

# Chapter One

## White Mountain

The deepening sun scorched the snowy drifts; turning them cherry pink as it cast its dying rays over the peaks and popular winter resorts of the skiing elite.

Shadows of dusk lengthened as lights twinkled in the valley below. Above the hustle and bustle of bistro and café life, chic alpine lodges, ski schools and cable cars, White Mountain loomed.

Its towering flanks gleamed in the fading light, its secret heart still safe, still undisturbed...the ancient ancestral home of an old sorcerer.

Within the bowels of the mountain, lived the aging scholar, a practitioner and magus of the old arts. An archetypal wizard, with steely grey hair and a scruffy beard, his heavy lidded eyes belied a keen intellect and appeared both sharply alert, yet ready for slumber. A powerful but rather eccentric figure, he had the bumbling demeanour of an old-world gent, a long lost uncle back from some distant travel with stories to astound and amaze. Mr. M. Agyk, also known as Marval or simply the 'Green Wizard', had witnessed the passing of ages. A quickening of time that had brought too many great changes to the world outside; yet nestled deep within the mountain's walls he had continued to live his life mostly unaffected by the curious comings and goings beyond.

From within this dwelling sprang many hundreds of beautiful rooms and twisting tunnels, a labyrinth of chambers, which even the wizard had forgotten or lost his way in. Its endless expanse of passages and curling staircases glittered and shimmered when touched. Delicate frozen beads of water, each encrusted with crystal hung from the corridor ceilings swaying and tinkling like millions of tiny bells.

At the core of this strange home lay a huge round living room. Its circular walls were lined with shelves upon shelves crammed full of books and curiosities from all over the ancient world and bulged inwards as if the mountain were pressing in. Dominating the centre of the room stood a

roughly hewn fireplace where an ever-burning fire flickered.

Mr. Agyk, not being the tidiest of people nor able to throw a single thing away, had become over the centuries of his life a 'hoarder' on the grandest scale. Despite the size of his home and the vastness of its rooms, he had managed to fill nearly every nook and cranny with an immense collection of dust covered clutter. The living room was no exception. Littered amongst the dozens of faded and matted rugs, their overlapping edges frayed and worn, lay little stacks of books and parchment paper piled in tumbling mounds or stuffed beneath the missing legs of tables and chairs.

Above it all, and stretching to a height of some forty or fifty feet, arched an enormous domed and vaulted ceiling of the deepest sapphire blue, set with a thousand twinkling stars that drifted across its expanse.

Mr. Agyk lived a hermit life on the whole, unknown to the outer world and isolated from others of his kind, except for a few of his closest friends. However, to the great exasperation of these friends, and despite the wizard's own aversion to modern day man, he found himself deeply fascinated by humans and their complicated chaotic lives.

On occasions, when this fascination became too great, the old scholar would venture outside disappearing for days, weeks or even months on one of his 'expeditions'.

Often the sorcerer could be found wandering the streets of the great industrial cities, an unnoticed elderly fellow watching the frenetic pace of humans in their never-ending cycle of work, stress and life.

So it was that after one of these strange days, Mr. M. Agyk eventually returned to White Mountain to find his old friend waiting in the cold...

Gralen stood leaning against the rock face, scraping his talons down the ice covered stone, an expression of boredom and annoyance on his face. "Where have you been?"

"Sorry, am I late?" fumbled the old man, patting his friend on the back. "You know I always get my days muddled!"

Mr. Agyk and his lifelong companion, Gralen, a temperamental and rather portly green

dragon with dark, leathery wings and a stunning orange jewelled belly, stood precariously high upon a narrow and slippery mountain ledge. The weather grew steadily worse as chilling night winds howled and curled over the rocks, blasting a flurry of ice flakes into their eyes. The wizard looked his usual dishevelled self, his straggly beard and shock of wiry hair blowing around him like the mane of a mangy old lion. His ruddy features and profile were almost handsome, with pale silver eyes and an impressive roman nose; the bulbous tip of which reminded the dragon of an unripened or scarlet coloured raspberry, depending on the weather and mood of the old man. Today, it glowed beacon red.

Gralen on the other hand, though certainly impressive at full height or in mid-flight, was a rather overweight and average example of the near extinct North Eurasian dragon.

Mr. Agyk pressed his hand against the rock, eager to get out of the cold. A large doorway suddenly appeared.

“This is your home too, you should have gone in,” he said quizzically, looking at the settled snow on the old dragon’s scales. “How long have you been waiting?”

“A while...waiting and watching,” Gralen grumbled, crossing his arms and making no effort to hide his irritation. He looked at the old man’s tweed trouser suit. “You’re wearing your human robes I see...you haven’t been off on another ‘expedition’, have you? I thought you’d gone off somewhere south to visit Malty, or one of the others.”

Mr. Agyk smiled. “It is cold, let us get inside. After you,” he bowed.

Gralen gave him a suspicious look and mumbled something under his breath then disappeared inside, closely followed by the wizard.

Standing eight feet tall at the shoulder and fifteen feet to the top of his head, Gralen had a broad frame and huge articulated wings, which folded flat against his sides. His long muscular neck supported a slightly outsized head with overlapping fan-shaped spikes, which splayed out from behind his ears. His large amber eyes, though certainly swift to anger or laughter, displayed a depth and subtlety unexpected in such a lumbering bulk. However, Gralen’s most distinguished features

lay not in the two horns that protruded from his muzzle and forehead, or even the wispy chin whiskers he had grown over the years to catch stray bits of food, but merely in the remarkable fact that ‘in a modern world’, he remained the sole surviving member of his kind. He was the very last of the race of dragons.

The dragon settled himself in front of the warm glow of the fireplace. Mr. Agyk shook his outer clothes, which promptly changed to his usual green attire, and vanished down one of the many tunnels leading off from the living room like the burrows of a rabbit warren.

“Is offal sweet-cake all right?” he asked a few moments later, from the general direction of the kitchen.

Gralen stretched in front of the flames, curling and flexing his toes in comfort.

“Let me know if I can help,” he yawned, closing his eyes.

“No, no...!” came a hurried voice amidst a clatter of dishes and a faint whiff of peppery smoke.

The wizard reappeared. Floating in front of him were two enormous dishes. Gralen sat bolt upright and wrapped his tail around his huge clawed feet. The dishes gently drifted towards him, hovered for a moment as if offering themselves for approval, then placed themselves neatly on the low table in front. Mr. Agyk sat cross-legged on the floor as another long procession of plates and dishes piled high with steaming food, glided in from the kitchen.

Gralen’s orange eyes widened, his chin whiskers already twitching wildly.

“Well, tuck in!” Mr. Agyk chuckled and raised a large crystal goblet. “A toast...to great friends and great food!”

“I’ll toast that!” spluttered the dragon, his mouth full to overflowing.

The two friends sat for hours in front of the roaring fire talking and laughing and eating until they thought they’d burst. Finally, Gralen stretched out, satisfied at last, and patted his pendulous belly. Then with a contented smile on his face he lazily began blowing tiny green fire bubbles into the air. He watched as they slowly drifted up almost out of view, floating higher and higher before

exploding in little puffs of emerald smoke and sparks. He closed his eyes, rather pleased with himself.

“I couldn’t eat another thing!” he announced at last. “My scales are poking out!”

Mr. Agyk kicked his battered boots off with a satisfying thud, before resting back into his favourite rocking chair; an old wooden throne he’d ‘picked up’ in the Crusades, with delicately carved intertwining wings for a back and sinuous arms that curled each side into drooping flower-heads. He mumbled a command and instantly the wooden frame creaked into motion, gently rocking him back and forth.

“My stomach is as full as a grouchal!” he mused, remembering the giant toad like creatures from his youth and their legendary voracious appetites.

Gralen nodded, his mind drifting towards sleep. “You know, you really shouldn’t take the risks you do,” he started as he turned to face the old mage. “All these idiot trips you go on...sometimes I don’t understand you at all!”

The wizard sighed heavily and stared down at his toes, waving at him like fat little men through the many holes in his socks. He had had this conversation before, many times, and he was in no mood for another argument.

“Must we talk about it? I will not be travelling anywhere for a while.”

“Good! I’m glad to hear it...it’s about time you came to your senses,” muttered the dragon, resting on his back and staring up at the ceiling, “well, the stars are looking bright tonight,” he began at last.

“Yes,” Mr. Agyk murmured faintly. “They grow brighter the nearer we get to the winter solstice...”

Gralen tilted his head. “What the hell’s that?”

“The winter solstice?”

“No, that noise...you can’t hear that?”

The wizard strained to listen.

The sound repeated itself. A rumbling tone, low and muffled, barely audible to the old man's ears, yet growing steadily louder.

"Well?" Gralen demanded. "What is it?"

Mr. Agyk shook his head. "I do not...oh, my heavens..." he laughed. "*That* my friend is a message! Someone is using a mimmirian to contact us!" he beamed, "I only use it to reach Wendya these days." He closed his eyes and muttered a *bringing* incantation.

"Well, turn the blasted thing off!" Gralen complained.

Moments later, a large triangular mirror drifted into the room and rested in front of them. The noise booming from it was quite deafening.

"Enough!" Mr. Agyk touched it, and at once it became silent. The ancient communicator had been crafted by the old sage himself and allowed messages to be sent and received over vast distances; providing a means of staying in contact with old allies from across the globe. The knowledge and art of making such elaborate mystical instruments was known to only a few of the most learned mages. Although Mr. Agyk had made one such rarity for their good friend Wendya years before, few now still survived and the secret of how to construct them was all but lost.

Mr. Agyk passed his hand across it. "Who seeks counsel?"

The mimmirian's mirrored surface quivered and became a diaphanous liquid before their eyes, metallic yet clear. Ripples formed across it, colliding and merging with each other until an image began to form.

"Who seeks counsel?" he repeated.

Suddenly the liquid stilled and the image cleared to reveal a faint but recognisable face.

"Belloc? Is that you Bell'?"

The figure did not reply.

Mr. Agyk shook his head. "Of course, he is not calling now...this is a message, perhaps a few days old."

The figure started to talk, but no sound came.

“What’s wrong with it?” said Galen coming closer.

“I do not know. Something is interfering with it...”

Galen narrowed his eyes and stared at the image. “Look at him. Something’s wrong. He looks...frightened!”

“Belloc? Never...”

“*Look at him,*” urged the dragon. “He doesn’t look right.”

Mr. Agyk stopped fiddling with the device for a moment and gazed at the image of his magus friend. To his surprise, Belloc appeared unusually aged and deeply troubled.

“Yes...perhaps you are right. Let me try this,” he said altering a small lever while passing his hand over the mirror. “Tell us your counsel!” he demanded.

Suddenly the device sprang to life, and the figure’s voice emanated from the screen.

“Marvalla, please come quickly!” Belloc’s voice was coarse as if every breath were a struggle. “I do not know who to turn to anymore, who can be trusted. So many have been corrupted. I dare not leave, they are always watching. You *must* come quickly, so much depends upon you...Marval, I need your help.” He paused and lowered his voice to a whisper, his dark eyes flitting nervously around him. “Things are on the move, terrible things. A reckoning is coming, a war...it has already begun. The humans...dear gods, the humans will never be able to survive...” the image began to crackle and fade, “...urdered, countless of them! We have to stop it! *You must come!*” came the final plea before the picture was lost and the mimmirian turned black.

Galen sat upright. “What the hell was that about?”

“A reckoning...a war?” repeated the old wizard, pressing his hand against the cold glass.

“Against whom? How are humans involved?” He sat silently, lost in thought, the worry on his face evident.

“Well, this is a first,” Galen jeered, “*him asking us* for help, but then Bell’ always had a flair for the dramatic! *They are always watching*’...who’s *they*’?” he scoffed.

The dragon had never much cared for Belloc. An arrogant, ambitious and pompous idiot he

thought, too interested in accumulating ‘things’, whether it was wealth or influence. In truth, Belloc had never much cared for the dragon either.

“It’s plain he’s in some sort of trouble,” Gralen pressed.

“It certainly appears that way,” the old man muttered. “But what kind of trouble... ‘*urdered*’ he said? You are right, Gralen, I have never known Belloc to ask for anyone’s help...*ever*. He must be in great need,” he shook his head. “He looked...*terrified*. I have never seen him like that. Something is dreadfully wrong my friend.”

Gralen looked at him, he was taking this very seriously.

The wizard started pacing the room. “Curse me for my ridiculous antics! I have been away for *far* too long. If I am truly honest with myself, I *have* felt it. Something out of balance, a shifting of energies. I am old enough to know better. I should have listened to my instincts!”

“You’re not going?”

“Of course I am, *we* are,” he faced the dragon, “he needs our help Gralen, what would you have me do?”

The dragon sighed and sucked at his teeth with an awful rasping sound before eating a large lump of food dislodged from his back molar.

“Gralen, my dear friend, it will give you an opportunity to stretch your wings and for both of us to catch up with news from abroad.”

The dragon shrugged and shifted his weight uneasily. “I doubt there’s much news to hear. Things don’t change in our world.” He couldn’t quite muster up his enthusiasm. “We could head off tomorrow I suppose,” he said, gently flexing his huge wings and wafting the fire as he did so, “I suppose I could use some long distance exercise.”

Mr. Agyk smiled. “Thank you.”



## Chapter Two

### City Of Ice

The next day dawned bright and clear. Sunlight streamed through narrow slit-like windows cut high in the mountainside. It was a cold beautiful September morning. Gralen's cavernous room and the corridors outside echoed with the big dragon's snoring. Mr. Agyk had had an unusually fitful sleep, full of worrying dreams and dark shifting images. He was tired and restless when he awoke and had a distinct feeling of apprehension. Belloc's distressing cryptic message kept playing through his mind. He shook his head and carefully lifted the heavy latch of Gralen's door. It creaked open. The dragon was fast asleep and snoring on his huge bed of willowgrass and snootledown feathers, his wings wrapped tightly around him like great leathery sheets.

The wizard stood framed in the doorway for a moment watching his old friend. A stream of autumnal light slowly crept down the walls towards the slumbering figure, igniting thousands of floating dust specks in its wake, like a trail of tiny falling stars. He loved mornings, the slow awakening of the world, the beginning of things. Gralen of course was quite the opposite. He loved the night, especially for flying, and if his stomach didn't wake him demanding food, he could quite easily sleep the whole morning away and most of the afternoon.

"Rise and shine!" the wizard called at last.

He waved a hand at the roof and part of it promptly slid back, opening the room to the sky and the pale morning sun. Gralen stirred and opened a bleary eye.

"It's not morning yet?" he yawned, turning over and pulling the snootledown cover over his head.

Mr. Agyk chuckled. "Yes it is, and breakfast is getting cold."

A large green head shot up and in an instant the dragon was clambering out of the door, "I'm

coming, I'm coming!"

\*\*\*\*\*

After a large breakfast or four, they slowly made their way down to the map room.

"Don't you think we should try contacting Belloc first?" quizzed Galen. "We should at least know what's going on, what we're flying into!"

Mr. Agyk kept walking, "I have already tried, many times," he sighed. "Our mimmirian is working, but his is not. Whether it is broken or disabled I cannot tell, but there is no way of reaching him." He walked ahead a little way then stopped. "Here we are."

The map room lay before them. An enormous pyramidal shaped room with tilting walls covered with strange maps, drawings, star charts and atlases, and a pointed ceiling far above, inlaid with a single starstone. The chamber glowed with an eerie luminescence as the early light poured in from small shafts burrowed deep through the mountain rock.

In the centre of the chamber, directly below the starstone and its beam of soft light, stood a raised stone dais and upon it, a large domed table showing a layered '*Tapestry of Time*', as the wizard called it. Shimmering beneath an ever-altering veil, lay an overlapping view of both the old and new world. Shifting borders, changing coastlines, ancient and forgotten countries, newly discovered lands, islands and whole nations swallowed by the sea. Continents and landmasses torn in two, archaic and ruined állfr cities, the last few dworll strongholds and, glittering through the veil brighter than anything else, sparkled thousands and thousands of stars, each one a spreading human metropolis.

The old scholar sighed again and studied the table, then passing his hand over it, he revealed a small area below the mist.

"Now, we need to plan a route, the safest and most direct," he said seriously. "You are not as young as you used to be and my staff will not take us both, certainly not for long distances."

"I'm only 892 years old," grumbled Galen.

"You are 1364 years old, and not a day younger!" laughed the wizard. "Now, Belloc lives in

İssätun...”

“The land of the white bear... ‘*Arrktika*’!”

Mr. Agyk shuddered. “Urghh! Dreadful modern name! It has always been İssätun, and it always will be! We have not been there for a good many years.” He glanced over the map and fell silent for a moment as if troubled by some nagging worry. “I do hope Bell’ is all right, he sounded so very desperate. There are so few of us left now...” Mr. Agyk murmured, a strange sadness in his eyes. “I have allowed myself to lose touch with our own kind,” he paused and looked up at his friend and half smiled. “Well, it is never too late to rebuild kinships, eh?”

“‘*Arrktika*’,” teased Galen, grinning as the old man winced at the name, “it’s a fair way though, it’ll take one or two days at least, and we’ll probably have to spend the night there and fill up with supplies,” he added cheerfully.

“That is fine. I am sure Belloc will put us up. We could even make it a longer trip and call upon Wendya, on our way back...”

Galen’s eyes sparkled, and a mischievous grin spread over his face.

“Well, *that* is settled then!” laughed the wizard.

The sorcerer lent over the atlas and suddenly the veil parted to reveal a narrow pathway, no more than a sliver, winding from White Mountain steadily northward to the icy wastes of the Arctic.

“Good!” he chirped, “quite direct.”

The wizard packed their rather generous provisions and strapped them onto the dragon’s back. After changing into his green travelling clothes, the friends were at last ready. Mr. Agyk held his travelling staff aloft; a rather ordinary and scruffy looking cane of twisted willow wood with the merest sheen of silver covering the brownish fleck of its bark. He tapped it lightly on the floor and mumbled an incantation. A spherical orb of translucent glass sat perched on the top of the staff, and from this sphere burst a flame, dim at first then quick to brighten, that filled the room with a dazzling light.

Mr. Agyk closed his eyes as a faint milky haze emanated from the orb, enveloping them in a

shroud of the finest sheer gossamer. He smiled and clambered onto Gralen's back as they slowly disappeared from view. The two invisible travellers shuffled down a long winding tunnel until they came to a dead-end. The wizard lent forward and touched the stone wall in front of them, which promptly fell away. There stretched out before them, as a startling almost blinding white against the sky, stood a thousand snowy mountaintops.

"Ready? Then off we go!" cried the old man, as they leapt out of the tunnel mouth and soared up into the clear dawn sky.

A sudden gust of icy air hit them, taking the wizard's breath away. Gralen hardly noticed. He lowered his head into the wind, arched his back, breathed deeply and shot forward. As they soared higher and higher, he couldn't stop smiling.

On and on they flew, sometimes above the cloud, sometimes below, following the ridge of mountain peaks as they curled into the north. Hours passed and slowly the mountains thinned, falling away to hills and rolling green countryside. Gralen looked down at the tiny houses and grey thread-like roads as they rushed past, and licked his lips as they swooped over fields full of grazing cattle and sheep.

Still further they flew, Gralen quickening his pace now, his great wings finding their natural rhythm. Mr. Agyk sat high, perched on the ridge of the dragon's back, the wind billowing his robes, his silver hair streaming behind him, his keen eyes scanning the skies around for aeroplanes.

"There! A flying craft straight ahead!" the wizard warned.

Gralen dived below it.

"Never had to worry about those in the old days," he grumbled.

The morning then the afternoon waned, and the landscape blurred beneath them as vineyards became industrial outlets belching out thick clouds of chemical smoke, and farms gave way to factories and endless car parks. The travellers continued north but avoided the larger cities. Soon they were flying over sea, then land again, then sea once more, on into the darkening night as the acidic glare of a million street lights burned the skies behind them.

Time passed quickly now and just as dawn crept over the eastern sky, the dragon and wizard flew over the last expanse of wintry sea and were soon skimming low over ice and snow, a white blanket as far as the eye could see.

They journeyed on when suddenly Gralen veered off to the left as if following some unseen road sign. Less than two hours later the companions passed through a strangely dense fog bank and beyond it, a veil of grey mist known as *'The Dome'*; a protective shield encompassing Īssätun and its surrounding land shrouding it from unfriendly human eyes and acting as an enchantment to any creature who entered.

The land began to change now as a series of jagged ravines and crevasses appeared, each dropping to a fathomless depth. Large and beautifully sculpted canyons of ice gaped open beneath them.

“It is not far now!” Mr. Agyk shouted.

At that moment, the ground dropped sharply away into a deeper chasm, a vast sunken ice crater. Nestled at the bottom and surrounded by sheer cliffs of white, stretched Īssätun, like a sparkling diamond in the sun.

“I had forgotten how beautiful it is!” Mr. Agyk gasped, in awe of the sight before them.

Īssätun was *huge*, an immense and vibrant city of ice under a single roof. It covered the entire crater floor in a dazzling array of turrets and steeples all made of glittering white rock, crystal and snow. Rising above its parapets in undulating waves bobbed vast glassy spheres and huge galleried domes. Along the high walls, towers rose, flanking each entrance and glistening in the late morning sun. Hundreds of pale ribbons stretched across each gateway, dancing in the cold air like welcoming prayer flags or offerings to the gods.

Īssätun was more than just an immense collection of shops, traders and bustling markets. It remained one of the last outposts for any of the old races to gather: a vital meeting place, a refuge from the modern world, a centre of magic and learning and a crucial link to the past. Its great archives and records were known to be the largest and most complete in existence and a source of

immeasurable knowledge. Most importantly, amidst its labyrinth of twisting streets and busy alleyways and its cavernous open spaces, it was the best place to hear of any news.

A sense of excitement and frenetic activity pervaded the air as the friends eventually landed. Their invisibility veil fell away as they made their way towards one of the entrances.

Gralen glanced up at the fluttering flags, trying to read their scrawled inscriptions as they walked inside. Frozen sculptures and ice-trees celebrating the coming winter solstice and New Year were already in place and a million twinkling starlights decorated the snowy walls. It was busy. Enchanted polar bears wandered past, a large group of pixies were frantically trying to remember where they had parked their branch, teams of faeries and sprites were everywhere busily hanging up the last decorations, and amongst the general chaos a witch's convention from Bermuda had just arrived.

"Wendya could be here," smiled Gralen, smoothing down his scales.

"I doubt it," Mr. Agyk replied simply. "It would be too crowded for her. In fact, I doubt if she has *ever* been here!"

Gralen shrugged but still kept a lookout for a head of long raven hair.

İssätun was packed. The two friends wandered further in and finally decided to split up.

"I'll try to find some information out...see what's going on...oh, and I could get a New Year tree!" chirped Gralen excitedly.

New Year, although it fell considerably earlier in both áellfr and dworllian calendars, was the only 'human' festival commonly celebrated. It was also the only event the dragon enjoyed, due entirely to the receiving of presents and the copious amounts of rich food and drink.

"All right," answered the scholar. "I will head to the information centre then try and find Belloc. He used to live in the old quarter. I will meet you by the main waterfall in about three hours, and we can have a late lunch."

An hour passed quickly and İssätun got busier and busier. Just before half past twelve an announcement echoed over the speakers:

*“Mr. Nicholas is visiting us today, he’s on his way. Could the owner of a large orange and red patterned flying carpet, registration W.O.O.L.L.Y.1, please move their rug as they are parked in Mr. Nicholas’s space. Thank you.”*

Less than ten minutes later, an enormous and rather flamboyant sleigh pulled up outside. The glitzy wizard, Mr. Nicholas got out, signed a few autographs then wandered in carrying several large empty sacks.

The figure, dressed entirely in white arctic fur, darkened his sunglasses and disappeared into the swarming crowds, as his reindeers untied themselves and trotted in after.

“Humph! Not an attention seeker, eh?” scoffed Mr. Agyk. “He breaks just about every rule and I get roasted for interfering in human affairs!”

Another outbreak of excitement filled the air, even greater than before but mixed with something else, awe or perhaps fear. Mr. Agyk looked up at the kerfuffle and was amazed to see his old friend Belloc arrive, looking surprisingly robust, and followed by a group of very serious young wizards and dworlls. Before he could utter a word the sombre group swept past in a flurry of capes and hushed whispers, as all those around fell deathly silent.

“Bell’! Belloc! It is Marval! *Belloc!*” Mr. Agyk called after him. He tried to follow, but his friend had disappeared in the throng. “Blast!”

“That’s bin happenin’ a lot round ‘ere lately,” came a croaky voice.

The wizard turned to see a shopkeeper behind him. An old and stout leathery-skinned dworll, his white hair neatly brushed back into a tight ponytail, his plaited beard adorned with minute silver and blue beads.

“Pardon?” he asked, distracted by the dangling beads.

“It’s just I saw ya watchin’ those youngsters an’ that grand magus...I’m sorry sir, I should mind me’ own business as like it is.”

“No, no...please, what were you saying?” asked Mr. Agyk, curious at the look of concern on

the old seller's face.

The dworll hesitated and looked suspiciously at the wizard as if gauging his character.

"I meant nothin' by it sir..." he started at last, digging his hands into his apron pockets.

"But...well...I bin 'ere longer than most and I seen a great deal of things, some good, some not so good. But I've noticed like most of us that live and work 'ere, stallers and sellers and traders ya know...that things 'ave *not* bin as they should be. There's changes afoot, and not changes for the better I'll warrant..."

The old dworll seemed unduly nervous and looked intently at the wizard again. Then nodding to himself, as if he knew he was somehow safe, he came closer. He quietened his voice, and it seemed to Mr. Agyk that he had been labouring under a great and troubling weight for some time, a worry he had been unable to unburden himself with...until now.

"I'm a 'seer', ya see...not a powerful one mind you, but I can tell about people, an' I can tell that y'ur to be trusted," he began slowly, "well, we get allsorts 'ere ya see and allsorts bring news from far forgotten parts most of us 'ave never even wondered about! And well, by all accounts the rumours and stories of late 'ave bin dark, very dark...worrying ripples." The shopkeeper leaned against the edge of a large cauldron. "We get more and more of those young wizard an' dwizard types arrivin' every day...don't buy nothin' mind you, just rush past like that, all frownin' and secretive."

Mr. Agyk's curiosity was well and truly roused. "What stories?" he asked.

"Ah, that's the thing! Whatever's going on they've bin tryin' t' keep a lid on it...deal with it quietly themselves I'd guess, but things 'ave a habit of gettin' out and stayin' out. Whatever's got 'em worried we'll probably all know soon enough...when it's too late!" he added. "In either case, folks say they're tryin' t' get the ol' Order back together, t' discuss things...can't see it happenin' me' self...most of those folks, beggin' ya pardon, have long since gone."

Mr. Agyk gazed over the shoppers. "I wonder..." he mused.

"Anyway," the seller went on, clearing his throat, "I'm sure they'd want a distinguished



fellow such as y'urself t' help in matters, bein' learned as you are and wise no doubt beyond count!" he said with a false sort of laugh as he tapped his fingers on the cauldron.

Mr. Agyk understood the old seller's meaning, "I will take the large cauldron...the expensive one," he smiled.

"Oh, oh...fine choice sir, fine choice!" cooed the old dworll.

The green wizard wandered over to the gilt-edged cauldron. It was quite horrid.

"Have you heard anything specific? Any name or place mentioned? Anything at all?" he asked slowly, opening his drawstring purse.

The shopkeeper looked around furtively then lowered his voice again. "Well...only about the disappearances...mostly. People just vanishin', no warnin', nothin', just gone! We've even had some 'ere!"

"Here?"

"Oh yes sir, nasty business. Started a few years ago it did...we'd get one or two a year maybe. No one knew where they went, all their stuff would be 'ere but not them! A mystery t' be sure, but it was all kept quiet though," he tapped his nose. "It would always be worse in the dark months too...no matter what magic they'd conjure up t' try an' keep the sunshine shining, once winter's 'ere an' that sun sinks, things got worse. Some folks' think that's why them flags fly...that they're lost souls or prayers t' the missin'...most likely dead! But recently? Well, it's just bin plain bad!" the dworll shook his head, clearly upset over the whole matter. "We had another *four* go missin' just a few months back...fine youngsters like those wizards, and two more before that! Came 'ere they did, for a conference or some such grand meetin', and up and vanished right under our noses!"

"They were never found? Nothing was found?"

"Not a whisker! Mind you this is a huge place and no doubt there are parts of it that no soul would want t' go pokin' in, but the search went on for weeks and weeks." The shopkeeper hushed his voice again. "Then, only about four or five weeks ago, some torn robes were found frozen at the

bottom of an ice cave out there.” The seller waved his hand nervously towards the nearest exit. “Torn t’ tatters they were, and there was blood an’ bits all over ‘em! Terrible, just terrible it were. Folks reckon it might be the giant wolf A’kllut come back to curse us, or somethin’ worse. I hope it weren’t those youngens’. Anyway, all I know is people got more than a little scared an’ folks stayed away. Business has bin *very* bad!”

“Murdered...do you know who they were?” Mr. Agyk asked, greatly disturbed over the whole thing. “Do you know their names or where they came from?”

“No sir, I don’t, but records’ might ‘ave it, over in the Archives.”

“Thank you...” Mr. Agyk paused.

“Oh, Limmol sir, me’ names’ Limmol.”

“Thank you, Limmol,” smiled the sorcerer and giving the old dworll twice what the cauldron was worth he turned to leave.

“Ya’ ewer sir!”

“I will pick it up later...thank you again,” he nodded, leaving another pile of coins floating in the air as he quickly left, concern etched on his face. “I *have* been away far too long...” he murmured, shaking his head as he watched the shoppers jostle past. He thought of the message again, of Belloc’s words, of the fear in his voice. “Something in this place does not *feel* right,” he paused, looking at the faces around, their eyes seeming nervous now and downcast, “something terrible. No...I do not like this at all...I *must* speak to old Bell’!”

Mr. Agyk walked off at a swift pace, following in the general direction he had seen Belloc, past countless brightly decorated shop fronts and noisy market stalls, past crowded alleyways and smaller offshoots, in search of his old wizarding pal.

Meanwhile, Gralen, who had bought an enormous ice-tree, was now sitting and waiting for his friend and busy stuffing his face with his fifteenth lizard burger and tadpole shake.