

Planet Tendo

Southeastern Coast of the Creator Isles

24,356th Cycle since the Formation of the Islands

On the Evening of the sixth Orbit after the Desecration of the Avox

From the high cliff ledge, one could take in a singular view of the ocean. Towering waves crashed against the stone with the force of ten thousand warriors, carving the hard rock over eons into jagged swords. Aldur investigated the expanse of the surging elements. Barely two Relta out, a massive predator burst from the waters and devoured a seabird that had flown too low. *In the war of nature, there is but one law. And for us, too, it holds true.*

The Elar turned his gaze inland. On the continental side, small hills stretched across the land, obscuring the view toward Olor and Yadur. Wild Kel herds trampled the grass on the untouched plains, flattening it into endless pastures. His thoughts strayed to Sentan, still wounded, making his way toward the fourth garrison with his Bebun. *May the Tosh'Nor guide your steps, my friend.* Only a single rise broke the landscape here, faintly reminiscent of a mountain. The warrior's path led him straight toward it. The further he pressed inland, the more the salty tang of the sea dispersed. The cries of seabirds grew muffled in his shell-less ears until they vanished altogether. In their place came the rustling of countless tiny creatures darting through the woven grasses and shrubs of the coastal lands. He spotted a flying beetle tearing a small lizard apart with its mandibles. *I hope my fortune is better than yours...*

The mountain was modest; a mere gnat compared to the Avox. A great stone slab inscribed with runes of the ancient Kawiil tongue stood before a wide, oval opening in the rock. He could not decipher them. Slowly, almost furtively, he stepped inside to explore the mountain's hollow. The stench in the tunnels was a vile mix of carrion, rotting wood, and sulfur. The elite warrior wrinkled his nose in disgust. Everywhere, the artificially carved passages split and wound into nothing. Crates of rations and ore had been left abandoned. *Was this once a mine?* The place was not empty – that much he knew. Something dark lingered, and perhaps a brother who had dug too deep. Somewhere, the earth sank lower... He struck flint and lit a small flame. *I knew it...*

The warm light bent ever so faintly, following a subtle draft. In a small side chamber, he found the skeletons of two Nasar warriors. Their arm bones were perforated, gnawed clean. Nothing had been spared. A cold shiver ran down his spine. The finger bones of one corpse still clenched around a small crossbow with six bolts. Aldur crouched and, with a brittle snap, pried the weapon free. *You might yet be useful to me.* Guided by the breath of the tomb, he descended deeper into a realm long forgotten – one now claimed by the powers of darkness.

Three Relta ahead, four hundred Cheraktis slept, hanging from the immense ceiling of a cavern. One mistake – a loose stone, a rotten timber beneath Quaron's step – and all would be lost. The cavern stretched at least eighty Setah high. His keen sight allowed him to find his way even in this absolute darkness. He crept onward. Sheer dread dripped into the footprints he left behind, but already he had crossed half the black nightmare. At the cavern's heart rose a stone pillar, thrusting upward to meet the hollow's middle height. Quaron lifted his eyes to its summit – a small plateau,

where something glittered. *Please, don't tell me that there is Esbar's Stone. How can I reach it without these chaos-beasts sensing me?* But it was already too late. There was no retreat, no turning back.

The vision of the Lemani burned once more in his mind – absolute darkness, absolute terror, clear as the great crystal of Aijesch. The Avox shattered into a thousand fragments, like their people, torn apart in countless clan wars. Creatures, compared to which these winged beasts were no more than furry vermin, terrorized the survivors. Only the Lemani were immune to the darkness. Beyond this world, they looked down upon the dying planet and their children, who had failed to recognize corruption in time. Quaron clenched his armored fists, the glyphs on Bloodclaw shimmering faintly green. *Not while my heart still beats.* A new hardness settled in his gaze and features. Like a lizard – soundless, moving as though weightless – he scaled the pillar, thirty Setah height. One last surge of strength – and he hauled himself onto the plateau.

At its center, treasures lay piled: jewels, gold, Salris, pearls. He cast a quick glance upward. Now and then, one of the creatures shifted in its sleep. Slowly, he circled the shimmering mound. *Come on! Where are you?...* By chance, he caught sight of a small chest of Salris jutting halfway from the vastest hoard of the Creator Isles. Runes of the first language marked its edges. Upon its lid – half-hidden – a carving. *Small... antlers?* Realization stirred within him, a memory of Yadur. *Yes! The emblem of Esbar's temple!* He nearly leapt in triumph. Before seizing the prize, he checked his hook rope, then glanced across the cavern to the exit. Quaron leaned over the glittering mound and carefully moved aside a goblet lying atop the chest.

Then, with both hands, he lifted it. Time stopped – so did his breath. A small golden bowl slid gently onto the gems, a dagger of Salris and Sent-stone tipped and fell, soundless. He exhaled – Then came the Pulse of the world-soul. A tremor – sustenance for the darkness. A coin, half-wedged in the chest's lid, slipped free and rang against the others. The sound was bright – too bright. Like a demon's grin. It shivered through his scales, burrowed into his gut. Bloodclaw liked it, vibrating with eagerness for the lifeblood it would soon drink. The Elar's pulse hammered against his skull plate. And then, seemingly endless silence...

For Quaron, the sound of eyelids opening was worse than the thought of claws – a foul, faint flutter. He remained frozen, staring at the treasure. Large, polished plates and bowls sprouted eyes that stared back – faceless mirrors of malice. He did not need to look upward. With statue-like precision, he opened his pack and slid the chest inside, drawing out his coiled rope.

Then his race with death began. The hook bit stone. A leap. An impact, and crash – then a shriek, sharper and more hideous than all before. Others joined it. He ran. Stumbled. Wings beat behind him. Then the gnashing of teeth. Red points flared in the dark. The clatter of claw on claw. They dove on him together. Only the tunnel saved him. Bloodclaw struck, ending a scream. The blade seemed to revel in each kill, guiding his hand rather than the other way around. But for every beast it slayed, two more took its place. He staggered, gasping, into a smaller chamber – where they encircled him. Claws slashed down, venom-dripping fangs pierced at his armor. It was only a matter of time. One strike would spill his veins.

Then – something from the tunnel mouth, and the beasts froze... The king of the flying horrors. White, red-eyed, thrice the size of the rest, it tore the head from one of its own as it forced a path toward Quaron. Something whistled past him – struck a beast in the throat. It collapsed, gurgling. *What –?*

“Quaron!!! Here! Quickly!” The chosen turned. A second bolt flew past him. “Now move!” Bloodclaw carved another monstrosity down in a single flowing motion. Its wielder bounded toward the voice, as bolts cut down the foremost attackers.

“Aldur?! What –?”

“Silence! Follow me!” His comrade hurled aside the crossbow and drew his sword. “There’s only one way out. Pray I remember it!” Another shrill, marrow-freezing screech. Aldur pulled a brittle stick of wood from his pouch, soaked it in some liquid, while Quaron killed two more beasts.

“What are you doing?”

“They hate the smell. An Umbari... never mind, keep moving!” He hurled it to the ground and repeated the act with two more as they fled. “With luck, it will hold them off... Go!” The strategy worked. The creatures’ screeches turned to whines, while Quaron sent a prayer to the ancestors. Then came the final tunnel. Narrow, tight. One beast dared follow. Aldur’s blade struck straight through its throat.

“We must get farther from here. They’ll swarm out to reclaim the treasure.”

“W... what? What treasure?”

“Later. Just move.” The two Elar staggered on, spent, deeper inland. At last, they reached a derelict farmstead, its wooden huts collapsed. A glance out at the broken windows confirmed Quaron’s fear: tiny red points drifted through the dark like floating embers of damnation. “We’ll wait it out here. Once they retreat, I’ll need to fetch my Bebun from the coast.” Quaron placed a hand on Aldur’s shoulder, as their commander once had with him. “I thank you, my friend. I owe you forever.” Aldur returned the gesture. Still, guilt gnawed at him for the harsh words he had once spoken of his companion. Only now did he realize how violently he trembled – how narrowly they had escaped death. Bloodclaw’s glyphs still pulsed, warm with the fresh blood it had hungrily absorbed. Aldur gazed incredulously at the blade.

“Now then, to the treasure we nearly died for...” He opened the pack and drew out the small chest.