this time he had a hunch and he had come to trust his old bones.

The person he approached first was the Chief Rabbi of the Jewish Congregation known as “Ezorim Chadashim”—a Hebrew phrase meaning “new frontiers”. (No doubt chosen by the Jews of Lharna to commemorate the chance for a new beginning that the Androclism had meant to them.) Not long after the Androclism, a rabbi and his twelve sons had made it their mission to establish a temple for Torah study on Lharna. Even today, that rabbi’s descendants, the *Ezorim Chadashim*, remained confident that in this new and unfamiliar place, a soul was a soul and the ancient teachings would remain relevant.

Over the years, the Pope and the Chief Rabbi had rarely seen eye to eye on many matters. Moreover, most people found the Chief Rabbi to be utterly lacking in social graces, and his tireless campaign for a Jewish homeland often put him at odds with his colleagues on the Inter-Faith Religious Council of Novaroma. In spite of this, Chaste had to admit that the Rabbi was one of the foremost theologians among the Council. Moreover, if there was one thing that could be said for the man, it was that he was brutally honest. Chaste took a moment to fix

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

his vestments, and, taking a deep breath, knocked on the Chief Rabbi's door.

Rabbi Moshe Kanterwitz had a big smile when he opened the door to his office for Pope Chaste. Almost twenty years Chaste's junior, Kanterwitz was still in his early fifties back then. Like his father before him, Kanterwitz was stout robust man with a graying black beard that framed plump red cheeks. He had warm dark-brown eyes, the corners of which were wrinkled from a life of laughter—or tears (or perhaps both in equal measures). As he held a hand forward and motioned to Chaste, the pope took notice of the fringes of Moshe's prayer shawl poking out from under the rabbi's vest.

Chaste nodded and gazed into the rabbi's office—a hopelessly cluttered room with a single window and an abundance of fine wood paneling. For a second Chaste stood there, lost in thought. His eyes fixed on a box of unlit menorah candles lying unceremoniously on a table.

“Ah, Father, to what do I owe this honor?” asked the Rabbi.

“Rabbi, we need to talk.”

“This much I figured, or you wouldn't be here” Kanterwitz spoke, eyeing the Pope suspiciously but trying not to be a poor host. “Sit, sit, please,” He said, motioning to a chair and settling in behind his desk. “You caught me in the middle of lunch, I hope you don't mind.” He opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a glass jar filled with pickled onions. In a single motion he opened the jar and held

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

it towards Chaste. "Would you like one?"

The vinegary smell of pickled onions wafted up towards the pope but Chaste shook his head. He stifled a swoon as he wondered how anybody could eat an embalmed onion. Chaste's face stiffened to a weak smile. "No thanks, I've not had much appetite since my illness."

"Hmmm, well it's no wonder you were so sick. You always were as thin as rail. Come, I'll fix you a little something."

Chaste blinked and shrugged limply "Really, it's..."

But Kanterwitz continued, cutting him off, as he opened another drawer. "Let's see now, I have some wonderful bread, some smoked meats, and...oh," the Rabbi paused and lowered his voice as if he were about to reveal the location of a hidden treasure, "I also have some excellent pickled herring, the really good kind...we got it from the reavers."

Appetite or no, Chaste had no choice but to marvel at the Rabbi Kanterwitz's determination. He smiled to himself, as he remembered something someone had told him about Kanterwitz. *Kanterwitz believes that everyone has a right to know his opinion on everything!* Chaste reluctantly, took a pickled herring and settled into the chair across from the rabbi.

Holding his own pickle up before him, Kanterwitz began to recite: "Blessed is God, King of the Universe, who Created the Heavens, the Earth and Lharna, and

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

who grants us good food and good company wherever he places us."

"Amen", Chaste replied, and the two men began to eat. Seeing the Pope willing to eat with him put Kanterwitz' mind at ease. "So tell me, what is it that can't wait for the counsel meeting?"

"Well, you no doubt have heard all about the occurrence with Finn." Chaste's voice was suddenly distant and his eyes looked away from Kanterwitz. "Such a pity, such a waste. I'd known the man for so many years." Chaste shook his head negatively. "I wish I had not been so blind. I wish I had done more to help him." He shook himself and continued, speaking directly to the Rabbi, "As if that were not enough, lately I have been getting reports of witches from all the dioceses far and wide. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes..."

Kanterwitz swallowed and nodded. "Indeed. I get the same reports. Do I assume correctly that you now have some plan for what to do about it?"

"I really don't know. I've always believed that witch-hunts do more harm than good, but I'm not sure we should sit idle. Perhaps the time has come to go back to the old ways of the Church? I need to know where you stand. "

Kanterwitz lifted up his *kippa* to scratch a balding spot on the top of his head.

"The old ways." he said, with sadness in his voice. "You know, Father, when the Androclism first brought humanity to this place there were those who saw fit to blame the Jews for it."

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

“That was so long ago, Rabbi,” Chaste assured him.

“Nevertheless, “ the Rabbi continued, “when you speak of the old ways it sends chills down my spine. “

Chaste nodded. “We’ve faced a lot in this land since the Androclism. We’ve survived, prospered even, by working together—Jew, Christian, Hindu, Moslem—each man helping his neighbor like a brother. I can assure you, too much has happened for people to begin another pogrom. It won’t happen ... not on Lharna. We’ve all been through too much together Moshe.”

Kanterwitz was unaccustomed to acquaintances calling him by his first name, but right now, he welcomed the usage of his first name. “I hope you’re right.” The Rabbi agreed, although mostly because he wished to steer the conversation away from such an obviously uncomfortable subject for his guest.

The pope still held half a herring in his hand. He laid his cane against the rabbi’s desk and then sat back and crossed his legs. Chaste clapped one hand to his head and said, “Tell me, Rabbi, what do you think we should do with these ... witches?”

The Rabbi considered, “There are those among my congregation—they call themselves the ‘New Macabees’. They want to ride out and find the so-called witches and bring them to justice...to the sword!” The Rabbi emphasized the last word as he spoke, shaking his fist in the air in parody of a sword fight. “Such ideas frighten me, Guiseppe. I think to seek them out, ultimately, is to become

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

involved in their world, and to know such temptations and dangers as you and I could hardly imagine...and perhaps could not resist!”

Chaste settled back and exhaled. His tired blue eyes fixed on Kanterwitz.

Kanterwitz touched his fingertips before his face and exhaled audibly. “They have chosen an easy path to power, and we must admit, that is more seductive than what we can offer to our congregations. But you and I both know that they lack true understanding of the responsibility that comes with such power, their duty to their fellow men. I think this will be their undoing.”

“But can we afford to wait for that, Rabbi? I hear tales daily of faith healers and angel sightings ... and that frightens me—even more than the witches. I fear the thaumaturges, and the wonders with which they claim to be able to perform. It’s possible that all this might be misleading good, decent people.”

The Rabbi considered this. Leaning back in his chair, he began to think out loud, “Withstanding temptation. Guiding our congregations so that they might make the right moral choices...this is surely a righteous path. You know, I’ve often wondered why God sent us all to Lharna in the first place. What test did he have in mind for us—”

Chaste interrupted, “Yes, yes, but the question before us Rabbi, is what are we to *do right now?*”

Kanterwitz focused his deep black eyes on the pope and smiled. “Do? We will do

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

what we have always done. We will *pray*...for miracles of our own! You must understand our perspective on these things. We believe that all things—ALL things—come from God. I know that is not your way of looking at things. But to my people there is no devil, no 'Satan'. Everything is the hand of God, and everything is a test of our will. In the end we are all accountable for our choices.”

Chaste continued, “It’s going to be hard Rabbi. There are so few who can really support the idea of an interfaith miracle. Indeed, I have to admit that I cannot envision a true miracle being granted to one who has not accepted Christ as his savior.”

“That's a tough one, Holy Father.” Moshe answered. “I think we have no choice but to believe that there is no such thing as a ‘Christian miracle’ or a ‘Jewish miracle’. If God sees fit to intervene directly in the affairs of man then he must have his reasons. Who are we to question those reasons? God has seen fit to give man the choice between calling for hexxes and praying for his miracles. As always, it is man who has the ultimate choice. And it is man who will be judged by the choices he makes— not in this world, but in the next world, and for all of eternity.”

The Pope thought about this and replied, “In the end, I think this must be our guiding principal. How we deal with this is as much about how we deal with our fellow man as anything else...”

“I agree. We must both accept that there are many paths to God.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Chaste touched his hands together. He did not agree with these words, but he did not interrupt or contradict the rabbi.

Kanterwitz continued without pause, “ In the end, what matters is what we are praying for, not how we choose to pray. I cannot say that I know why God has chosen to focus his attention so squarely on Lharna. But it seems clear that whatever his reasons our destinies, and the destinies of all who would call upon His power to help their fellow man, are inexorably linked here, regardless of what face we see in our mind’s eye when we think of the Almighty.” The Rabbi added.

All that was over twenty years ago. With each passing day, the Firmament and all the other Inner Planes slowly moved along their orbits of the Astral Plane. The motion of the Inner Planes pulverizes matter and disintegrates anything caught between dimensions. Occasionally the terrible force of realities grinding against realities causes a rift—or tear—in a dimension. Usually rifts are microfine and they seal themselves in a short time. Probability dictates that rifts most often occur in remote and empty space ... far removed from the closest galaxies. But sometimes, a rift opens on a habitable world ... like Lharna. And though Chaste and Kanterwitz could not suspect it, with each passing day the rift opened wider, and as it did, tales of miracles, hexxes and wonders became more and more common. Cosmic forces were set into motion.

After Peppin’s death, Philippe had spent the better part of his life trying to atone for his father’s sins, and at the same time he had to contend with the impressive warrior’s reputation his father had left behind. Vanity was a sin, but perhaps

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Philipe was coming to fight the same elves who had fought his father. Perhaps he could at last put the ghost of his father to rest, perhaps he would meet those brave warriors Penthor and Leng who his father had met in battle. Though Philipe was cloistered as a clergyman, he was marching off to war. His conscience troubled him though, for in his heart he believed that he only carried God's blessing in the pursuit of a just war. If he led his army in pride or for vengeance, the army could not expect victory.

Together with Rogelio Cortiz and King Woil of Orcroft, he had mustered a powerful force to attack the High Elves in their moment of weakness. In his heart he had no taste for treachery of this kind, but he had come to fear and respect the Wood Elves and High Elves who lived north of Sinepaxia. He knew that if the humans showed weakness, the elves would surely attack Sinepaxia. Like it or not, the elves were the enemies of Sinepaxia, so Philipe felt compelled to strike at their moment of vulnerability. *Perhaps.*

The sun was low in the sky, casting long shadows across the camp that his army had pitched the night before. The camp was just starting to awaken and Philipe was enjoying a bit of coffee—a strange and compelling drink from a far away land. He had acquired the coffee as a peace offering from a reaver who wanted to establish trade with Sinepaxia. Philipe was standing in silence beside Rogelio Cortiz, a female warrior named Iyudi and a renowned hero named Jacob Chiram when L'Darrow the Exorcist approached them.

L'Darrow's gold-flecked armor was dazzling in the morning light. On his

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

approach, he removed his great winged helmet and bowed before Lord Philippe. L'Darrow's dark chocolate skin looked smooth in the morning sun and the short, knotted locks on the top of his head sprang forth in all directions. L'Darrow's voice was deep, almost guttural, as he said, "I need to speak with you, sire"

Philippe raised an eyebrow. "Speak."

"I meant ... privately."

Philippe looked at Iyudi and Rogelio. "Is this a personal matter, L'Darrow?"

"No, sire. I can't say that it is."

Philippe put his hands on his hips. "Is this a matter that concerns the army?"

L'Darrow nodded. "Probably."

"Then speak."

L'Darrow said, "I think ... I had a vision. A terrible vision ... but I'm not sure what it meant or if it was real."

Rogelio growled, "Visions are for dead men."

Iyudi had a square jaw that was neither beautiful nor unattractive. Philippe had learned to value her sword and her advice. "L'Darrow is close to God. I say we hear him out."

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Jacob had the beginnings of a thick black beard and at either cheek hung a long curling lock of hair he called a payot. As a New Macabee he put Jewish affairs before human affairs, but as a human he put human affairs before the affairs of all others. Famed for his stubbornness as much as for his sword, he cared not what others thought of him or his cause. “It can’t hurt.”

Philippe rested his hand on the pommel of his sword. “Then speak, L’Darrow.”

L’Darrow looked down at the campfire and his eyes became a little unfocused. The nostrils in his broad flat nose flared—causing his gold nose-ring to shake rhythmically. “I’m not sure where to begin. It was terrible. We were ambushed. They seemed to be everywhere. Many good men were struck down.” He looked at Jacob and winced. “You died. Impaled on a great spear and then quartered by a dragon.”

Jacob’s head cocked slightly.

L’Darrow looked away. “And there was magic—terrible magic. Even the orcs broke and ran. I was nearly trampled by Legion of Death troops as they fled the field of battle. Everything soon degenerated into a mad melee ... a free-for-all.”

As Philippe slowly rubbed the shaved spot atop his head, Rogelio Cortiz said, “I don’t have time for idle chat. When you’re ready to march, call me. I’ll be sharpening my blade.” And without another word he marched away.

Iyudi, who had little regard for Rogelio anywhere but on the battlefield,

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

remarked, "Typical."

The Macabee slowly drew his blade and scooped a whetstone from his belt pouch. "Well, it would seem that I have the most to lose if we read this omen wrong. It's the old trap. Do we encounter fate by avoiding it? Or can we avoid it at all? Or is this just dream, and nothing more?"

Iyudi set her square jaw defiantly. "Were it not L'Darrow the Exorcist ... I'd not take this so seriously. But I do see two keys in his dream: magic and ambush."

As Jacob often did when he was pondering, he ran his blade across a whetstone. "Yes, two elements we often associate with elves." As he studied his blade as he sharpened it.

Philippe inhaled and held his breath for a second. Exhaling deeply he put his hands on his hips and wondered aloud, "Perhaps this all a trap? We're moving a massive force, and based on what? The word of a some goblins?"

"What will we lose," Iyudi said, "if we ask Woil's orcs to hold, while we send some scouts into Elsylvania?"

"Maybe nothing. Maybe the element of surprise." Philippe replied.

Jacob said, "Well, if we're going to try to change things ... let's change them. I'll go ahead with the scouting parties. I might get killed, but at least L'Darrow won't have to watch me die!" Jacob bellowed, with the carefree laugh of those who

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

don't know how close they are to their destiny. L'Darrow looked up from his trance but he could not smile back at Jacob.

Philippe agreed. "Do as you wish Jacob. Just don't go too far ahead and don't let your Macabees start a fight they can't finish. If you see trouble, get back to the main armies as soon as possible."

Jacob caught the reflection of his left eye and a side lock on his blade.

"Understood."

The next morning Jacob and his scouts went ahead of the army. Jacob was soon out of sight of the forward guard, and days passed as the orc and human armies pressed on. The soldiers were anxious as they crossed the border between elfin lands and human lands. Neither man nor orc was particularly talkative.

L'Darrow's vision of betrayal and ambush was still in Philippe's mind, but he had forbidden his officers to speak of it for fear it might sap morale. But, even without talk of the vision, the armies were nervous, for the veterans warned of the elfin ability to move an army through the most impassible forest.

Days passed though, and they did not encounter a single elf. In fact, even the forest itself seemed quiet ... and while some took this as a sign that an ambush was not forthcoming, others claimed this itself was a bad omen of things to come. Hesitantly, blindly, they moved forward without word from Jacob.

Finally, on a quiet afternoon five days after his departure Jacob swiftly

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

approached the army. As he approached, Philipe shouted a greeting, “What news?” trying hard to hide his anxiety,

Jacob dismounted in one swift movement and landed between Woil and Philipe.
“The news is good.”

Philipe breathed a sigh of relief as Woil barked, “Out with it then!”

“The garrison appears to be lightly manned and unsuspecting.” Jacob said.

With a big toothy smile, Woil nodded abruptly as he waved his hand. “Good, then let’s move out.”

Philipe’s posture noticeably shifted as he had thrown the weight of his father’s armor off his back. “Good work, Jacob.”

Soon, they came upon the garrison. Philipe’s first impulse was to pull up short and examine the situation but Woil urged a fierce and reckless advance. When Rogelio seconded the motion, the human and orc armies crashed upon the castle.

The victory was surprisingly swift and completely overwhelming. Philipe was mightily relieved, as was Jacob, whose death L’Darrow had predicted. There was much feasting and drinking that night, and L’Darrow sat at the table alongside Jacob. L’Darrow pushed a lock of hair out of his dark and brooding face and said, “Never have I been so happy to be wrong.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Jacob slapped L'Darrow on the back and joked, "Think nothing of it."

Almost at that moment, scouts came charging into the feasting hall. The scout warned, "Another army approaches from the north."

"Let them come. We hold the castle now." Woil laughed.

Through a mouthful of food, Rogelio Cortiz spoke with a deep low tone, "I never figured the elves as fools though, why would they attack?"

But Philippe only gritted his teeth. When at last he could speak, he was deathly serious. "Man the walls."

Five

The Hill Giant, Tsarly Gnash and his troll companions tore into the bags and provisions loaded onto Ely Ulrich's packhorse. Ungah Laysum said, "This is pretty good stuff."

Eosos, the leader of the troll band, snatched up a piece of cheese with one hand and pulled the captive Gavril off the packhorse with the other. Gavril Gorin flopped onto the ground with a groan. His broken arm, though splinted and well bandaged, still was not fully healed. "Why aren't you walking?" Eosos asked, "Shouldn't the prisoner walk and the barbarian ride?"

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Gavril rolled over, but Ely answered. "He refused to walk." Ely's arms were held securely by a pair of trolls.

Eosos said, "Oh he'll walk. Or I'll snap his legs to match that broken arm."

Eosos grinned and looked at Ungah and the other trolls. "Tonight's good eats. Been too long since we had a good horse for dinner."

Tsarly Gnash stamped and danced. "Horsey, horsey, horsey!"

That night, the trolls sat around the fire gorging themselves on the horse's carcass. Ely and Gavril were tied back to back. While they had been given nothing to eat, they were allowed plenty of water. Ungah elbowed Eosos, "What'll we do with them?"

Eosos picked at his immense nose. "We could feed 'em to Tsarly. He'll eat anything ..." Eosos glanced at the giant who was sleeping soundly with his hands crossed on his big belly. The giant had a peaceful smile on his face. Eosos grinned. "Kinda makes you wanna kick him."

Ungah glanced at the peaceful sleeper. "Yeah."

"Or," Eosos considered aloud, "We could sell them as slaves."

Ungah nodded. "The goblins might pay more for the barbarian, seeing as how they could torture him."

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

“Then again, we could ransom them back to their loved ones.”

At this Gavril clenched his teeth and spoke just loud enough for Ely to hear “Of course, *I* have no loved ones.”

Ungah shook his head, “Way too much work.”

Eosos nodded in agreement. “Let’s make for the goblin trading post at the Forks. It’s not too long a hike. We’ll see what kind of deal they can work us. If they won’t give us a reasonable price ... we’ll just feed ‘em to Tsarly.”

The Forks was almost a four-day march as the troll moves, and Eosos and company made good time as they moved north and west through the hills toward the goblin camp. Ely and Gavril found themselves jogging to keep up with the long strides of the trolls. It was a grueling pace that became even more difficult as they reached the rockslides at the farthest reaches of northwestern Sinepaxia.

Although the road wound along a carefully chosen route through boulders and hills, the trolls cut a direct route, ignoring the roads. They made their way up and down hills and through the groves of twisted trees that dared to grow in the fields of rocks. For the trolls and the giant it made perfect sense to bypass the twisting road and bound up and down a boulder-strewn hillside. For one thing, in these lands, the roads were dangerous to trolls. Barbarians, brigands and even Sinepaxian rangers (who were on the look-out for brigands, barbarians and trolls) frequented the roads. For another, with their long legs and thick hides, the

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

rough terrain presented no obstacle to them, while the road seemed a perplexingly 'round-a-bout way of getting between two points.

But it was a miserable route for Ely and Gavril, who found themselves scrambling from rock to rock. Again and again, they cut and scraped themselves on the lichen-covered boulders. Gavril imagined snakes and worse hiding behind every rock. His broken arm was not even close to healing, and he felt it pounding with each dreaded footfall. The trolls refused to help at all, so Ely did his best to help Gavril along. Ely told Gavril, "I'm sorry, *noh-yerukka*. I never meant you to suffer like this."

Gavril shook his head, "My brother is the one who suffered. I'll be alright." At first he refused Ely's offers of help, but at last he relented when the trolls shouted their terrible shouts and yelled at the humans to hurry.

Ely hoisted Gavril onto his back to pick his way down a rocky wall taller than a troll. Ely grunted as he said, "I honored your brother as best my people know how."

Gavril's one unbroken arm was locked around Ely's neck. "I should choke you now. Spare me your remorse."

Ely explained, "We only remove the heads of the noblest and the bravest opponents—that way your brother might live with us forever. It is our custom. Besides if you choked me I would pass out and fall from this rock, only to land

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

safely on you.”

Gavril snorted as he clambered off Ely’s shoulder. “Beheading is a savage custom.”

“We are a savage people.” Ely leapt down to the next rock. “You could learn a lot from a savage.”

Gavril replied, “You could learn a lot from civilization.”

“Treachery? Gluttony? Despotism?”

“I suppose these things are unknown in your world?” Gavril asked.

At this one of the troll guards growled, “Hurry it up!”

Ely whispered, “Gavril, I have one favor to request from you.” Gavril took Ely’s hand and the barbarian lowered Gavril to the next boulder. “If we are sold to the goblins ... well ... terrible things may befall me. Goblins hate our people. I will be tortured and humiliated and I shall be killed—that much is certain. I only ask you one favor.”

Gavril looked at the barbarian. “What is it?”

Ely said, “When I am dead, cut my head off. If you can, hide it from the goblins. But most of all, don’t let them dispose of my corpse with my head attached to my body.” Ely hopped down to another rock. “Will you do this for me?”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Gavril nodded, smiled at the thought and spoke without pause. “Aye, barbarian. I’ll do that for you. In fact, given the opportunity I’ll gladly separate your head from your body ... before you are dead.” Gavril huffed and puffed as they clambered along. “Let me ask you this: why? Why did you attack our village?”

Ely shrugged. “Does the caribou ask the wolf why? There was no vengeance in our hearts. There was no malice. The hunter and the farmer nations will forever be in conflict.”

Gavril did not speak for a moment, so Ely continued, “ We sensed weakness so we struck. It is the wolf’s sacred duty to keep the caribou herd strong.”

Gavril and Ely struggled along several rocks and then finally reached the belly of this granite-strewn dale. As they started back up the opposite side of the dale, Gavril was quietly pondering Ely’s words. Somehow, he was finding it harder and harder to hate the barbarian. Almost to himself, he said, “I’m going to avenge my brother by killing you ... you know that?”

Ely scaled a rock half as big as a man, then turned and threw a hand down to help up Gavril. When their hands clasped again, Ely stopped for a second and looked Gavril in the eyes. Ely pulled, “Your spirit must follow your own destiny, as I will surely find mine.”

Ely pulled Gavril up and they moved in silence for sometime before Gavril finally said at full volume, “Maybe barbarians and civilization are forever in conflict.

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Maybe there is no malice. But, you know, barbarian ... one day ... one of our cultures will win. One of our cultures will finally exterminate the other.”

Gavril came up onto the rock and Ely turned his back to climb the next boulder. “Nonsense. Hunter and hunted have lived together forever, and thus it will remain for all time.”

Eosos shouted from at top the hill, “Shaddup your yacking, already! If you didn’t talk so much maybe you’d make better time.”

At the end of the day, the humans were exhausted from a long day of climbing and the fell into a deep sleep while the trolls made merry around the fire, dancing and singing as they finished off the last of Ely’s food stores.

The next morning the trolls awakened Ely and Gavril with a rude kick and the march began again. A short time later the group came upon the hill that overlooked the Forks, so named because at this point the Fench River split in two branches. The Fench was a swiftly flowing river, but at the Forks it slowed into two silt-laden streams that wound their way through the rocky terrain.

“Hello?” Eosos looked down at the goblin outpost and said, “What’s this!” He clenched a fist. “Goblin treachery!”

Eosos squatted behind a boulder and he motioned to the others to do the same. Ungah kicked the backs of Ely and Gavril’s knees causing the humans to also fall to the ground. Ungah moved in a waddling crouch up to Eosos. “What is it?”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Eosos pointed to the tents and goblin traders at the Forks. It was plain to see they were trading with dwarves—the sworn enemy of trolls. The camp’s leader Rigggart was shaking hands with a dwarf and grinning broadly as the pair seemed to be closing a deal.

Ungah gasped, “Dwarves?”

Tsarly sounded a little nervous, “I don’t like dwarves.”

Eosos leaned his back away from the view. “We’re gonna hit ‘em—all of ‘em, goblins and dwarves alike—and we’re gonna hit ‘em hard.”

Ungah shook his head grimly. “Those goblin berserkers sting and them dwarves are tough to hit.”

“I don’t care! We’re gonna do whatever damage we can. Tie the prisoners up.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Six

The story of Lost Bear starts not at the Bay of Tears, but at the River Vodre, far up this great river, almost at its source in the shadow of the Southern Elfin Divide. A pair of barbarian hunters discovered the child when he was about eleven years old. When they found him, he was naked like the beasts, and wailing in sadness. At the edge of the river, Lost Bear was on his knees, pounding the icy water, with tears rolling down his face. The smell of meat and death hung heavy in the mountain air, and the bodies strewn round the child quickly told the tale.

The boy sat beside a massive female bear. The bear was haphazardly slumped into the rocky shallows of the rapid river. In the stones along the bank her blood pooled up around Lost Bear and curled in inky stains. Her head was pulled up onto Lost Bear' thigh, and her eyes looked up at him blankly and serenely. The great beast's pelt was nearly separated from the bear, but Lost Bear did not seem to notice. He was clenching an arrow, and several more pierced the bear's thick hide. The arrow was short, and foreign to the barbarians who found Lost Bear, but the make was not unknown.

The arrows were clearly goblin-crafted, as the nearby corpses attested. Several goblins had been mauled and torn by the bear before she fell to the arrows, but the remaining goblins were savagely beaten by a foe almost as dangerous as the bear. Evidently, the boy had come upon the killers while they were skinning the bear, and he was so filled with rage that he killed them all.

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

The elder of the two men was named Travik Oldstone. Travik called out to the young boy, for he appeared to be a child of their own tribe, but Lost Bear only grunted and raised the arrow in his fist in an awkward threat. The hunters soon realized this was no ordinary child, but rather a child of the wilderness, raised by the now dead bear. With a bit of patience and some skill with the animals, Travik was able to win the trust and confidence of the boy whom they named Lost Bear.

The boy refused to leave the side of the bear until after the hide was removed, and then he would go nowhere without the precious hide. As best Travik and his companion could tell, the bear herself had willed the boy take the hide to remember her. Soon, the skin was fashioned into a great cape, which Lost Bear wore at all times of the night and the day in all weathers.

For many years, Lost Bear did not speak to his adopted tribe members. Though he willingly helped with the chores and the hunting, he avoided all play and interaction with the other children his age. Lost Bear preferred to quietly hum to himself and paid no heed to anyone except Travik. Many began to suspect that Lost Bear was mute or even dumb, but Travik suspected there was more to the boy. When Lost Bear reached the age of sixteen Travik had a fine axe of war crafted. He handed it to the young wild man, "Keep this axe well and it will keep you well, Lost Bear."

Lost Bear nodded. "Thank you, father."

Travik was astonished for a moment and then he began to weep with joy. He

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

grabbed Lost Bear in a big hug and Lost Bear stood limply as the old barbarian cried tears of joy.

Lost Bear said, "Thank you. Soon, this axe will kill many goblins."

And Lost Bear's words came to pass. Travik and his warriors made a raid on a goblin outpost not long after the day of the gift. (Back then the trolls were allied with the goblins.) When the barbarians approached, the trolls threw boulders at them. Lost Bear became so angry that he snatched up a boulder—and much to the amazement of all—threw it *back!*

When he grew into manhood, Lost Bear still spoke very little and rarely enjoyed the company of others. Like most barbarians, Lost Bear had little taste for farming. He never learned a trade and had no interest in commerce. Instead, he made his way by his axe, working as a mercenary without regard for the cause that he fought for. As a mercenary, Lost Bear often worked alongside ogres.

There was little love lost between the ogres and humans. In the war camps, Lost Bear often arm-wrestled the ogres and more often than not, he won. This earned him great respect among the ogres and the one true friend of his life was an ogre named Dourn Daug.

But after many years and many fights, Dourn Daug was killed in battle. Not long after that Lost Bear learned that his own adopted father Travik Oldstone had passed away. More melancholy and solitary than ever, Lost Bear made his way back to his village, where he hastily constructed a dolmen from the largest

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

boulders he could lift and dedicated the site to the memory of Travik. Then without warning, he left the village and disappeared for many years. When he finally returned he went to the village shaman and said, “Why can I not talk to the bears?”

The shaman consulted the omens and replied, “They do not remember you, because you have not yet done what the *Ti-Qorem* sent you to do.”

“What must I do?”

“Meet your destiny.”

Lost Bear thought a moment. “What is my destiny?”

“That I cannot answer. No mortal can answer that question, but you will find the answer written, in the Tome of Paths.” Before Lost Bear could ask, the shaman warned him, “And no mortal may read from the Tome of Paths, as it is guarded by Udelly Dva—the great and terrible two-headed giant who stole it from man long ago.”

Lost Bear replied hastily, “Where is this giant?”

Though the shaman’s words pointed Lost Bear across the breadth of the barbarian lands, and across Elvas Major over the Dorok Mountains to the Haazenhaffen Mountains at the edge of the dwarven nation called Dagmökk, Lost Bear set off immediately. The journey was long and arduous, crossing many

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

climes and terrains, but Lost Bear made the journey. Along the way, he had many adventures too numerous to tell here, but at long last he found the mountain where Udely Dva, the two-headed giant, lived.

Two hounds (not unlike the *izgin* that barbarians use to track enemies and prey) guarded the approach to the two-towered castle where the two-headed giant lived. But Lost Bear carefully and skillfully slipped past their vigilant watch. He approached the towers by night to catch the giant asleep. But, when he entered the giant's chamber, only one head was sleeping. Lost Bear's plan was quickly discovered. The first head roused the second head and the second head called out to Lost Bear: "What mortal dares to climb my mountain?"

Lost Bear replied, "I come to read from the Tome of Paths."

The first head answered, "No mortal may learn their destiny, it's too dangerous."

Lost Bear wrapped himself in his bearskin cape and said, "Will you give me the Book? Or will I strike you both down?"

Both heads of the giant looked down at Lost Bear taking careful note of where he stood. A wicked smile ran across both faces. "I will not stand to face an opponent as unworthy as you. Do you dare approach me?"

Lost Bear grimaced and yelled a mighty yell that shook the overconfidence of the two-headed giant. The giant stood in panic to meet the charge, but Lost Bear suddenly plummeted down—caught in a pit trap on the giant's floor. Both heads

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

of the giant laughed at Lost Bear' rashness, and then quickly slammed the cover of the trap closed, locking Lost Bear in darkness.

There he sat for a long time.

Eventually, he began to wonder if it was a folly to ever try to learn his destiny. In the darkness all alone, he waited. Time passed. He began to wager with the voice in his head, gambling on whether he would first go mad or if he would die of thirst first.

Then without warning, he heard the latch on the trapdoor above him. It clanked in a hurried manner and Lost Bear reached for his axe. The door creaked open a crack and a voice said, "Pssst."

Lost Bear squinted and held his hand up. The light was weak but it hurt his eyes.

Another voice said, "He's dead already, no doubt. Let's be going before—"

The voice repeated, "Are you in there, *gervekkum?*"

The voices waited a second.

"Okay, he's passed already, let's be going—"

Lost Bear growled, "I still live."

The first voice whispered, "Well then, what are you waiting for, *gervekkum?*"

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Com'on then, let's be getting you out of there as quickly as possible."

A rope was tossed down and Lost Bear pulled himself up and out of the pit. His saviors were short of stature, with a ring of whiskers below the chin and no moustaches—they were ... gnomes. The younger gnome (the first voice) was named Ezemiah Zice. "Quickly, quickly. We must away," Ezemiah said.

Ezemiah and his partner scampered from the chamber. Lost Bear was still slightly dazed, but he staggered along behind them as quickly as he could go. They led him out of the castle, past the hounds and back to their homes at the foot of the mountain. There, they fed him and listened to his story. He told them little of his great adventures and his long journey. He barely mentioned his many mercenary battles. Instead, his tale focused on his childhood, and Travik—and more so on the bear whose milk he drank as a babe and whose skin he now wore 'round his shoulders. "I come to read from the Tome of Paths."

"I suppose you're wondering what business it is then that we gnomes have with Udelly Dva?" asked Ezemiah.

Lost Bear wiped the gruel from his beard and looked up.

Ezemiah said, "On the second day of each week, my partner and myself must take tribute from our people to the giant on yonder mount. I have to tell you, that is was at great personal risk to our lives that we rescued you from the cage were you were kept."

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Lost Bear nodded. “Thank you.”

Ezemiah asked, “I’m sure you won’t mind my asking sir, but what is it you’ll do next?”

Lost Bear stood up. The ceiling in the gnome’s abode was a bit low for his oversized frame. He snatched up his axe. “I suppose I’ll kill the giant.”

Ezemiah shook his head. “That’s a fine boast sir, but I have to give you word of caution. That giant has sat on yonder mount for generations and he has laid low many a hero.”

Lost Bear sniffed and then smiled at the little gnome and then tossed him a casual glance. “Then I suppose ... I’ll *try* to kill the giant.”

Ezemiah laughed. “You’re a foolish man—of that there is no doubt, stranger. And when the bards ask me what name they should sing in their tales of your epic deeds, who shall I say vanquished the mighty two-headed giant, Udelly Dva?”

“Lost Bear. Tell them he came seeking his destiny. And one way or another ... he found it.”

Ezemiah smiled. “You’re a brave man indeed Mister Lost Bear.” Ezemiah turned to his gnomish partner. “Fetch the ointment.” With that the other gnome dutifully scampered off to the cabinet. Ezemiah said, “This magical ointment was conjured long ago, by a gnome for the protection of our best warriors.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

The second gnome held up the ointment and said, “Rub this on your body. It will protect you from the giant’s blows.”

Lost Bear took the ointment and looked at it for a second. He then removed his cape and threw the old bearskin over the table.

Ezemiah said, “Wait! This is the last of the ointment. You’ll want to be rubbing this into your own skin.”

Lost Bear looked at the cape and said to Ezemiah, “This will protect?”

Ezemiah nodded. “Aye.”

The bearskin was ragged and a little tattered from years of wear, but Lost Bear rubbed the ointment into the cape and soon it looked healthy and as shiny as the day the old bear was felled by the goblins. He scooped the cape up, threw it around his shoulders and left without another word.

It had been but two days, but he made his way back to the place where the two hounds guarded the road and for the second time, he slipped past them unnoticed, to the twin towers of the two-headed giant. He entered the giant’s chambers and once again, he found but one head was sleeping. The second head roused the first head, but the giant remained seated. Udelly Dva did not recognize Lost Bear because his cape looked so new and luxurious. Udelly Dva challenged Lost Bear, “Come closer that I might smite thee.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Lost Bear grinned wickedly and then screamed a terrible battle cry. In an instant, Udely recognized Lost Bear and he jumped up, startled. “You? How did you get out?”

Lost Bear leapt over the trap door and came closer to the giant. “No talk. Fight.” He raised his axe and took a warrior stance.

One giant head cursed. “Dratted gnomes!”

The other head said, “We’ll kill them all.”

“After we crush this man-thing.”

The giant pounded down at Lost Bear to crush him like an insect. But Lost Bear darted aside and struck a terrible blow on the giant’s hand. When the giant whipped his hand back from the stinging pain, Lost Bear deftly caught a hold of the hand and jumped up onto the giant’s shoulder. Then with mighty precision, he swung a single blow through one of the necks. The head was severed off cleanly and crashed onto the floor. It rolled a bit and then fell into the very pit where Lost Bear had been left for dead.

The remaining head yelled, “Aaaaaaaagh! You’ve cut off my head.” He reached up onto his shoulder and snatched up Lost Bear. Lost Bear squirmed against the grip, and swung his axe at the hand round his waist. Udely Dva tossed Lost Bear onto the ground with all the force he could muster, but Lost Bear landed safely on his bearskin cape. The cape broke his fall. Lost Bear sprang back to his feet and

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

vaulted at the giant to swing his axe again. This time the blow cut across the giant's chest. The giant's knees wobbled and then all strength left them. Udelly Dva crashed lifeless onto the chamber floor.

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Seven

“Croal!” General Garn Ironflow smiled broadly at the hero of the Mokk. Garn was a middle-aged dwarf with ebony skin and rich brown eyes. Garn set down his visored helm and removed a gauntlet as he threw his hand out at Croal.

Croal had known Garn long before Istlur came to power, before Croal’s days in the Folksmakt, but Croal ignored Garn’s outstretched handshake offering. Croal stepped into the center of the dwarven command tent and threw his hands on his hips and said, “The stones in the cairn ring?!” Croal’s tone was commanding, and his blue eyes were burning in the low light in the tent.

Garn looked at Croal with a hint of confusion and he instinctively turned to Vram Cragtop, the Stautmeister. Vram Cragtop was younger than both Croal and Garn, and his beard lacked their luster and length. Young though he was, Vram’s beard was silvery white. Vram’s pale and soft milky white skin contrasted against the wine-colored elfin chaise where Vram lounged lazily. Vram was motionless, but his eye’s passed slowly from Garn to Croal and then back to the tent flap. Vram spoke with the slow and haughty cadence of a Haazenhaffen aristocrat, “Where is Otten?”

Garn said to Croal, “What’s the matter?”

Croal spoke directly to Vram. “Those elfin stones in the cairn ring are not going anywhere.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Vram studied the so-called hero of the Mokk for a moment. “You know Croal, I’m the first to admit that I’ve never studied Bihhavian etiquette—so I don’t know exactly how such things are settled under your mountain. But,” Vram turned his eyes slowly to meet the gaze of Croal, “in the mountains of my grandfather’s grandfathers, we give our superiors respect.” Vram held his palms skyward and said to Garn, “To be heard ... one must hear.”

Croal stood unflinching. Garn cast his brown eyes down uneasily as the silence grew.

Vram carefully arranged the stouttrooper’s clasp in hanging in his beard and said, “Someone did tell Otten to be here?”

Garn nodded without looking up. “Yes, Stautmeister.”

Croal said to Vram, “You might as well kill me as kill my honor.”

Vram chuckled. “Yes, yes, of course, Croal. Without honor we are nothing.”

Vram rolled up out of the chair and made his way toward the store of liquors that had been stockpiled in this tent. He reached first for a dwarven blueberry schnapps, but then thought again and reached for a flask of *jhirv*—an elfin spirit made from horse’s milk. Although it was curdy, the *jhirv* was nearly as white as Vram’s beard. Vram poured the pungent drink into a dwarven beer mug and then sniffed. With but a whiff, he recoiled from the odor, saying to Garn and Croal, “Strange peoples and strange customs. One day there will be only one

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

people and only dwarven customs.”

Vram lifted the mug up toward Garn and Croal. “To Bigbeard and Istlur—and the continued successes of the armies of Dagmökk.” Vram held the cup to his lips, took a generous drink and then grimaced as he squeezed the burning liquid down. He held the mug up and smacked his lips as he studied the aftertaste.

“Hmmm? Not bad.”

Suddenly Otten Gurstkiene, the dwarven warlock, came barreling into the tent. He was huffing and puffing, and beads of sweat were gathered on his ruddy face. Gurstkiene tipped his head reverently, “Pardon, Stautmeister.”

Vram shook the mug rhythmically, swirling the curds floating the *jhirv*. “I’m glad you made it, on time Otten, as we are having guests tonight.”

Croal clasped his hands in front of him and looked down at the ground. He could see that unless he played the Stautmeister’s game, Vram would pay him no heed. Croal bowed slightly. “Stautmeister, pardon my excited state when I entered.”

Vram Cragtop smiled and sipped from his mug.

Croal spoke slowly and clearly. “My concern lies with the stones from the elfin cairn ring at Eyletha. We promised the elves that if they surrendered, we would not move those stones.”

Vram looked to Otten and choked down the last of the *jhirv*. His lips smacked in a

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

cloud of white whiskers. Vram said, “This is true?”

Otten nodded. “What do words mean to a fallen enemy?”

Vram moved to his armchair and settled down. He stroked his white beard. “I see.”

Garn looked to Vram and quoted the Book of Bigbeard, “‘The truth can be beaten, bent, melted and twisted, but like gold, it never really be changed. Like gold, the truth must be cherished and honored.’”

Vram looked to Otten, “And I suppose these stones are alleged to be magical in nature?”

Otten grinned. “So the elves believe.”

Vram crossed his arms over his chest. “Alright, let’s keep Croal happy then, shall we? Our word was given, and so our word we shall keep.” Vram looked at Croal and said, “Do what you want with the stones, Otten. But do not move them from the cairn ring—the word of a dwarf was given.” The Stautmeister then raised an eyebrow and cast a look at Garn. “‘Gold—and the truth—can be beaten into leaves and laid thinly over lead. Truth is malleable.’ If you are going to quote the Book of Bigbeard, quote the entire passage, Garn.”

Garn looked away, but in his head he heard the rest of the verse: But a thin plating of gold on a lump of lead does not a golden nugget make.

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Croal breathed easier. The matter was settled. The campaign was nearly finished. This whole war against the elves had been a terrible ordeal, but soon he could begin the long trek back to Bivahhia see his wife and two sons.

Vram nodded, “The first part of our operation is complete gentlemen. We are now ready to make our move.”

Garn fixed his brown eyes on the Stautmeister. “First part?”

Vram stroked his white beard. “We can only go forward, not backward.”

Lean and hungry as always, Otten grinned.

Croal stammered an old proverb, “When your cart is full it is time to leave the mine!”

Vram shook his head. “Croal, you are a great warrior, of that there is no question. But there is a reason why I am the Stautmeister and why you are just an honored member of the Folksmakt. You simply can’t see the big picture. You are blind to the designs of our leader. That is why you are destined to remain a hammer and not a smith in the forge of destiny.”

Garn Ironflow interjected, “Even with the stores taken from the elves, my men are in need of supply, Stautmeister.”

Vram replied, “I assure you supply is not a concern. Even as we speak, some of

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

my men are trading with local goblins for any supplies needed for our next push.”

Croal clenched his fists and spoke through gritted teeth. “I’m assuming you did not call us here to discuss the decision?”

Vram nodded. “The decision was already made ... at the highest levels. No, I called you here to introduce you to our next tool—our next weapon. Under the direction of our beloved leader, I have made arrangements to ally with the only force on this world that rivals the strength and power of Dagmokk.”

Croal looked uneasily at Garn. “Who is this ally? What is our objective?”

“Keep in mind at all times that yours is a sacred duty. Keep in mind that our blood will be poured for the future of our children and all children of the Mokk—in the name of Bigbeard and Istlur.”

Otten muttered, “*Eickuh Istlur.*”

Croal repeated, “WHO is this ally?”

Vram looked up. “It’s so obvious. In the end, my dear Croal, there can be only two choices: the Mokk ... or death. Our objective is to give the Empire of Grodnus and the Sinepaxians that choice.”

A stouttrooper opened the tent’s flap and reported, “Sh-Stautmeister, they’re here.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Vram came to his feet. “Send them in.”

Before Croal could turn, a chill rolled over his body and into the tent. His lip curled as he inhaled the scent of rotting flesh. The color left Garn’s brown face and he looked pale and uncertain. Croal spun about and his jaw dropped.

Tall, gaunt and foreboding, the four guests towered over the dwarven commanders. Vram bowed to the undead leader and held out his hand.

“Deathmaster Ekong, these are my generals: Garn Ironflow, Croal and Otten Gurstkiene.”

The Deathmaster stood shoulder to shoulder with Demian Suth, Luther Rielly and Cardinal Finn. His vacant eye sockets seemed to look through Vram as he spoke. “After much consideration, we accept your offer of alliance.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Eight

The Forks is where the River Fench splits in two and makes its way through the tors and crags of the northwestern reaches of Sinepaxia. The Fench is an unremarkable river that joins up with the Chaffen River and then runs to the Thoom Sea. The Fench is perhaps important only in its insignificance, for despite the fact that it makes its way through lands claimed by the Barbarians, the Empire of Grodnus and the Sinepaxians, no army guards this land and in recent memory no one has ever fought for them. Perhaps this is because there is little arable land here, no precious metals and the terrain is not well suited for imperial highways or barbarian longboats. Yet these lands are central to the continent of Tolaria and for that reason goblin traders have established several posts and permanent camps in these lands. Unmolested by distant governments or barbarian raids, the goblins in this region have quietly prospered. No doubt, if this land was more desirable, these goblins would have been run out, long ago.

Eosos and his band of trolls meant to put an end to goblin prosperity at the Forks. The trolls had securely tied Ely and Gavril and the band was now poised to attack the goblin camp. Ungah looked over to Eosos and said, "Are you sure you wanna do this ... "

Eosos growled, "Whaddya mean am I sure? Course I'm sure. Don't you hate dwarves?" Even from up here, Eosos could see dwarves and goblins trading and bartering in the camp below.

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Ungah replied, “Don’t be stupid. I lost relatives in Vrakland too. I just think maybe you’re being a bit quick tempered.”

Eosos almost shouted, but then he looked down at the goblins and dwarves and whispered angrily, “I NEVER lose my head! I might get a little angry from time to time, but I’m not quick-tempered!”

Ungah looked away. “It’s your call, chief. We could attack them both now ... or we could attack them one at a time later.”

Eosos clenched his jaw and stared at the goblin trading post. “Oh ... alright, damn it! We’ll wait, I guess.” There was a sudden commotion in the camp and several dwarven rams galloped out of town without mounts. Eosos said, “Hello ... what’s this?”

A goblin tent burst into flames and goblins and dwarves started running in all directions. Leaders shouted orders and warriors went for their weapons. Eosos smiled. “Looks like we’re not the only one who hates dwarves and goblins!” Eosos stood up in plain view of the camp below and shouted to his trolls and Tsarly Gnash, “CHARGE!!” Waving his saber wildly he loped down the tor and into the goblin camp. His companions were not far behind him.

Gavril and Ely sat unmoving, still bound together. Their view of the battle was completely blocked by boulders and they could only guess what was happening. They could hear the terrible roars of trolls and the clash of steel. Down in the

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

dale, Tsarly Gnash cursed and they heard a metallic thunk. Suddenly a dwarf came flying over their heads. The dwarf tumbled through the air and then banged against a boulder. His skull made a hollow cracking sound as his brains exploded against the rock. Ely and Gavril silently watched as the brainless and lifeless, corpse reflexively twitched and then lay still.

The raucous in the camp continued, but Ely and Gavril's attention was suddenly shifted to a voice that said, "I say now, what would we be having here?"

"Ozrahad, untie them. Quickly now." He was Fosiah Zice, a gnome—short and not quite so stout as a dwarf. His cheeks were ruddy and he had sparkling blonde hair. His eyebrows were full and luxuriant and his eyes gleamed with friendship.

"Quickly now ... "

Ely and Gavril were slightly dumbfounded as eight gnomes scrambled to undo their bounds. They were a mixed band of gnomes with variegated skin colors and hair colors, but they snapped to the orders of Fosiah Zice. When ropes were loosed from their hands, the humans rubbed some circulation back into their wrists. Fosiah ordered, "Come along laddies. This way now."

With that Fosiah pattered away followed by a line of gnomes. Ely and Gavril staggered along behind the gnomes as they darted and weaved through the boulders. As Gavril ducked beneath an overhanging branch he wondered whether it was more difficult following trolls over the side of mountain or gnomes scurrying down a rabbit's path.

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Fosiah looked at the rocky under-populated lands around the Fench and who said, “Enid, does this remind you of the hills out back of Graven’s Crawl?”

The gnome named Enid replied, “Aye, it does at that Fosiah ... it does at that.”

It had been a long journey for Fosiah and his fellow partisan gnomes. It had been a long journey and a desperate quest to seek out a favor from an old friend. Back in his homeland in the borders of Dagmökk, Istlur and his stouttroopers pursued a policy of persecution against gnomes. However, Fosiah and many rebels (including some dwarven allies) had sworn to find a way to fight the Mökk however, and wherever, they could. At every turn they ambushed and sabotaged the Mökk’s plans. Unfortunately for the gnomes, the Mökk held every resource. The gnome rebels could not hold out forever. So it came to pass that Fosiah had been sent by his father on a desperate quest to call in a favor.

Ely and Gavril (in their weakened states) struggled to keep up with the gnomes, but soon they could barely see the end of Gnomish column. They ran along behind as best they could, but having not eaten for days their will waned quickly. Eventually, even the last and tubbiest of the gnomes was gone from sight.

Gavril’s gait slowed and he stumbled to a walk. Ely ran past him a few yards, before stopping and looking back. Ely’s chest was heaving and he spoke between pants, “Come ... on ... Gavril.”

Gavril leaned against a stone and then slid down onto his rear. He looked up at

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Ely and said, "I don't know why I'm running. I've got nothing to run for. My family is dead." Gavril breathed heavy to catch his wind. "My town is gone. I have but one purpose in life and that is to kill you ...and at this moment, I'm not sure I'll even do that."

Ely looked down. He took a deep breath. "The *Ti-Qorem* have a plan, Gavril."

Gavril looked away. "Your pagan mysticism gives me no comfort, barbarian." He dropped his head into his hands.

Ely said, "We have no food, no weapons. We have nothing. If we lose those gnomes we are as good as dead in these lands."

Gavril did not move.

Ely shrugged. "Suit yourself. I'm going on after them." Ely turned and took a step. He cast a glance over his shoulder and saw that Gavril was not moving. Ely stopped and growled, "Alright, I'll carry you if I have to."

The unexpected voice of Fosiah Zice piped up. "No one'll be carrying anyone. Now pick your bum up and let's get moving again."

Gavril looked at the little gnome standing before him. He had his hands on his belt buckle and his eyes were almost at the same level as Gavril's, even though Gavril was seated.

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Fosiah said, “I say again, *gervekkum*: pick your bum up and let’s get moving!”

Gavril sucked replenishing breath and smiled oddly at Fosiah. Gavril then rolled up onto his feet. “Let’s go.”

Fosiah winked and motioned to his partisans to start moving again. This time Fosiah took an easier pace. He led them downhill a long ways, until they at last came to a branch of the Fench. The water was very shallow here—only about knee deep for the humans. Gavril and Ely ferried the gnomes across the water and then Fosiah turned and led the party a short ways up the hill on the opposite shore. It didn’t take long to find a spot well sheltered by rocks. Fosiah said, “I doubt they’ll be finding us here.”

The gnomes quickly settled in and began removing their packs and pouches. The party of gnomes fell into a campsite routine. With an industrious pace and business-like detachment, they set up camp. Ely and Gavril watched without moving.

Fosiah looked up at them. “There, now lads. Take it easy. Find a nice patch of Lharna and make yourselves comfortable.” Fosiah pointed to a red-haired gnome. “Ozrahad, when you fetch the water, bring a little extra for the *gervekki*.”

Ozrahad nodded and then he and another gnome hastened back toward the river. Ely and Gavril sat down as they were ordered, and Fosiah said, “Are you lads, hungry?” Before they could answer, Fosiah continued, “Of course you are! I can

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

see that in your eyes. Enid, fetch them each a *chotka* to hold them over until we can get a dinner ready.”

Enid was a deep brown gnome. His skin was so dark that he was often called by the nickname “Purple”. Enid fetched the *chotkas* as he was told and he said, “Why was it that the trolls had you two bound?”

Gavril looked at Ely and said, “It’s a bit of a story.”

Fosiah said, “Stories were made for telling. As soon as Ozrahad returns, we’ll settle into camp and hear the story. In the meantime, let me take a look at that arm of yours.”

Gavril looked at his broken arm. It ached him and the arm seemed to have healed little since it had been broken. Down on one knee, Enid began unwrapping the dressing that the barbarians had put on the arm, as he said, “That’s just a scratch you have there, laddy.”

Gavril winced as the bandages were removed, “Oh yeah?”

Enid winked. “Most certainly.”

Fosiah nodded. “You’ll take care of it then, Purp?”

Enid nodded. “Aye. I’ll need my prayer rug.”

Gavril pulled away gingerly. “What’s this?”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Enid rolled a small carpet onto the ground alongside Gavril. “There now. Just relax, and we’ll see about that arm.” Enid placed his knees on the carpet and donned an odd looking fez-like cap. The cap was boxy and carried an odd plume that was almost comical, especially as compared to Enid’s somber expression. Purple clasped his hands and bent his head as he mumbled and chanted. Soon he took one hand and put it to Gavril’s arm.

At first it tingled and then Gavril cried out in pain, but almost as soon as the pain came, it was gone. Gavril blinked and then rotated his hand freely for the first time since the battle in Dobriograd. He nodded and wiped the water from his eyes. “Yes.” Gavril looked at Ely. “It’s ... healed.”

Meanwhile, a pair of gnomes had started a small fire and began spitting rabbit meat to cook over the fire. There was a time when Gavril would have turned his nose up at rabbit meat, but both he and Ely were salivating at the thought of getting some fresh meat.

Fosiah noticed their keen interest in the rabbit and he smiled, “Compliments of our goblin friends.”

Ely eyed Fosiah suspiciously. “You trade with goblins?”

Fosiah and his gnomes laughed. “Trade? I wouldn’t call it trade, would you Enid?”

Enid chuckled. “I doubt the goblins would call it trade.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Fosiah replied, “Since we caught them trading with Istlur’s thugs, we decided to procure what we needed in all the commotion. Your troll friends were just a little unexpected bonus.”

Enid smiled. Just then Ozrahad and his helper returned from the river.

Fosiah said, “Now that Ozrahad and Bojok have returned, let’s hear your stories.”

Fosiah’s partisans continued to prepare dinner while Gavril and Ely told of Dobriigrad and the trolls and the journey to the Forks. The gnomes listened with great interest and when the humans were done, Fosiah laughed heartily. “So! You two are enemies are you?”

Gavril looked at Ely. “I suppose so.”

Fosiah looked at the barbarian. “And you come seeking Lost Bear?”

Ely nodded.

Fosiah replied. “My partisans and I have come a quite a long way ourselves and we too seek Lost Bear. Long ago, my father rescued Lost Bear from danger and now, we come seeking his help. The Mokka is on the march on all fronts, eager to destroy that which is most different from them—the giants and trolls. However, in their own lands—in our own lands—they are eager to destroy that which is most like them—us. If you haven’t heard it already, Elvas Major has already fallen to the Mokka. Istlur’s reach knows no bounds and soon he will turn toward

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

your lands and your people. We come to bring a warning, but also to seek allies.”

Gavril said, “Who is this Lost Bear?”

Ely replied, “A mighty hero. A giant slayer. Valaz said it was your destiny to meet Lost Bear.”

Gavril scoffed. “And how would Valaz know my destiny?”

Ely said, “She hears voices—the voices of the *Ti-Qorem*. She hears their mysteries.”

Gavril shook his blond head. “Sounds to me like she’s possessed by a demon.”

Ely shrugged. “I suppose that is a matter of perspective, eh? But she is rarely wrong.”

Fosiah kicked his foot up on a rock and rested his arm across his knee. “I’ll not force you to go with us, Gavril. That’s entirely your choice. You may’ve been Ely’s prisoner, but now you’re mine to set free.”

Gavril tipped his head to Fosiah.

“But, if you were to ask me, and I know you’re not asking me, I’d suggest you come with us. Maybe this Valaz is right. Maybe you should meet Lost Bear. At this point, you’ve lost everything—so you might as well risk what you have left to go the final step.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Gavril sighed. “I have some unpaid debts that do need attention.” He looked down and rubbed his arm. “Of course, I’ll need a sword.” He glanced at Ely and then turned toward Fosiah.

Fosiah nodded and winked. “Aye, I’m sure we can help, but would you mind settling for a short sword?”

Gavril said, “Tell me more about the troubles in your land, Fosiah.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Nine

Woil had come a long way from Orcroft. His orcs had been mustered in impressive numbers to fight alongside the humans and they had marched a long road in good spirits. Although their combined victory had been swift and certain at the elfin garrison, he couldn't help but feel a little empty. He had come to grapple the enemy, to do battle, but he and his orcs had been denied the opportunity to find their place of honor among orc heroes who had fallen in battle.

Woil looked up at the walls of the captured elfin garrison, which were now bristling with orc and human troops. The guard duty had been loose and easy after the victory, but last night when scouts interrupted the feast with news of another army on the march, every available soldier had been put on alert. The troops had rushed to the walls and but the attack was not forthcoming. All night the army had been on edge, but there was no sign of any enemy army. Woil could see that the troops were now tired and impatient and the orcs in particular were eager for a fight. Woil released a battle cry that echoed between the palisades. The cry was not unlike an angry ape, but it was shriller and a bit unnerving. His troops were heartened by the cry though and they hooted and shouted as they shook their weapons in response.

Philippe looked at Woil and shook his head. It was plain to see that the howl had a positive effect on orc morale in the garrison, but Philippe suddenly felt keenly aware of the differences between orcs and humans. Iyudi seemed amused by the

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

whole affair though and she pulled her diaphragm tight to hoot loudly in orc fashion.

Woil was unaccustomed to the thought of female warriors, but he smiled at Iyudi and said, “No, no. Like this!” And he squatted low and pulled his fists in tight over his sternum. As he released the howl, he extended his body at all extremes and stood upon his tiptoes as he held his head back and shot saliva as he yelled. He yelled until his eyes watered and his lungs were starved for air. After catching his breath again, he looked at her and smiled.

Iyudi looked up around the walls of the garrison and all the orcs were hooting and howling and yelling. Here and there Sinepaxians were joining in the cries, but it was clear this was more of an orc ritual than a human activity.

The morning sun at last climbed high enough to throw its rays into the garrison’s courtyard, where the lancers and Justice Monks had gathered. The light dazzled from L’Darrow’s golden armor, and he solemnly nodded. The morning sun on his nose ring burned against the darkness of his ebony skin as he said, “They’re here.”

Jacob cinched his sword belt and gave a thumbs-up sign to his fellow Macabees. His lustrous black hair was pulled into a tight knot and his deep-set features seemed dark and ominous as he donned his battle face. Jacob took leave from Philipe’s side. “My men and I will now pray.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Philippe took no notice of Jacob as he separated himself from the leaders. Instead he turned to L'Darrow. "How do you know this?"

L'Darrow shrugged and lifted his winged helmet up and onto his head. His voice had a tinny echo, as he nodded behind the mask of his great helm. "There are demons among them."

Philippe leaned forward to catch Woil's gleaming eyes. Woil was beginning to feel the energy and the unmistakable charge that orcs get from battle. Philippe nodded at Woil and shouted to be heard over the whoops of the orcs, "Demons among elves? Does this trouble you?"

Woil laughed. "We hold the castle. We have orc foot troops and Sinepaxian cavalry and arrows. Nothing troubles me at this moment."

Suddenly the Sinepaxians on the wall let out a cry and the orcs redoubled the volume of their shouts. They yelled because, enemy troops were now visible to those in the towers and on the walls. Philippe said to a squire. "Fetch my mount!" Then he turned to Woil. "Who will lead?"

Woil swelled with confidence and waved to the soldiers on the walls. "Our armies are best served if you stay with the cavalry and lead the charges. I'll find a tower from which I can direct the overall battle forces." He slapped Philippe on the back and started to walk away. Then Woil turned and shouted as he continued backing away, "Be prepared to charge if we open the gates!"

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

And the Woil was lost from sight as he disappeared into the troops massed in the garrison. Iyudi smiled. "It's good to see someone who enjoys their work."

"Who enjoys their work?" It was Rogelio Cortiz. He was pulling a gauntlet on and his eyes were still cloudy with sleep. His tussled hair stood oddly and sand was gathered in the corners of his eyes.

Iyudi shook her head in disgust and said to Rogelio. "Thank God you are good at something."

"What?" said Rogelio in his low deep baritone as he blinked against the morning light.

Meanwhile, Woil was just reaching the top of the forward tower. The morning sun cast a beautiful hue over the wildflowers in the dale spread out before the castle. Butterflies danced here and there and the smell of spring was in the air. Woil took no notice though. His eyes scanned for enemy troops, and soon he spotted them.

The road that led to the gate branched out in two directions, with one arm reaching south along the river. This was the road that the humans and orcs had taken only the day before. The road to the north followed a broad meander of the river in a slow curve and then disappeared into the forest. It was there at the edge of the forest that Woil spotted it.

At first, it was just a cloud of dust, and the walls of garrison suddenly became

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

quiet. Woil squinted as he peered out over the parapet and the wind whipped at his fur cape. A voice from the courtyard down below shouted, "What is it?"

Another yelled, "What do you see?"

But no one responded.

Then the front column of the army appeared from the dust cloud. Column after column of them marching in a slow and easy gait, they appeared from the dust as if they had materialized on the road. Their armor was spiked and twisted and they wore wicked skull faced helms. Their tunics were lightning-yellow and their capes were a deep wine colored purple. Woil squinted and said to himself, "Those aren't elves."

The army continued to move forward and step-by-step they closed on the garrison. The train of troops continued for quite some time. As the troops filed out of the forest, and the humans and orcs alike watched with keen interest. It was soon clear to all that this was NOT an elfin army. At the head of the army marched humans, guards and foot knights, but this was not a Sinepaxian or Imperial army. After the humans came a strange form of beast men. No one present had ever seen these wicked forms before and they weren't exactly sure what to make of them.

Finally, at the rear of the army there was the cavalry. The cavalry was mounted on fierce fiery-eyed chargers and the knights were heavily armored in the spikey

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

style of the rest of the army. As the army moved closer, the mounted knights broke away from the columns and out into the wide fields between the garrison and the river. One knight remained on the road though. He was smaller than the rest, clad in robes of purple and on his head he wore a crown of gold and a mask of iron. His horse was light, a mere palfrey, and did not trot in the same gate as the chargers. He held up his fist and then motioned and pointed. He did this several times, and when he did the army began to break columns and file into a line in front of the castle. All of this was a slow and unhurried process and by lunchtime the army was nearly in position, but still well out of range of the bows of the Sinepaxian archers.

Woil watched from his tower with keen interest and then he carefully did his math, orc style. He looked to one of his lieutenants and said, "There's not enough of them to worry us. We could handle them even without the castle." And with that he sent word down to Philipe and the other human leaders in the courtyard.

The orc messenger told Philipe, "The mighty Woil says to stand down. This army is not a threat. They look to be quality troops but they are few in number."

Philipe looked at L'Darrow, who replied, "The battle is on."

Philipe told the messenger, "Tell Woil that I shall parley, and have the gates opened." Philipe pointed with authority. "Jacob! Iyudi! You two are with me."

Jacob snatched up a Macabee banner from his herald. "On your word."

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

“I want to go too!” Rogelio Cortiz boomed.

Philippe hoisted himself up into the saddle. “No. You’ll stay here.” He waved to Iyudi and Jacob. “Let’s ride.”



Yendor Bhondouth looked troubled. “I fear, Leng son of Leng . I fear what may come to pass.”

Leng’s rich brown hair sparkled in a ray of light that stabbed down through the canopy of trees. Leng’s dark chocolate eyes burned with passion and he nodded but he did not speak.

The Yendor put one long sinewy hand against the trunk of a mighty oak. He did not lean against the tree for support, but rather, he touched it lightly, as another sovereign might pat a favored pet. “You are young Leng, but you’ve seen much in your 364 summers, perhaps this is why you have matured so quickly.”

Leng nodded at the kind words, and looked away from Bhondouth’s steady gaze. Down below in the dale, the river meandered quietly.

“Though it’s been almost a century and a half since Fherlon was slain by the human swines, it pains me as if it happened this morning.” The Yendor looked to Leng and smiled weakly. “But I take some comfort in our relationship, and you are like another son to me.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Leng cast his eyes at the river and said, "It is a terrible thing to outlive your children."

"I cannot describe the pain, Leng."

"Fherlon was a good elf. A brave elf."

Yendor Bhondouth nodded. "A brave elf is a foolish elf. Never forget that Leng. Never. We can outlive any opponent. Therefore, always relinquish the battle in favor of winning the war."

The Yendor patted the oak again. "Remember when we planted this tree? Now: look at it."

Leng turned abruptly and he squinted as he examined Bhondouth's face. "What are you afraid to say?"

Elves are beings based in emotion, and as they age they must learn to temper those fiery passions; to bury those feelings deep and avoid rash emotionally-based decisions. An elf is possessed with a powerful intellect, but reason can be clouded by emotions, so in the fullness of time, an elf must learn to divorce his intellect from his spirit and the passions that beat strong in his ancient heart.

Bhondouth's face was obscured by wisps of his silvery mane, but Leng sensed something burning just below the surface of Bhondouth's pale angular face.

Bhondouth was deep in thought and his eyes were fixed at some distant unseen

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

object. He turned to Leng and said in a strangely optimistic tone, “I’ve been wrong before.”

Leng felt something well up in him. Tears? Love? Fear? He gulped hard, blinked rapidly and before he could tap that feeling, he buried it down deep inside. “My Yendor why did you beckon me here?”

“Leng, you are like a son to me.”

“None shall replace Fherlon.”

Bhondouth raised his hand. “Of course. But you are a comfort to me—closer to me than my own daughter. You are wiser and more mature than my nephew Penthor. I intend to announce you as the next Yendor.”

“Yendor! I am too young. YOU are too young.”

“In another six summers I will have seen a millennium. It is time for me to settle this issue.”

Leng stammered, “You are yet middle-aged Yendor, you have an epoch before you.”

“Perhaps.” Bhondouth looked away. “But tragedy may cross my path at anytime. Fherlon was struck down in battle—my end may be approaching sooner than we think.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Leng started to speak, but Bhondouth cut him off, “This is not a matter for discussion. I have spoken with Penthor, and I will advise the elders soon.”

“Penthor is jealous?”

“Perhaps.” Bhondouth remembered how Penthor stormed off in anger and he chuckled. “But time—time is a wonderful thing for it can mellow the hardest-heart and sweeten the bitterest memory. He knows this is for the best of the nation, and he has been dispatched to attend to his own duties.”

Leng gritted his teeth and did not speak.

“For now, Penthor will be my right hand, and you Leng will be my left hand. He will carry the sword and you will carry the shield.”

Leng arched an eyebrow.

Bhondouth spoke with a commanding tone. “I have decided to attack the dwarves in Elvas Major.”

Leng smiled. “But you told the goblins that you would not do this.”

Bhondouth nodded. “When you are Yendor, you would be well advised to keep any plans and schemes as far from goblin ears as possible. We have spent considerable sums to higher goblin mercenaries to help us ... ahem ... ‘attack’ the trolls. Obviously we will not be attending that battle, but the goblins need not

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

know this.”

Leng cackled with glee, but then bit his lip and stifled the laughter swelling within him.

Bhondouth laughed as well. “Yes, yes. But this is not a time of joy, dear Leng. For I am taking a terrible risk here: I intend to wager the future of Elvas Minor to save our brethren in Elvas Major. Penthor is gathering every available elfin regular. We are forming the mightiest force the elves have assembled in five thousand years. It will be your duty to muster every irregular, volunteer and hot-headed centenarian you can find and meet us at Khorvin’s Crossing.”

Leng shook his head. “The irregulars are always itching for a fight.”

Bhondouth nodded. “That’s why I picked you to lead the irregulars. You’ll need to muzzle those tigers. We’ll build our defense around them. We will attack using the older, wiser elves that make up the regular forces. You’re young enough to mix with the irregulars, but old enough and,” Bhondouth tapped his silver haired temple, “smart enough not to do something stupid.”

Leng dipped his chin to his chest and his eyes looked down respectfully. “But, we’ll be defenseless should the humans or anyone else try to attack us when we bring this force to bear.”

“Indeed, and this is my gamble. The stakes are grave.” The Yendor looked passionless now. His heart was stone and his mind was clear. “But we already

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

know that the dwarves are dragging their engines of war toward our forest.

Worse yet, we also know that they are employing magic of some kind to hide the true nature of their force. It is possible that they have discerned the secrets of the Cairn Ring.”

Leng shuddered.

Bhondouth agreed without saying a word. “I have business of my own to attend to. I’m going to get Mother, and the others.”

Leng gasped, “Your mother hasn’t left her glen since ... well ... since long before I’ve been alive.”

Bhondouth nodded again. “We’ll need her sorcery. I know a few old elfin wizards that I might be able to stir into action. They owe my father a favor.” Bhondouth couldn’t recall the last time he allowed anger to simmer in his heart, as he knew that elfin anger is a vengeful, vile spirit, dark as the darkest thoughts of any human, dwarf or orc, but lasting for centuries. He spoke through gritted teeth and allowed a scowl to form across his fair brow. “I intend to win this war with the dwarves Leng. If we lose this battle, well, it won’t be for lack of firepower.”

Leng smiled. It was good to see that elfin pride still whispered through the forests of Elvas Minor.

Bhondouth regained his composure and continued, “In the morning, I must rush away to address a meeting of elders at *Lhuna do Arna*. I expect you to make best

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

possible haste to Khorvin's Crossing. Penthor and I will meet you there before the moon is new."

Leng held out a hand for Bhondouth to shake. "Yes, my Yendor."

Bhondouth grabbed Leng's hand and pulled Leng close for a hug. He patted Leng's back and whispered, "I've consulted a chronomancer, Leng. This ... this is bigger than Elvas Major, bigger than elves. Something terrible may be happening."

Leng's body stiffened and Bhondouth pushed Leng away. The Yendor was trembling with emotion. He thought to himself, "Silly bird. After all these years I'm still as weak-hearted as a young elf." As he pushed Leng away, the Yendor turned quickly, to hide his face. He pointed and growled, "Away, and quickly."

Ten

Gavril Gorin rubbed his sword arm. He hadn't felt so much as a twinge of pain since the gnomes rubbed the soothing ointment on the break. The gnomes were busy scurrying around camp, packing and gathering just as efficiently as they had set up camp last night. He'd never met or seen a dwarf or a gnome before yesterday, and even after Fosiah Zice explained the subtle differences between those two races he doubted he could tell them apart. The single biggest difference that Gavril remembered, aside from the way gnomes and dwarves preferred to trim their beards, was in the feet. Dwarves usually possessed relatively big human-sized feet, while gnomonic hands and feet were small and more

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

proportioned to their short stature. Gavril scratched his blonde head, amazed that people so alike as the dwarves and gnomes could find any reason to hate each other.

Across camp, Gavril spied Ely Ulrich, the savage who mercilessly murdered Gavril's brother back in Dobriigrad. In a flash, he pictured his sisters, his mother, his female cousins, cleaning a barbarian camp and living as slave wenches—hostage whores. Perhaps he should kill the barbarian now, or at least die trying.

Ely spotted Gavril's haunted expression, and replied with a cheery smile, "So have you decided to go with us to meet Lost Bear?"

Gavril muttered. "I'll need a sword."

Fosiah hefted a pack onto his back and called out over his shoulder, "I've got but one to spare at the moment. It's a rusty old short sword in need of sharpening."

Enid, the deep dark brown-skinned gnome, laughed. "That old sword wouldn't cut melted butter!"

Fosiah scrubbed his blonde chin whiskers and grinned at Gavril. "Purple's exaggerating *gervekkum*, but not by much. If you'll only be traveling with us if we provide you with a sword, I suppose I could be parting with my own, then."

Gavril shook his head and looked away from Ely. "I'll tag along with you. If I can find nothing better, I'll pick up a stone along the way."

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Ozrahad, the oldest of the gnomes, laughed loudly. “Stones are good for brains smashing, that’s for sure!”

Fosiah laughed at Ozrahad’s mirth, though he was sickening by the joke. He smiled at Ozrahad and said, “I hope my heart is not as twisted and gnarled as yours when I’m as ancient as you.” Fosiah called out to his band of gnomes, “Are we ready then lads? The *gervekkii* are roused and Lost Bear’s a-waiting. Let’s march!”

“Hoy-hoy!” All the gnomes cried out in unison and little their nimble hands in the air.

The gnomes trotted away in single file following Fosiah. Ely came along behind them and lastly Gavril paced behind Ely. As they trotted along, Fosiah called out a simple song in a gnomish tongue that the barbarian and Gavril did not understand. It was a mournful hymn, almost hypnotic with Fosiah calling and the troop responding. Gavril’s eyes bored into Ely’s back as they bounced down the trail and Gavril replayed the day that Alsoomse’s band stormed Dobriigrad. At last he could take no more and he said aloud, “They did nothing ... nothing to provoke you.”

Ely caught the words, and on the bed of music provided by the gnomes. Without breaking stride, he replied, “The antelope does not provoke the lion. Hunger provokes the lion.”

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Gavril shouted, “The lion does not murder every male antelope in the herd and take the antelope women and children away, so that he might teach them how to become LIONS!”

Fosiah broke cadence and the gnomes slowed their jog a bit to look back at the humans. Ely stopped and turned and started to say, “You want me? Then let’s—“

Gavril’s knuckles cracked loudly against the barbarian’s jaw. Ely stepped back and shook his head to recover, but Gavril was on him again. This time a left swiped across Ely’s nose, drawing blood. Gavril cried out, “I can not forget that you killed my brother!”

Fosiah’s pack was already off and he was pushing his way through the stunned gnomes. He dived and caught Gavril’s arm before Gavril could swing again, and when he did this, several other gnomes grappled Gavril to the ground.

Ely put one finger to close a nostril and bent over to blow clots of blood from his nose. . “Not a bad.” He stood up and wiped the blood from his nostrum. “But not as good as this!” He charged at Gavril to deliver his reply, but there was a sudden crack of smoke and light. Ely and the two gnomes closest to him lay charred, blackened and unmoving.

Gavril felt tiny pellets stinging him here and there where a gnome did not cover his body. Fosiah sniffed at the air, and smelled the distinctive smell of the bangshoot plant.

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Bangshoot is a rare plant that grows only on the eastern slope of certain mountains. The leaves are specially dried in a secret process, then crushed and left to soak in the purest water melted from mountain glaciers. Soon after, the mixture will set-up in a pasty buttermilk-like briny liquid. The liquid is then left to dry in complete cave darkness, whence it becomes very sensitive to light of any kind. The bangpowder is used as a shot propellant by dwarven arquebusiers. When the trigger is pulled, a shutter on the arquebus allows measured amounts of light into the chamber, and the weapon fires.

Fosiah smelled the bangpowder in the air and he could hear Dagsprek (the dwarven tongue). "Scatter!" He yelled and rolled off of Gavril.

There was another loud pop and stinging shot of some kind rained down on Gavril. He blinked for a second, slightly blinded by the lights and stunned by the sounds, but rolled onto his belly and started clambering for a nearby bush.

Ely Ulrich staggered to his feet and pulled a blade from a fallen gnome. All the hair from his face was singed away and blood oozed from a gash on his right pectoral muscle. Ely looked down at Gavril and whispered, "Lost Bears is your destiny." Ely then raised his sword and cried loudly as he charged out of Gavril's sight.

Gavril elbowed toward a nearby boulder as he heard another shot go off somewhere behind him. He had no sword and not much of a clue as to who or what was attacking them. Once he had some cover to hide behind he put his back

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

to the boulder and came to his feet slowly. He peaked out from behind the boulder and about 20 paces away he spotted Ely engaged in melee with a pair of dwarven arquebusiers. He swung at them angrily, but they parried with their rifles. While Ely was busy slashing at them, another dwarf raised an axe and sprinted towards Ely's back.

Gavril rolled out from behind the boulder and pulled a sword from the other dead gnome. He charged swiftly, silently, catching the dwarf in the armpit, just as the dwarf pulled his axe back to strike at Ely's back. The dwarf toppled to the ground in agony, but now another and another dwarf rushed from behind nearby rocks to attack Gavril.

Ely had already slain the two arquebusiers and now Gavril and Ely met the attack head on. The dwarves plowed ahead holding their axes so that the spear at the tip of handle stabbed at the target. Ely, who was already shot and weakened from the struggle, cried out as the poleaxe punctured his chest. He lunged at the dwarf, but without much strength. Though he hit the dwarf, the dwarf was unfazed, and recovered his axe from Ely's chest.

While Gavril avoided his attacker's stroke, then mercilessly sliced the dwarf before him, the other dwarf swung his axe swift and true—cleaving Ely's head from the body. Gavril spun about to strike the dwarf down, but when he swung, the dwarf dropped to his knees. Gavril had missed, but the dwarf was already dead—struck in the back by Fosiah Zice.

The Opening Portal

by S. William Nesbitt II <Will@NesbittOnTheWeb.com>
6510 Cavalier Dr. Alexandria VA 22307

Fosiah looked up and said grimly, “Enid and Ozrahad slaughtered two more.”

Fosiah put his hand to his mouth and called out, “Hoy-hoy! Lads, let’s be tending to the bodies quickly. If we didn’t kill the entire patrol, the dwarves will be back in greater numbers.”

Fosiah called roll: Ozrahad, Enid, Yakim, Isniv and Munna were still alive.

Munna was probably going to die soon. Nurvom and Yekyl were dead already.

Gavril looked at Ely’s lifeless head and recalled his promise to the barbarian.

Gavril spoke solemnly, “Leave the barbarian’s body here. I’ll dispose of the head elsewhere as was his wish.”