

# Kriki's Gift

Book Two of the Geometry of Power



S. J. E. Brainerd

Copyright ©2013 by S. J. E. Brainerd  
Cover art Copyright ©2004 by S. J. E. Brainerd.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication, except the free download, may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published by:

**Brainerd Enterprises**

Livingston, Montana

[www.heirofkingmeldh.com](http://www.heirofkingmeldh.com)

ISBN13: 978-0-9747447-3-1

Sample Chapter  
Free Download

## Chapter XXIX

Carra soon discovered that Badger had a joyful bounce to his walk, which made him feel almost as if he were floating. She had expected the warhorse to have plodding gates because of his pronounced musculature, but he was anything but heavy beneath the saddle. His lilting steps punctuated the rhythm of her chant – as if the horse was joining her in the meditative power of Flindra’s prayer. She grew fond of this big, chestnut gelding as she settled into the comforting rhythm of the chant.

“Spirit around me; Spirit within me; Spirit protect me; Spirit direct me.”

The Queen’s chant eased her tension and touched her mind with a sense of peace. This simple prayer was such a heartening example of Flindra’s abiding faith in the goodness and love of the Divine. She smiled as she imagined her Queen using these words to combat fear in the days she served with the Rangers. It made her feel as close as a sister to her for Carra was entering into an adventure fraught with peril. She only hoped she would conduct herself with similar courage to what her Queen had evinced during her service in Kalmyk’s troop.

Carra suspected that many of the men around her were silently repeating the chant too, but the prayer didn’t seem to dull the sharp edge of their attentive scan of the surrounding landscape. Their expressions were focused and intent and their bodies translated the tension to their mounts so many of the horses strained at their bits and walked with exaggerated movements. It was a very different picture from the relaxed ride from Leidz to the Pass Gate just a few days before.

During the first hour of the ride, she glimpsed the presence of their troops only twice and understood how Lieutenant Benlof had expressed surprise at seeing how well hidden these men were. She knew that there were hundreds of men in position to battle the Valkea’s forces. General Ghesor was brilliant to be able to disperse his men so skillfully. It gave her a deep sense of security to know that the general and so many soldiers were hiding beyond observation and just waiting to spring into action.

As the sun rose higher in the sky, the low hanging clouds peeled away from the peaks revealing the new snow glinting with dazzling beauty in the sunlight. Occasionally, the weight of snow on a tree branch would bend the limb too steeply and the snow would fall in a crash of powder that sparkled in the air like a shower of rainbow dust. She remembered that as a child she would look at a snow covered landscape and could imagine that the sparkles in the snow were in reality an infinite assortment of delicious sweets. Once, when she was very young, she had tasted an especially beautiful icicle and had welded her tongue to the frozen treat. She smiled at the comforting silliness of her childhood memories. She left her mind focused on other pleasant memories of her childhood for it gave her a sense of peace and comfort.

\* \* \*

Flindra sat on a couch in the anteroom with her feet propped up on a stool and had a warm lap rug thrown over her legs. Luta and Anthela were with her to keep the fire going and to see to her needs, but she was no longer aware of their presence. She held the White loosely in her hand and the lids of her eyes were half-closed, reflecting her state of profound relaxation. She’d been very successful tapping into the mysterious energies emanating from the Spirit that resonated through the entirety of His Creation. She had started thinking of this energy signature as the Spirit’s Pulse, which is how all the others now referred to it.

She waited with her mind stilled so she could spot any change that would betray the Valkea’s presence. Flindra felt very much as if she were staring at the smooth surface of a reflecting pool, just waiting for a ripple to alert her that something was moving within the depths, something now con-

cealed by the glassy facade.

Kalmar and Gegen were present on the edges of her field of awareness and she was pleased. It had been difficult for them to reach this state of relaxation and deep awareness. They were both men of decisive action and resolute energy and initially they had found it challenging to sink into such a state of passive inactivity. Their unrelenting desire to succeed had eventually carried them into this meditative state so they were now all joined together in an awareness of the Spirit's Pulse. Their crystals acted synergistically to strengthen this link so although they were separated by space they were effectively one. They were three hunters patiently waiting for the quarry to come into their field of view so they could spring into action.

Kewero was also part of the joining for she'd taken her place in the crystal cave and was intimately aware of their efforts for their connection caused a visible rhythm in the pulsating lights in the cave. The rhythm amplified her perception of the network, but she didn't join in with the chorus of power. She needed to see more than just the activities of the Valkea. There were other sources of evil in the world, and she needed to keep a close watch on them too. Vetlok had tried to draw upon the powers of the evil seed during his battle with Flindra and it was possible the Valkea might try to link with others to increase her powers. Kewero waited in watchful attentiveness so she could alert the Champions to any other danger.

Leitho sensed the psychic joining of the Champions as well as Kewero's attentive overview of the entire situation, but he remained more detached than any of them. Sannhet filtered his discernment of the Spirit's pulse so it wasn't as sharp and he had the distinct impression that he needed to remain somewhat distant so he could be a contact to the soldiers around him. The Champions were closely focused on the Valkea; Kewero was one step further away so she could see the activities of more than the Darkness beneath Muluk's Pass. He was one layer more distant yet and would be aware of the human scale of this battle. Thus, they were all ready to act in their assigned positions as soon as the Valkea surfaced.

\* \* \*

Carra had no challenge seeing the beauty and grandeur of the Spirit's presence in this magnificent landscape. At the same time, the splendor of the day made it nearly impossible for her to comprehend the monstrous threat of the Valkea's existence at the roots of the mountains, a presence growing and spreading like a canker in the darkness. Somewhere beneath the loveliness of sun, snow, rock and sky was an evil underworld of staggering dimensions.

From what she had been told, it was a two-hour ride to the place where Wehgert routinely dropped off his supplies to the horde. He had confessed there was a cave entrance hidden by an overhang of rock just inside one of the side valleys. The Valkea shielded this entrance from discovery from prying eyes so even though it wasn't far from the road, it had never been seen or its existence even suspected. Carra knew that many of the soldiers assumed that they would be attacked near or at this place. If that were so, they had but an hour remaining before they would be attacked.

She felt a heightening of tension in the pit of her stomach, but wasn't afraid of the emotion for she was playing a vital role and was proud of her contribution. When the Valkea took the offered bait, she would surface, exposing herself and her hellish horde to the powerful forces of Unaya. The Valkea would face complete destruction, for Carra had absolute faith in the King and Queen's ability to overwhelm their opponent. Then they could turn their attention to the Valkea's lair and cleanse the world of the unholy offspring she was producing and nurturing deep within the bowels of the mountains. She and her dark world would be destroyed and it would be done in a manner that wouldn't endanger the King's life.

Her thoughts lingered on the vision of the nest of monsters being incubated in the nursery somewhere beneath them. She had listened intently to the report Leitho and the King had given in the council and had picked up on the horror and revulsion in their words and demeanors. They had

spoken of King Meldh's experience with similar inhuman beasts in his time and she thought of the nightmare reality that these monsters were here already, here in her time and in her world - in truth just miles away.

Fear and loathing started to inch their way into her thoughts and unconsciously she stopped repeating the Queen's chant while she remembered what the King had said and in her imagination she pictured the reptilian-like offspring of human mothers. She shuddered in revulsion at the vision of beasts with human intelligence, all under the control of the Nameless Ones. They were creatures born of human mothers but designed to destroy humanity.

Her thoughts drifted to the stories she'd heard about the altar and the hideous rites of darkness and violence the Valkea had orchestrated there. If something went wrong with their plans and if the wild throngs of the enemy overwhelmed her escort, she might find herself facing the bite of a sacrificial blade and the ultimate profanity of cannibalism after her death!

Carra's fear grew and she could no longer see the beauty in the landscape. Instead, the rugged geometry of the mountainous country became wild and dangerous. The high ground to the right seemed to grow steeper, rockier and nearer until it crowded the road so they were now enveloped in menacing shadows. The cliff face seemed to squeeze them toward the river, which ran ten to fifteen feet below the level of the road in this place and coursed dangerously over jagged rocks. Here in the shade of the cliff, there was ice beneath the snow and she worried about Badger falling and crushing her beneath his weight while the riders behind her struggled to avoid trampling her.

The Nameless Ones hadn't been successful in deceiving animals so far, but was that due to inability and limits to their powers or merely due to the fact that they had not used this tactic before? This was a possibility they hadn't even discussed in the council! What kind of fools had they been? This was an obvious oversight on all their parts. She suddenly wondered what terrible things could happen if the Valkea turned her fell will to the horses and drove them mad with fear. A stampede of frenzied horses on the icy ground could prove disastrous.

A dribble of nervous sweat rolled down her back and she shivered, not from the cold but from nervous panic as a vision worse than the horse falling seeped into her thoughts. The possibility of Badger grabbing the bit between his teeth and plunging insanely into the depths of the river beside her was a thought that filled her mind with dread and her heart with fear. She had never felt comfortable standing on the lip above a steep slope and the idea of meeting her death by crashing into jagged rocks was particularly alarming to her. She was an accomplished horsewoman but what hope had she to stop a panicked horse on slippery ground?

Her uncomfortable thoughts pulled her focus deeper into the fear until it was nearly choking her reason. Unconsciously, her body translated her growing terror to her hands and she slowly started to tighten the reins and stiffened her position in the saddle. Badger finally protested with a snort and he pulled against her grasp to loosen the reins. His ears were turned toward her – not in an aggressive fashion – but as if he was trying to gauge her mood for she had so dramatically changed how she was connecting to him through rein and saddle.

Carra noticed what she was doing and eased her grip. Fear still clouded her thoughts and out of instinct and long habit, she uttered a silent prayer for help.

"Spirit, please protect me."

The words reminded her of Flindra's chant, which she now drew back into her attention and repeated forcefully and emphatically in a low voice. She didn't care if the soldiers heard her – she needed to hear herself pray. Her thoughts cleared as she spoke and heard the protective words and she shook her head in disgust at her previous foolishness. Why was she thinking this nonsense and getting herself all worked up into a panic? The Valkea's forces had no chance of overwhelming the might of the men protecting her, much less the hundreds of experienced warriors who were in position to jump into battle as soon as the enemy surfaced.

She glanced about herself and saw tension and, yes, even fear on the faces of the men around her and she instantly knew the near panic she had felt was not of her making. They may be an hour

away from the spot they anticipated to be ambushed at, but the Valkea was already toying with their thoughts!

“Men of Unaya!” she called out loudly. “The Enemy is upon us and clouding our reason. Spirit around us,” she shouted. “Spirit within us!”

Lieutenant Haxton heard her and shook his head to clear the grim and dangerously foolish thoughts that had filled his mind to distraction. He suddenly realized that the sanctity of his own thoughts had been violated, and was embarrassed that he'd allowed it to happen. He turned his glance to Carra, took note of the courage filling her eyes, and was deeply impressed that she had been the first one to recognize that the lies of the Valkea's deceptions had been twisting their minds. She may be a sheltered daughter of a noble family, but she possessed intelligence, wisdom, and courage in large measure. She was an equal to any of the soldiers he'd had the privilege to serve with.

“Spirit protect us!” he chanted loudly in unison with her. “Spirit direct us!”

Other men joined in the chorus of the Queen's chant and soon their impassioned voices became a clarion call of reason, a wave of truth that rippled outward to free the minds of their comrades from the grip of the Valkea's deceptions.

\* \* \*

Darrine had unconsciously sunk into a state of gray depression. Her mind was filled with doubts, feelings that she was too old to have any use or purpose remaining in life. It didn't matter that she'd been placed in a position where she was likely to meet her doom. She was expendable and everyone knew it - that was everybody except for herself. She was an old and foolish woman who had deceived herself into believing that she still had value.

Darrine heard the voices at the rear of the column rising in a shouted repetition of the Queen's chant and felt the strange sense of apathy lift from her mind. In an instant, her thoughts cleared and she understood that the unfamiliar lethargy was not of her own making. Anger replaced the doubt for she was outraged that she'd succumbed so easily to the Valkea's illusions. The bitch wasn't going to be able to do that again!

Turning, she looked at Trooper Kulm and finally realized that he'd long ago stopped singing his romantic ballads to the decoy Lady Carra in the wagon. She watched him shake himself like a wet dog. “What in the name of the Spirit was I thinking?” he muttered in disgust.

Darrine started to speak to him to let him know that he wasn't alone in being victimized by the Valkea's deception, but her horse staggered as three arrows pierced deeply into the mare's flesh, one severing an artery in her neck. Darrine barely got her feet free of the stirrups before the bay collapsed to the ground.

“We're under attack!” Captain Rodal bellowed. “Defensive positions!” He spurred his horse forward to protect the decoy wagon.

The captain knew that the safest thing to do would be to charge onward and simply move out of range of the attacking archers. However, the entire purpose of this expedition was to draw out the Valkea so they had to remain in place until the monster appeared. The best they could do was to take a defensive position. All his officers knew what was expected of them so with discipline the men quickly moved into defensive postures.

To add realism to the charade they were playing, Sergeant Garbarek quickly pushed the fake Carra into the back of the wagon for this protective move would surely be expected. Then he put a horn to his lips and blew a far-reaching blast to draw in the soldiers who were hiding in the surrounding areas.

Darrine found herself on the ground in the midst of a hailstorm of arrows, although none of the bolts were being aimed directly at her now that her horse was downed. As expected, the Valkea's fighters were trying to keep her alive so they could capture her. She noticed that Sergeant Garbarek had been shot at and was now bristling with arrows stuck in his cloak and surcoat, but he appeared to be safe inside his armor. The archers avoided firing directly at the wagon so they could take Carra alive,

too. Trooper Kulm's horse was down and he leaped off the dying animal to jump next to Darrine with his sword drawn to protect her as she struggled up from the ground. He had two arrows sticking from his cloak, but they had penetrated no deeper than the cloth because of his breastplate.

Captain Rodal interjected his horse between the Valkea's archers and Kulm and Darrine.

"Get back!" he commanded as he leveled his lance and held his shield high to protect them as best as he could.

Other horsemen followed the captain and helped him screen Darrine and Kulm. The vanguard closed in from the front of the wagon so it was surrounded protectively. However, it made little difference for the arrows were coming from above and not from the side so the rain of projectiles continued around the wagon.

"Where are they?" Rodal demanded in frustration as he looked up the slope and scanned the area, but couldn't see where the archers were shooting from.

Other areas of the column now came under attack and it was clear the Valkea's archers were shooting the horses for they were easier targets than the armored and shielded men. The air was filled with squeals of pain as the horses were hit.

"Archers shoot back at your best guess at where the bastards have to be!" Rodal roared in frustration.

The archers stationed on the wagons began to fire up the slope hoping to hit their unseen enemies. The horsemen began to cluster closely together so they could shield each other and their horses from a killing shot. The mounted men also were also attempting to protect the horses harnessed to the wagons. Naturally, the men guarding Carra clustered closely about her so no arrows could find her.

One of the horses pulling the decoy wagon was hit and the gelding screamed out in pain as he reared up in panic. Several arrows hit into his exposed side and he dropped to the ground dragging his harness-mate down with him. Sergeant Garbarek grabbed a battleaxe from beneath the seat and jumped down to free the horse from the harness. In a moment, he'd freed the mare from her traces and then he grabbed the reins to pull her up. The mare responded to Garbarek's urging and stood. As soon as she was up, the sergeant leaped on her back. Once mounted, he galloped her around the side of the wagon so he could help Darrine and Kulm escape.

Darrine drew her dagger and ran to Moonbeam to release her before she was hit with an arrow.

"Mount up," Kulm hollered at her when he realized her intentions. "We've got you covered." He vaulted up behind Garbarek who kept the horse between Darrine and the archers.

Moonbeam was saddled and bridled so she could be ridden in an emergency. Darrine slashed through the lead tying her to the wagon and vaulted into the saddle without bothering with the stirrup.

Suddenly, a flight of arrows sliced through the air above them to blanket the landscape to the right of the road. Rangers had taken up position on the steep and wooded slope north of the river and were plying the positions of the attackers with a steady rain of arrows. They were using long bows so they had the carry to easily make their shots land on the slope across the river from their positions. Rodal and his men still couldn't see any of the Valkea's people, but the pace of the attack slowed – presumably because the enemy was taking shelter from the Rangers' ferocious counterattack.

Captain Rodal turned his horse out of the line of defenders to look at his men. He could see that at least two of his men were down and he counted seven dead horses, not including Darrine and Kulm's. There were both men and horses numbering among the wounded. "Those on the south side of the road - hold your positions," he commanded. He looked at several of the men perched on the wagons. "Get our casualties loaded on the wagons. We leave no one behind," he yelled.

All of the men knew that the Valkea's minions were cannibals and no man would leave a fellow Guardsmen behind to be so defiled. Men started to jump from the wagons to help their wounded comrades and to load the bodies of the two men who had been killed.

The Rangers kept up an uninterrupted stream of arrows from their positions on the north side of the river. Rodal continued to gaze up at the slope to see if he could spot what was happening. It was obvious at this point that the Valkea was shielding her fighters from view. Surely, some of the Rangers'

arrows were finding targets, but there were no cries of pain or other sounds coming from the Valkea's people. Perhaps she could disguise sounds as easily as she could sights.

The air was suddenly rent with an unearthly screech of outrage. The scream was immediately followed by a roaring sound akin to a wind rushing towards them. When the blast of energy reached them a vision of darkness exploded into everyone's thoughts. There was no hiding from this overwhelming sense of doom. Some men staggered against the crushing will filling their minds with madness and held their hands to their ears in an ineffectual attempt to block out the insanity being forced into their thoughts. Others became unmoving statues for they were powerless to do anything for their minds were so weighed down by the torment. Eventually, several of the men were utterly overwhelmed by the Valkea's mental assault and they lost consciousness and collapsed, falling off the wagons or from their saddles.

Carra leaned against Badger's neck, buried her face in his mane, and hid beneath her shield. Her thoughts were filled with writhing and twisted shadows of evil, things of darkness beyond the knowledge of human beings. She couldn't escape from this nightmare and wished she could faint or even die to escape this horror.

Just when she felt she couldn't take any more of the punishing assault on her senses, the madness abruptly ended and she was suddenly freed of the nightmare. It was like a door had slammed shut in her mind to keep the darkness out. She gasped for air almost as if she'd been saved from drowning by being pulled from a dark and muddy quagmire. She breathed heavily and tried her best not to even think about what had just happened to her.

"My Lady?" Haxton finally queried and he grasped her arm gently. "Are you well?" His voice was concerned, but strained as well for he was still battling the effects of the Valkea's attack on his own sanity.

She pushed up and was glad for his supportive hold for she felt dizzy and disoriented. When she turned to look at him, her attention was instead drawn to a blazing light far up on the slope.

"Look up there," she called in astonished wonder. "That has to be the Valkea. I think the King and Queen must be attacking. That's why the horrible madness stopped."

Haxton turned to look, as did the men around them. High above the road was a rock ledge and perched on the ledge was an intensely bright circle of light. It shimmered with such intensity that no one could look at it for long. The lieutenant's eyes drifted down and he suddenly saw what the Valkea had been shielding from them before with her dark deceptions.

The rocky slope below the ledge was filled with fighters. Many were dead - having been killed by the storm of arrows the Rangers had sent their way. The survivors stared up in stunned shock at the ledge above them for the Valkea had disappeared from sight behind the curtain of blazing light. After a moment's pause, they charged upward forgetting their attack on the Guardsmen below. They had to go to the aid of their matriarch for she was the meaning behind their existence and must be saved at all cost. As soon as they moved into the open, the Rangers shot them down with deadly accuracy for they now had a clear view of their foes. Heedless of the fact that they were being massacred, the horde struggled upward with singular focus. They had to save the Valkea.

The captain could see that the Valkea's fighters were no longer concerned with his people and knew that this was their chance to get away. They had done their job of drawing out the Valkea. Now he needed to get Carra to safety. "Let's get out of here, fast," he bellowed. "Load up the wounded. Push the dead horses out of the way so the wagons can pass."

Rodal looked down the ranks to assess the damage done to his people. Far down the line, he spotted Lieutenant Haxton for he was nearly a head taller than the men around him. In the crush of riders, he glimpsed Carra and was pleased she was still astride the chestnut gelding. She was safe for the moment, but that could change in an instant. They needed to get away. To remain in the vicinity of the Valkea and her horde was insanity.

His command spurred men into activity, but fear certainly added to the speed with which the men jumped to their tasks. Minds and souls had been singed by the Valkea's attack and no one wanted

to linger here and chance a repeat of the experience. Soon all those who had collapsed were loaded on to the wagons alongside the wounded. The bodies of dead horses were pulled out of the way of the wagons and left on the side of the road. There were several horses that had been wounded too severely to continue on – they would have to be left behind for others to care for once the battle was over. Their riders joined the soldiers on the wagons.

As the men worked, Carra looked up the line to see if she could spot Darrine. Since tall men surrounded her, it took her some effort to see around them to spot the watcher. It was with a sense of relief that she finally saw Darrine mounted on Moonbeam. Both appeared to have survived the attack unharmed.

Carra then glanced upward to the light on the ledge above. The glow was steadily growing in intensity and was now painfully bright to gaze at. Even so, she couldn't keep her eyes from glancing at the light for just looking at it seemed to touch her soul in some mysterious fashion. The dark and writhing horrors that had manifested in her thoughts were fading as if they were mere spots on the fabric of her soul and were being bleached by the intensity of the summer sun. It was incredibly comforting to know that her beloved King and Queen were doing battle and apparently succeeding.

"My Lady, are you well?" Haxton asked again for he noted her expression was unfocused and distant.

"I am, Lieutenant," she replied as she turned her eyes to him and gave him a small smile.

"We'll be riding again shortly. Are you ready?"

"I am," she remarked and took a deep breath as she pulled her mind back into clear focus for she knew the danger of their position. "It is well that we will be leaving as soon as possible for the Valkea's fighters may be distracted at the moment, but that's not going to last. When the Valkea is destroyed they're going to go insane with a thirst for revenge. It would not do at all to be here when that happens."

Haxton smiled and bowed his head to her. "Well stated, my Lady. You've summarized our position very clearly."

She gave him a quick smile.

"Keep your wits about you, gentlemen for there are more fighters out there," the captain shouted.

Although Carra and Haxton couldn't really hear what Rodal was saying, it interrupted their low conversation. They turned their attention to the front of the column.

"Move out – hand gallop," the captain ordered. The command was repeated several times as it was passed through the ranks so all heard it.

Carra was relieved they were leaving this horrid place at a gallop, even though part of her was curious to know what was going to happen. Her common sense overrode her curiosity, however. The ruse had worked and they'd successfully drawn out the Valkea so the King and Queen could destroy her. She was proud that her suggestion had worked. However, the Valkea's soul searing assault had left her feeling shaken and a bit vulnerable and she wouldn't feel safe until they were on the far side of Karlaz.

\* \* \*

When the Valkea's scouts had brought word of Carra's presence on the road to her, she had known a surge of heady exhilaration for taking the woman and her servant would give her a supreme chance for vengeance. What fools these idiots were to think it was safe to ride forth today. Did they really think that they had closed the only entrance she had to her world? Did they really believe that all her fighters had died defending the altar? She snorted in contempt. Today she would relieve the soldiers of such foolish arrogance! When the woman and her escort came into range she knew her people would slaughter the soldiers and the two women would soon be within her hands. Then she would celebrate her victory with a sacrificial offering to the Kwetwer. She didn't need an altar to carry out her sacrifice and again she snorted - the Rangers were fools to think they had neutralized her. Today

she would show them! She licked her thin lips in anticipation of the gory revels that would follow the sacrifice. The Kwetwer would be pleased.

The Valkea stood just inside a cave entrance high on the slope above the road. This cave was one of her many sentry outposts and from here she had a commanding view of the area below. Her eyes were not accustomed to the sunlight of the surface world so she wore a gray, gauzy veil over her face. Some of her best fighters were standing next to her, awaiting her command to rush down to the road to join the battle. She had already ordered her most skilled archers into position on the slope below the cave. It was littered with talus and provided good cover for her people so they were unlikely to be spotted even without her shielding illusions. With her powers protecting them, they were effectively invisible. She always enjoyed casting forth her shields to hide things for it gave her a sense of superiority knowing the fools didn't have a clue how to do this. Woe to the soldiers and the witless women they were bringing within range of her grasp!

When she was satisfied with the state of her planned ambush, the Valkea turned her thoughts in the direction of the road and the Pass Gate. Today the fools were going to learn that she was capable of doing far more than just shielding her fighters. Projecting her dark thoughts into the minds of her enemies would distract them away from their duties and eventually drive them to the brink of madness. She intended to weaken the men protecting the girl by destroying their ability to act. They would ride helplessly into her ambush like so many cattle herded to the butcher's axe. They would be easy prey for her archers.

Projecting her thoughts westward, her mind eventually touched the presence of Carra and her people. She couldn't see them, but she felt them and started to slowly channel the power of the Kwetwer towards them. It was important to be subtle for her control worked best when she kept her efforts below people's perceptions. Then, they wouldn't realize what was happening and thus couldn't defend against the lies poisoning their very thoughts.

The shadowed power of Darkness would sink to its own level and nourish the thoughts of like kind in a person's mind, and renew them until they grew strong enough to gain expression. Fear, doubt, guilt, greed, and jealousy were just a few of the negative emotions and thoughts, which could be nourished by the Darkness. Once these negative thoughts took root and started to grow, the Valkea could pour more energy into her effort so the dark thoughts would throttle any possible resistance and gain mastery over the mind. Inducing madness at this stage of control took only a minor effort if she had to push that far. She had never failed in her control mind games and was smugly anticipating her victory over these fools.

The Valkea continued to weave her dark energies around Carra's caravan until the foremost riders came into view. Her veil obscured some of her view, but she could make out the dark shapes of the horsemen against the snowy background. With an imperious wave of her hand, she silently ordered her soldiers to prepare for the attack. Her lips twisted into a contorted smile in anticipation of victory when suddenly her heart convulsed with pain when the shouted chorus of the Queen's chant reached her ears. She staggered and one of her lieutenants reached for her arm to steady her.

"Punish them!" she hissed angrily as she pulled away from his grasp. "Kill them! Kill them!"

Whispers buzzed down the slope as her orders were quietly relayed to the archers. Soon the Valkea was rewarded with the sounds of battle and she watched with a renewing sense of pleasure at the scene of chaos enfolding below her. Laughter and snickers broke from the lips of those around her when they took note that Rodal's archers were shooting blindly up the slope. From that angle the arrows struck harmlessly against the rocks.

"So much for the might of Wesperos," her chief lieutenant mocked. "They're utterly helpless!"

"Let's make a new altar supported by their bones," suggested another.

The Valkea joined in the ensuing laughter and stepped a bit farther out on the ledge to get a better view of the killing.

All of the laughter and jeers came to an abrupt halt when an unexpected flood of arrows started landing on the slope, actually hitting and killing her archers.

“No!” she screeched in outrage at seeing the unexpected carnage on the slope.

For a second time, these idiots were besting her fighters! It was time to put a stop to it. The Valkea drew up to her full height as she screamed in fury and then stretched her arms and pointed down the slope at her enemies. Gathering her will she sent the full force of her powers of Darkness down to crush them. They were going to pay!

\* \* \*

“Did you feel that?” Flindra thought suddenly and broke the level of relaxation she needed to sense the Spirit’s Pulse. Realizing what she’d done she immediately focused her will into the White.

“I felt great anger and outrage ripping across my awareness,” she announced when Kalmar and Gegen joined her in a direct contact with their crystals. “Do you feel that?”

“I do,” Kalmar quickly answered. “I also sense danger. I think it’s time to go to Carra and see if the Valkea has surfaced.”

Flindra paused as the White began to feed her disturbing images. “They’re under attack! The Valkea is broadcasting forth thoughts of madness. Kalmar, you and I need to focus on an image of Carra so Gegen can follow us to her.”

“Understood.”

The two immediately directed their focus to their memories of Carra, bringing in all the details they could into the shared vision.

“I have the image,” Gegen announced after a moment.

“Let’s go then,” Flindra said.

Using the clear picture of Carra’s life essence they projected their energies to the site of the ambush. It wasn’t necessary or even desirable to reveal their presence to the combatants, so they didn’t focus their energies to the point that their images appeared. However they were present with enough power to be ready for battle. They immediately took note of the fact that Carra’s caravan had suffered a conventional attack, but of greater concern was the Valkea’s mental onslaught.

“They’ll be driven mad,” Flindra warned in an urgent tone. “We must isolate the Valkea so she can do no more harm.”

“Where is she?” Kalmar demanded. “Where’s the Valkea?”

“Up on the slope,” Gegen answered for he’d been searching for her from the moment they had projected their energies to this place. “See her standing on the rock ledge?”

Flindra and Kalmar looked up and spotted a hooded figure standing on a rock ledge, high above the level of the road. There was a cave entrance behind the Valkea and all three could feel the presence of Darkness emanating from the bowels of her lair.

“Should we get closer?” Gegen asked.

“We’re close enough to press our attack,” Flindra answered. “Our first task must be containing the Valkea until Carra’s caravan has a chance to escape. As soon as they are out of range, we can go on the offensive. Imagine a shell of energy, which will contain her powers. Make it real in your thoughts first and then we’ll spring it around her once it’s fully formed in our imaginations. We can’t allow her a chance to see what we’re doing with a gradual buildup. That would give her a chance to counter our efforts.”

“Or unleash an even worse assault on our people,” Kalmar added in agreement.

“So true. Each of us will certainly imagine something different but I think our diverse approaches will actually strengthen our efforts. Think of it as three separate notes, which form a musical chord of stunning harmony, instead of a single tone played in unison.”

“Understood,” the two men replied.

“Bring ample detail into your vision, then it will be easier to make it real. Any questions?”

“I have none,” Kalmar answered tersely.

“Nor I. Let’s get to it,” Gegen replied with restless energy filling his response.

“May the Spirit be with us and bless us with victory,” Flindra prayed.

With her instructions given, she focused her attentions to the task at hand and envisioned a sphere filled with the light and love of the Spirit. The goodness of the Spirit was the ultimate antithesis of the Valkea’s darkness. Confined within the sphere, the Valkea wouldn’t be able to press her attack for her dark powers would be neutralized just like a shadow vanishes when exposed to direct light. Flindra used the recent experience she’d gained when she’d cut off the power of the Nameless Ones to rescue Heleena. During that confrontation, she had sought to isolate the child from the control of the Enemy; now in very much the same manner, she would isolate the Valkea from the source of her powers. It was perhaps a soft approach to a battle, but she expected it to be an effective one.

After she rescued Heleena, Ghesor had complimented her on her choice of an indirect approach in that contest with the Nameless Ones. He had explained that there was great wisdom in setting the indirect to act directly and making adversity act as an advantage. History showed that those who triumph in a confrontation knew beforehand how to analyze the indirect and the direct and to use it to their advantage. It had taken her some thought to figure out the full import what he’d been saying, but now she understood his wisdom. Acting contrary to what was expected in a battle, in and of itself, created an advantage. It was a superior strategy to appear soft and indirect when an enemy anticipated the hard and straight, and unwaveringly direct when the opposite expectation held true. She thought of Ghesor’s lesson on strategy and focused her thoughts on the light of the Spirit to counter the darkness of the Nameless Ones in her indirect challenge of the Valkea.

Kalmar had an instinctive and keenly sharp sense of justice. As the King, he was in fact the highest judge in the land and what the Valkea and her wild horde had done was a crime against all of his people. She and her band needed to be neutralized so they couldn’t carry out the evil designs of the Nameless Ones. Revenge was not justice - in truth it fed into the Darkness - but it became necessary to isolate and destroy evil to prevent it from inflicting harm on the innocents of the land. He tapped into the righteous fury he had felt when he’d learned of Blazina’s ordeal and the infuriated outrage that had filled his heart at seeing the nightmare spawn of the Valkea’s horde born to threaten and torment his people. His anger was not hot and reckless; rather it was cool, patient, and focused. He fed this energy into his vision of inexorable justice. Calling upon his anger to fuel his attack was akin to a taproot finding a deep well of water, which drew strength into the branches high above. He had passed judgment on the Valkea and was now readying to carry out the sentence. Knowing that the very concepts of truth and justice would be an anathema to her, he focused his thoughts on these things to fill his zone projected around her with an environment that would surely weaken her.

Gegen was a soldier and his mind was conditioned to think in terms of defensible lines and barriers. A strong wall could keep an enemy out, or in, as the situation required. He sensed what Flindra and Kalmar were planning and understood they were focusing their energies on conditioning the space within a tight zone around her to neutralize the Valkea’s strength, but their efforts would only succeed if the barrier itself held. Thus, he concentrated the full force of his thoughts on creating an impenetrable barrier that the Valkea could not hope to breach. He thought of stone - freshly quarried granite – a rock free of any planes of weakness. Granite stood at the root of most mountain ranges and bore the weight of incalculable tons. This was the stone, which was the first choice of masons and the rock that was capable of standing inviolate for eons.

He thought of the properties of granite and incorporated all these characteristics into his vision of the barrier they would soon be projecting around the Valkea. He had come to understand that fighting with the crystals was doing combat within the realm of thought and imagination. He knew full well that he wouldn’t actually see granite appearing to entomb the Valkea, but he accepted with faith that the attributes of granite could be called into existence around her. He focused on these things and awaited Flindra’s command to attack.

In took but a moment for the three champions to prepare for this battle and Flindra could feel when they were ready.

“Now,” she commanded.

Acting in perfect unison, they attacked and surrounded the Valkea with their combined wills.

\* \* \*

Leitho was immediately aware when Kalmar and the others jumped into action to contain the Valkea. He looked at Stelgan.

“The Valkea has surfaced,” he announced grimly. “The battle has begun.”

“It’s early,” the lieutenant remarked with some surprise. “Do you sense anything else, sir?”

Leitho closed his eyes for a moment so he could better isolate the reaction of Sannhet from the distraction of his other senses. “Lady Carra and her escort have been attacked,” he finally reported. “I can sense Queen Flindra’s concern as well as the King’s outrage.”

Stelgan frowned. “I’ll pass word to Colonel Stellag.” He hurriedly crossed the room to send a messenger with the news.

Leitho observed Kalmar closely. The look of almost sleepy relaxation on his face had vanished and in its stead was an expression of keen concentration and grim determination. The Blue started glowing in answer to his will and soon the room was bathed in a light of sapphire hue as the King’s battle intensified. Leitho had seen this before when watching Flindra fight her battles and knew the light was a reflection of the power being used to bring home a victory. He also knew what came after the fight – exhaustion and collapse.

“Stelgan,” he mentioned in a low voice, when the lieutenant returned. “When the battle is over, the King will collapse and it may happen quickly and unexpectedly. I suggest you take your position close to him so you can catch him before he falls from his chair.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Please, just call me Leitho.”

Stelgan flashed him a smile. “Yes, Leitho.”

He gave him a lopsided grin in return. “Thanks.” His attention then returned to Kalmar and while he watched the King he kept his hand pressed against Sannhet so he could better receive any impressions from the gem.

\* \* \*

The Valkea was veiled when Flindra’s mind reached her so she couldn’t see the monster, but she recognized the power of the Nameless Ones. She felt the numbing cold of Evil surrounding the Valkea but snapped her sphere filled with the essence of the Spirit into position before her mind and soul recoiled from the contact. Kalmar and Gegen were with her – as close as her own thoughts and she rejoiced at having such capable and resourceful allies fighting with her. Their powers joined with hers so smoothly and uniformly that there was no separation between them. They were truly three fighting as one.

The Valkea was caught at the center of the power sphere and suddenly was confused for she couldn’t direct her thoughts to the Darkness when she was surrounded by light and hope and love. The situation stunned her into immobility for she didn’t know what had happened and she had no inkling of how to fight back any more than snow could battle the heat of the summer sun.

“Hold her,” Flindra broadcasted to the men.

Without waiting for a response from them she drove her thoughts deeper into her awareness of the Divine Presence. The Spirit was pure love, power, beauty, and an infinite reservoir of light and all things good. Flindra contemplated these things and felt the Valkea’s power fade ever so much. She still remained unable to break out of the imprisoning barrier emplaced around her.

“Carra’s escort has gone,” Gegen announced for he’d kept watch while Flindra and Kalmar focused their efforts on containing the Valkea. “Let’s press our attack,” he urged.

Nearly at that same instant, the Valkea surprised them with a stinging blow, which nearly over-

whelmed their efforts. The Champions' barrier around her held, but the atmosphere within it shifted, becoming cold and dark and filled to capacity with a sense of utter despair.

What Flindra hadn't considered when she planned on isolating the Valkea from the power of the Nameless Ones was the fact that the Valkea's heart served as a portal to the Darkness. She was linked to the Enemy so completely that she was a point where the Kwetwer could access the world. Now their Evil flowed forth to do battle. The Valkea was useful; few in the world had reached her level of power so she was worth defending.

Flindra could sense the shadowy presence of the Kwetwer in their reality beyond the Valkea as they became aware of the attack and began to funnel their power through her and into the world. She recognized this evil for she'd felt the mind numbing horror before, having experienced such an intimate contact with the essence of the Nameless Ones when she had battled with the evil seed. She held fast against the maelstrom of madness, but Kalmar and Gegen recoiled from the soul-singeing, mind-ripping, and sanity-destroying thoughts of the Kwetwer. Both had skirted the awareness of Darkness during their apprenticeship with their crystals, but neither man was prepared to face the full force of this flood of malice. No one could imagine the full malevolence of the Nameless Ones until facing them directly.

"Hold fast!" she commanded as she projected her thoughts around them to anchor them to sanity. "Think of the Spirit and all that you hold most dear in this life." She took the full brunt of the Kwetwer's attack to give the others a chance to recover.

Kalmar and Gegen rallied behind Flindra's mental shield and steeled their thoughts against the madness. They were soldiers and immediately counterattacked by filling their minds with all things positive to counter the poisoned Darkness. Their efforts released her from having to stave off the full battering. Just as she had done when facing the evil seed, Flindra drove her focus deep into her extended memories until she experienced the sense of oneness with all that was now and all that gone before her. Due to the overlapping proximity of Kalmar and Gegen's thoughts, she dragged them with her so they, too, became aware of the encompassing wholeness and interconnectivity of life. Existence was an exquisitely complex tapestry with the color and grandeur of the weft threads fully interwoven and supported by the sturdy warp filaments, in a masterful pattern of the Spirit's design.

Fortified by this experience, the champions struck back at the Valkea and through her to the Kwetwer beyond. If the power of the Nameless Ones was experienced as a paralyzing coldness, the answering challenge of the Champions was expressed as blindingly bright light, which produced a heat capable of melting a cold and evil heart. For several moments, the opposing forces cancelled each other into nullity, but then Flindra, Kalmar, and Gegen drew deeper into their personal energies and the crystals responded with a power increase of three to the power of three.

Within the confined sphere they had projected around her, the Valkea could do nothing to hold off the energy of the crystals. She was in a furnace fueled by the focus of the Champions and felt her will weaken. The Nameless Ones had to rely upon her strength to keep open the hole that allowed them to broadcast forth their evil energies, so they became unable to respond to the Champion's assault when the Valkea could no longer maintain the connection. She had become so dependent upon the power of the Nameless Ones to fuel her attacks that she had no reserves of energy of her own to fight with. Pushed by the growing force surrounding her, she collapsed inward much like a hollow gourd will wither and shrink when exposed to heat and sunlight.

The Champions pressed inexorably onward with their assault and the Valkea weakened and faded. It was difficult to say when she actually perished – she merely vanished beyond the limits of perception.

"She's gone," Flindra finally announced. "Let's drop the barrier. Kalmar why don't you assess the situation around us while Gegen and I see what's happening inside the caverns? We can enter the caverns now that the Valkea's power has been broken. Before we attack the nursery we should be aware of the full situation."

"An excellent suggestion," Kalmar agreed. "It shouldn't take me long to talk with my men. Then we

will end this horror.”

\* \* \*

Sergeant Garbarek's horn blast was heard by all in the vicinity and was relayed by others with horns until all the men stationed around the road knew that Carra's escort was under attack. Captain Pender and Lieutenant Cherok were the officers in charge of the closest group of horsemen. This group of forty men consisted of superior swordsmen and had been drawn from both of the garrisons at the Pass Gate as well as from the King's regiment. There were so many men ready to do battle with the Valkea that there weren't enough Ranger uniforms to disguise the Guardsmen so there was a mix of red and green cloaks in this group. They charged out of their hiding places and pelted down the road to help Rodal's men. They had watched Carra's escort ride by their place of concealment so they knew they had several miles to go before they could intercept them and offer them aid.

As they rode to the rescue, Cherok soon felt the familiar touch of the Valkea when she attacked Carra's caravan for yesterday's battle at the altar had branded his soul with an awareness of her evil.

“The Valkea is attacking,” he hollered to the captain so he could be heard over the galloping horses.

“Best speed!” Pender commanded as he spurred his horse into a dead run. He knew that evil things were happening ahead.

All the men matched his speed and raced their horses onward.

The abandoned wagon and the dead and wounded horses marked the spot of the attack but the glowing light surrounding the Valkea instantly drew their attention to the rock ledge above. Her fighters were clustered around the ledge trying to give her some assistance. They were drawn around the light like so many moths to a flame and were totally oblivious to the arrival of Pender's men.

Pender threw up a hand signaling a halt as he reined his horse to a stop and assessed the situation. “Praise the Spirit Lady Carra's escort has escaped.”

Cherok pointed to the carnage on the slope above them. “Those are Ostarian long bow arrows,” he noted in a low voice. “There are Rangers about.”

The two men turned to look at the slope across the river for undoubtedly that's where the Rangers had taken up their positions. A green clad Ranger stepped from behind the trees to signal they would hold their fire.

Pender acknowledged the wave with one of his own. Then he and Cherok looked back at the situation unfolding before them. The light around the Valkea was now far too intense to actually gaze upon so they had to hold up a hand to block it from view to see what was happening around it. Amazingly enough, some of the Valkea's men were hurling themselves against the globe of light in a futile attempt to penetrate the energy field. They collapsed to the ground and their comrades took their places even if it meant standing on the fallen.

“Mindless,” Cherok remarked in disgust and spat. “It's hard to imagine humans reduced to the status of insects.”

“It's time to put a stop to this madness,” Pender answered.

Wanting to take advantage of their enemies' ignorance to their presence, the captain issued his commands in low whispers and gestures. They dismounted, spread out along the road, and readied to scale the rock-strewn slope. They then worked their way up the slope. Pender set the pace so they stayed together. The Rangers' attack had been devastatingly effective and the ground was littered with dead and mortally wounded fighters. All others had left their positions to help the Valkea. The Guardsmen worked their way around the bodies and continued up the slope to the rocky ledge.

“Surrender or die!” Pender bellowed when he and his men reached striking distance.

It was as if the Valkea's men were linked mentally, for they all seemed to turn as one. “Kill them,” the tallest man screamed madly.

All the Valkea's followers had been filled with impotent rage at their inability to help her. Their pent

up anger flowed forth and they charged into Pender's men with insane recklessness. They had a certain advantage for they were uphill from the Guardsmen, but they were outmatched in numbers, for the Rangers had decimated their ranks so a scant twenty men remained.

The tall man ran straight for Pender and raised a short sword over his head to rain down a killing blow. Having no experience in swordsmanship, he didn't realize he was leaving his torso completely exposed – a fact Pender took advantage of by delivering a quick thrust into his midsection. The tall man responded as if he felt no pain and walked deeper into the blade to get close enough to strike at the captain. Pender deflected the blow with his shield, extracted his sword, and beheaded him.

All of the Valkea's fighters seemed to be entirely devoid of fear and oblivious to pain as they fought. The fight was reduced to a brutal business of hacking the Valkea's men to death. It was a sickening sight but a familiar one to the few men present, such as Lieutenant Cherok, who had fought with the howling mob at the altar the day before.

It was soon over and Pender's men were alone on the slope. The blazing light still radiated forth so intensely it created its own shadows. The men stood with their eyes averted to protect their vision. They were surprised that the column of light gave off no heat.

"An awesome display of power," Pender remarked. "Small wonder it's reported the King and Queen collapse after fighting with their crystals."

Cherok nodded his head in agreement. "Praise the Spirit Their Majesties are capable of such a mighty assault. I felt the Valkea's anger when she attacked Lady Carra's train. Let's pray they didn't suffer too much before the Champions began their battle."

"Agreed." Pender glanced back to the road. "The decoy wagon took some good hits. I wonder how many men were lost or wounded."

"Let's hope not many."

"What mindless maniacs. They didn't seem to care that they were dying in such a hopeless fight."

"Just like yesterday."

"And just like yesterday, more will surely come. I'm sure all of the Valkea's people are aware of her peril." He pointed his sword towards the tunnel. "Do you hear that noise, Cherok?"

He listened carefully. "It almost sounds like a distant drum beat."

"A good way to sound an alarm in a cave fortress," the captain speculated. "I wager we're soon going to have company."

"A reasonable guess."

"Gather around the cave," Pender commanded. "Defensive positions. Try to find a spot where your footing is secure."

As the soldiers moved into the best possible places around the cave entrance, another group of twenty men arrived from the west.

"Good, we have more swords," Cherok noted as he watched the men dismount. "I have a feeling we're going to need them."

The new fighters were under the command of Lieutenant Boerger, Henny's betrothed. He was one of the younger officers, but a capable fighter and leader. He was a big man, but was agile and quickly led his men up the slope.

Before Boerger and the others reached the ledge, the light vanished, leaving behind nothing but the ring of the Valkea's henchmen who had died trying to reach her. Before any of the men could react to the sudden end of the light, an image coalesced and they found themselves in the presence of their King.

The men instantly saluted. "Your Majesty," Pender said respectfully.

"Gentleman," Kalmar replied and gave them a nod to acknowledge their salutes. He didn't realize it, but his face was haggard with the effort of battling the Valkea – a fact instantly noticed by his men who exchanged a concerned glance.

"How may we be of service?" the captain asked.

Kalmar looked around at the men gathered at the cave entrance and instantly noticed that the

ground was littered with the Valkea's dead clansmen. "As you can see the Valkea is no more. Thank you for taking care of her fighters here. Now we need to cleanse the world of the nest of monsters she has been incubating in the caverns beneath our feet. Before we can continue, I need to assess the situation here. Have any of your men entered the tunnel?"

"No, Sire. We just finished our battle and were preparing for more of the Valkea's henchmen to appear for we hear the distant drums. Please allow me to congratulate you on your victory."

"Thank you, Captain." Kalmar focused his attention to listen for the drumbeat but instead felt his mind being drawn to the place Flindra and Gegen were now seeing. Deep within the heart of the cavern was a central chamber and it was here that the drums were being sounded. Men and women were running to the summons. All had grabbed some kind of weapon and moved about in complete frenzy. All three Champions were shocked to see the numbers present – hundreds of howling monsters were running helter-skelter while they awaited someone to take command.

"It's not going to take long for this howling mob to make it to the surface somewhere," Gegen warned. "Wouldn't it be easier for us to attack them here and save our forces inevitable casualties?"

"I have an idea, but we need to make sure our forces are well away from the tunnel entrances," Flindra said.

"What's that dearest?" Kalmar asked.

"When I destroyed the evil seed there was a burst of energy that not only hurled Leitho and me back to our own reality, but it weakened the tunnel roof enough that it triggered the cave-in that trapped us. I believe we can generate a burst of energy, which will collapse the cavern roof. We can put an end to these monsters in an instant. It'll save our soldiers from the horror of battling with these maniacs and it will actually be a more merciful end to Valkea's followers. The risk comes from the fact that we could trigger landslides on the surface."

"It sounds like a good idea. Let's give it a try," the King agreed. "Allow me to warn the soldiers so they can pull back to a safer location. They've been readying to do battle at the tunnel entrance where we fought the Valkea."

Kalmar drew his full focus back to the men gathered around the entrance. His image had actually vanished during the conference with Flindra and Gegen. His officers were huddled together in a deep discussion and he could see worry on their faces – no doubt caused from his unexplained disappearance. "Forgive me for not warning you I was leaving," he said. "I didn't mean to alarm you."

Pender smiled in relief. "There is no need to ask forgiveness, Sire. We were just concerned something bad had happened to you." Cherok and Boerger smiled and nodded in agreement.

"I heard the drums and joined Flindra and Gegen for they had located the source of the commotion. The Valkea's forces are gathering and are working themselves into an insane fury," Kalmar reported. "The three of us are going to attempt to create a cave-in to destroy them all to spare you the risk and effort of defeating them. Flindra is worried our actions might trigger a landslide here so I want all of you to return to the road and then move into positions where you aren't beneath a cliff face or talus slope. If we fail in our efforts and the mob escapes, it'll also be an easier battle fighting them on the level. Choose your positions with that in mind."

"We will, my lord King."

"Good luck, gentlemen." He held up his hand in parting and let his focus be drawn back to Flindra.

The scene in the cavern had turned into bedlam. Two men seemed to be exercising some control and were intentionally whipping the mob into a lathered fury. The crowd responded by waving their weapons in the air and screaming hysterically.

"Tis an ugly scene, Sire," Gegen warned ominously. "We need to act quickly before the mob is unleashed."

"Agreed. Flindra, do you have any suggestions how best to generate an energy wave capable of collapsing the roof?"

"I do. Gegen, you did an excellent job visualizing a barrier. If you do that again, Kalmar and I can work to fill the inside with energy. Then when we're ready you can drop the barrier."

"I can do that."

"Kalmar, you and I need to think of the powerful forces of nature, such as spring floods, gale force wind storms, powerful thunderstorms and the like. I think our thoughts will be translated into energy just as Gegen's visualization of granite worked so effectively to create the barrier which trapped the Valkea."

"Let's get to it," Kalmar agreed. His tone was filled with urgency.

Gegen instantly threw his thoughts into creating the barrier. He drew from his recent experience holding in the Valkea, but this time he added the image of a powerful dam to the attributes of his granite wall. This was a structure capable of holding back the raging waters of a flood. In his mind he could see the crests of wind-swept waves crashing against the dam face to be effortlessly deflected by the massive stonework so the water, soundly chastened, flowed back into the lake.

Flindra drew upon her memories of the ferocious summer thunderstorms that would build all day above the Greyfell Mountains. The wind would grow strong as the clouds drew in surrounding air along with moisture from Lake Eghero. Clouds would rise to unimaginable heights, fueled by the power of the roiling and churning internal winds. By afternoon, the thunderheads would darken, lightning would flash, and thunder would echo against the distant peaks. Then the monster storms would sally forth and batter the forest, the lake and surrounding lands with deafening thunder, pounding hail, torrential rains and tempestuous winds so formidable they transformed Lake Eghero into a wild and dangerous thing capable of swallowing up any craft, regardless of how skilled the fishermen and sailors aboard. Howling gales could effortlessly uproot decades-old trees, snap off branches or even split trees asunder. Hail would strip trees and bushes bare of leaves, making the forest floor look as if it had snowed in green once the hail pellets melted. All creatures, feathered or furred, sought shelter for to remain in the open could mean death. Such times also ended all human activity as well for nothing could be done outdoors until the storms were finally spent of their fury.

She poured details and distinct memories of such storms into the White and the crystal took her images and translated them into a dominating force. A whirlpool of power exploded into existence inside Gegen's barrier and pressed mightily against the restriction of his containing field. His barrier held against her storm of energy just as his imaginary dam repelled the pent up anger of surging waves.

Many times Kalmar had witnessed the incredible might of the flood-swollen Kanza. He had routinely seen trees uprooted, banks undermined, even docks and buildings washed away. All these were impressive sights, but the undisputed example of the incontestable might of the river was the battle that was joined between the flood-swollen Kanza and the mighty current of the sea where the waters met in the Bay of Tamerre.

Ocean swells would break against the river currents and lose their rounded shape, turning into dangerous cliffs of water tall enough to engulf a ship. The sandbar at the mouth of the river would shift, sometimes disappearing and reforming in a different place so channels safe to navigate in the winter were gone by summer. Even the intrepid Azeans avoided these waters during the annual contest between river and sea. Oftentimes, implacable west winds would hammer from the outer seas across the coast superimposing a storm surge on top of the dueling waters. At such times, the memories of men couldn't suggest a more impressive example of the invincible potency of the elements.

The King's blue crystal took all his images and transformed them into a concept of unconquerable might. Gegen had to allow his barrier to expand to hold all the energy being added by Kalmar's imagery. The synergistic properties of the crystals suddenly squared the resultant of Flindra and Kalmar's combined efforts to produce a sparking, crackling energy storm of dazzling intensity. Flindra recognized that Gegen was straining to hold his barrier to contain this leap in power.

"Let it go," she commanded.

Gegen released his barrier and the energy exploded radially outward in a burst of unimaginable might. In no way, could the three have anticipated the unstoppable force they had created and released into the heart of the mountain. They had freed the energy burst above the howling mob and

it manifested as a ferocious airburst that smashed the frenzied and howling men and women into the ground - many dying as the shockwave crushed bone and tissue. Above the crowd, the pulse of energy swept into the overlying rock and the cave reverberated with the sharp report of rock spalling off the roof. The shattered rock began to rain upon the prostrate forms of the horde below. Those who had survived the airburst struggled to rise and escape the deadly hail of jagged stones. The pitch of the sounds in the cavern lowered, growling ominously as the wave penetrated deeper into the rock mass. With a deafening roar, the cavern roof collapsed, obliterating the clan under countless tons of rock.

The energy pulse propagated throughout the mountain collapsing tunnels and caverns as it went. The entire universe of the Valkea's horde was utterly obliterated as the mountain reclaimed its inviolate and impenetrable strength. Deformation within the rock mass served to absorb and dissipate the energy of the shockwave on its passage outward so by the time the wave front broke out on the surface it didn't trigger the catastrophic rock slides Flindra had feared.

The three champions had pulled their focus out of the cavern when things started to collapse so they could see what was happening on the surface.

"Praise the Spirit we didn't bring down the entire mountain," Flindra observed with relief.

"My engineers are going to have to clean up the road," Kalmar remarked as he took note of a minor rock fall that had spread out over the road. He sighed wearily for he was utterly spent. "Let's see if there is anything left of the Valkea's nursery. It's not likely to have survived, but we need to make sure."

Kalmar directed his thoughts into the mountain, but sensed nothing but darkness and the oppressive weight of the surrounding rock. "It's gone," he announced wearily. "It's time to rest. Many thanks to both of you," he uttered.

"Rest easy, Your Majesties," Gegen replied and his essence vanished. He was too exhausted to say more.

"Be well and know that I love you," Flindra murmured to her husband.

"Sleep well, my Beloved."

Kalmar and Flindra drew back simultaneously and collapsed in their respective chambers.