

1. “DO~

The man hammered wooden pegs into heartwood planks, while kneeling down upon the bridge. The sweat on his forehead glistened about a raised mark of two lines – one horizontal and one vertical – and then raced down his face to a beard as long as a man’s hand.

He swung his mallet with a muscular and tanned forearm -- it too, glistened from the sweat though it showed a rapidly fading tattoo. He paused, as he sensed, perhaps even felt, the presence of another approaching nearby.

He slowly rose, and turned – his long robe of white catching the light coming from the evening’s sun which, in turn, was showing colors of white, gold, and blood-red; and then the muscular man smiled at the one that was indeed nearby: an immense golden Lion.

The Lion spoke. “Write the words that I have given you, so that others may be healed.”

But BridgeMaker, for that was his name, shook his head, his locks of brown sweaty hair tinged on the tips with blond, moved slightly above his shoulders. “How shall I write those words so that no one is wounded, but all are helped?” he asked. “This one shall comply, but how to comply is my question.”

“Dear BridgeMaker,” replied the Lion. “Speak your words into the crystal vase, and then shatter it. I shall have my light touch the broken pieces. And then put only the reflections upon the scrolls. It will come to pass that only those with broken hearts will read and understand.” The Lion paused, as the evening’s breeze moved some of the locks of his thick mane.

“BridgeMaker,” continued the Lion, “It is the broken-hearted that I wish to heal.”

BridgeMaker bowed his head towards the Lion, “Yes, BloodFriend, I shall do as you have asked.”

The Lion smiled.

The Last Days of a Man Named Fighter
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2. NOT~

The air shimmered silver, and then parted, as the man entered into the stone-floored room. The stones buckled and bent – not because of the man’s weight, for he was of normal, though muscular size—but the stones moved because the stones were living, and cushioned the walk of any that dared to come inside.

The man glanced about, clenching his fists, the muscles showing in his arms. He looked hard into the room, until his blue eyes could make out the enormous silver throne that sat in the center. And without hesitation, he stormed forward.

“Lion!” shouted the man. And indeed, a Lion appeared on the right side of the throne, standing in a shaft of light that came down from above. Higher above the throne, was a white cloud.

“What bothers you, good Fighter?” asked the Lion in a voice of calmness that softly echoed among the living stones.

“The woman I walk with,” shouted Fighter, “continues to release the DreamKiller.”

“Is that so bad?” asked the Lion.

“No man can fight without his dreams!” shouted Fighter. “My dreams of victory and vindication fill my life, yet she has released the DreamKiller!”

Fighter paced about the room, his breastplate catching glimmers of light that seemed to come from small flames that moved about the walls and throne. The living stones continued to move under his feet, as if trying to absorb some of his anger and frustration.

Fighter continued, “Every dream I place upon the Table of Hope, she speaks against and kills. What she cannot kill, she wounds. No dream does she ever support with a whole-heart.” He paused, and shook his fists, the wrist-guards showing their beaten copper, and then demanded, “Why did she ever adopt the DreamKiller into her family of thoughts?”

Without hesitation, the Lion softly replied, "Because she needed it."

Then the Lion continued, "When she was young, she learned that the DreamKiller could keep her safe from all things placed upon the Table of Hope."

"What things?" asked Fighter, who now stopped his pacing, but continued to clench his fists, over and over again.

"To place something on the Table of Hope" continued the Lion, "takes openness. But to move something from the Table to the battle, takes commitment. And not all battles are won," said the Lion.

"That still does not answer the question!" replied Fighter in frustration. He shook his head, and then ran one hand through his short-cropped blond hair with a glance towards the ceiling, as if trying to signal to the Lion that the Lion was missing the point of the discussion.

The Lion noticed the movement of the hand and the turning away of the blue eyes, but choose to ignore the insult. The Lion continued, "Since the woman has lost many battles, she now fears commitment. But rather than fear commitment, if the DreamKiller is released, then commitment is never required -- because the dream is killed and gone from the table long before commitment comes."

Fighter looked straight at the Lion. Somehow, at that moment, he knew that the Lion was right. "Thus," said Fighter, "the battle is over before it has begun?"

"Now you understand," replied the Lion.

"I understand. But I cannot accept," replied Fighter. "There is a difference!" He again clenched his fists, and then paused, sighing hard in frustration, the air escaping from his lips in disgust. He placed one hand against his clean-shaven face, as if to signal that he was in deep thought. "Perhaps," he said, almost spitting the words, "I should never be open with her about my dreams."

"That is one solution," replied the Lion.

“Perhaps I should break the clay bowl that we swore into existence,” said Fighter.

“Do that, and I will curse you!” replied the Lion, showing anger for the first time.

A moment of silence passed, and a glow of light seemed to emanate out from the Lion, even more than from the shaft of light. Some of the flames moving on the walls cast shadows against the stones. Some of the living stones on the floor seemed to stiffen as if bracing to support stronger words from the Lion.

Then, the Lion continued, “To break the bowl is not an option that is within my presence.”

“I have fought for you! I have bled for you!” shouted Fighter, “and you limit my options?”

“Yes!” replied the Lion. “I choose to forbid the simplest one – to break the bowl is not an option that is within my presence. As it is written, ‘The dove cannot rest where there is no tree.’ ”

“Then I choose to hide my dreams! The woman shall never know the deepest goals that I have. I will hide them all from her!” said Fighter and he began to pace about the throne room again: his breastplate and wrist-guards catching bits of fire-light, his cloth grieves and tunic softly rustling, but his war-sandals slapping down upon stone after stone.

“Take care if that is your solution,” replied the Lion. “When a Fighter hides a goal, he often hides it only from enemies. The woman is not your enemy.”

“Yes, she is not my ‘enemy’,” spit back Fighter. “But she is also not my partner at the Table of Hope any longer.”

“Beware,” replied the Lion. “The Snake that lives on the tongue of the Serpent will offer you others to share your dreams with. What will you do when they come?”

“They will also never know my dreams,” said Fighter, “for I shall do what is right! Even if the woman does what is wrong!”

3. CONF

Fighter sat within a corner of the tavern. Though the wooden benches and tables had others scattered about on them, now Fighter sat alone. Earlier, a woman had sat with him, but now she was gone.

“NewHope,” Fighter sighed in sad-drunk mumbles, “you are such a gracious city... to have this tavern “The Mocker’s Dream” here.... But I drink now. I simply drink.”

He closed his reddened eyes, and then touched the hilt of his sword that lay across his lap. “I made you appear,” Fighter said softly to the sword, “by just the clap of my hands. But...” he looked at his surroundings and sensed the dryness of his mouth from all his drinking, “I am embarrassed to even show your metal.”

“Enough,” Fighter said to himself, “...enough.” He looked down at the sword, sighed, and then with a thought, caused the sword to vanish. He rose from the bench where he had been sitting.

With a motion of his hands, he caused a portal to appear before him, and he stepped through it. That hole in space – the portal – shimmered silver, and then closed behind him. None of the other patrons of the tavern noticed the portal, for only those that open the portals can ever see it.

Fighter staggered into the throne room of the Lion.

“You have been drinking DarkFire,” said the Lion, standing by the throne.

“Indeed... I have drank... it much,” replied Fighter, swaying a bit. The living stones under his feet calmly moved in counter-rhythm in order to help him stand.

“I know. I watched,” said the Lion. “And I grieved.”

Fighter paused, and cast his gaze to the ground. “I am ... sorry ... to grieve you,” he said. “You are ... the only ally ... that I have.”

“I understand,” replied the Lion. “And you are forgiven.”

“I even ... attempted to ... hold up my prayer-sword,” said Fighter. “I did... I truly did....” Now a tear began to appear in the edge of his blood-shot eyes.

Both were silent for a time. And then the Lion looked at him with eyes of love.

Fighter could see the light beginning to come out from the Lion. “It is not right!” He said, in a drunken voice. “You should hate me for what I am!”

The soft light touched Fighter’s face, and the clouds of unreasoning slipped away, as the drunkenness fled from the Lion’s light.

“Isn’t it written that ‘It takes two men,’ replied the Lion, “to push the shuttlecock, to weave the rugs of lepers?’ ”

“I know,” replied Fighter to the old proverb, “And I pushed my words to you out of guilt.”

“And I,” replied the Lion, “pushed your words back with forgiveness and love. Let us weave a rug that is filled with life, and not with shame.”

By now the Lion’s light had finished going through the body of Fighter, and all traces of drunkenness were gone. Fighter stopped swaying, and raised his head, looking at the Lion.

“Good Fighter,” began the Lion, “You traveled from my city, DwellingStreet, to the other city, FalseHope. Why such a journey?”

Fighter did not reply. He hated to admit that the Lion’s name for the city was far too accurate, so he remained silent.

The Lion nodded his huge head to show that he would honor the silence. And then the Lion asked a second question, “Tell me, good Fighter, how does it feel, to drink DarkFire?”

“Always good at first,” said Fighter, and he began to smile. “The ecstasy builds, the mind fogs, and the pain is gone.”

“Indeed. The pain is gone. For how long is it gone?” Asked the Lion studying the face of Fighter.

“Until the fog of the ecstasy clears...,” replied Fighter.

“And then?” asked the Lion.

“And then,” replied Fighter, his smile now completely gone, “And then... the guilt pours in,” he softly replied.

“How much guilt pours in?” asked the Lion.

“Less each time!” replied Fighter, pleased over the triumph he felt. He looked about the throne room, as if hoping the flames of the wall would applaud his statement. But the flames simply continued moving, and the throne room was silent for a moment.

“No,” replied the Lion, softly shaking his golden mane. “The amount of guilt is the same amount each time. But you cannot feel it as much. Each time you are becoming more and more unfeeling. As the scrolls say, ‘The forearm burnt by fire forms scars that can feel the fire no more’”

The Lion repeated the statement in a soft voice, “Each time you are becoming more and more unfeeling.”

“Perhaps,” replied Fighter, frowning at the thought.

“Perhaps, indeed,” said the Lion. “Perhaps, indeed.”

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4. ORM~

Fighter continued to stand within the throne room. He adjusted his breastplate, which he suddenly realized had been partially undone.

The Lion watched Fighter awkwardly handling the leather straps that held the metal breastplate.

“You drank DarkFire with another woman,” said the Lion, now sitting by the throne. “Why?”

“It seemed good to have company when drinking,” replied Fighter, now fumbling with the straps – not because of the earlier drunkenness. He paused and simply sat down upon the stones. The living stones rose up to form a bench for him to sit upon.

“Tell me something, Lion,” said Fighter, undoing the straps upon his shoulder. “Does your presence always sober one so quickly?”

“It does,” replied the Lion, “but my presence only sobers, it does not condemn.”

Fighter took a deep breath. He slipped the breastplate down, and then laid it across his lap, studying the leather straps where they inserted into the back of the metal.

Both Fighter and Lion were silent for a few moments. Fighter leaned forward, lost in the tangle that his straps had somehow become – only his cloth tunic with its padded shoulders covered his upper frame. Yet not all of his chest was covered, for in the style that was popular among the Fighters, his tunic had a large diamond-shaped hole cut in the center, exposing half of each pectoral. A large white-jagged scar lay directly above his heart.

The Lion looked at the scar, and then spoke again, “You drank DarkFire with another woman -- but what of the woman that I gave to you in your youth?”

Fighter did not reply. The Lion waited for an answer, but none came. Fighter finished untangling the straps that had held his breast-plate.

The Lion then continued, somewhat louder, "You can indeed drink DarkFire and forget the pain. You can indeed hate your wife for refusing to control the DreamKiller. You can do all these things."

"I know that I can," replied Fighter flatly. "What you say I already know."

"Indeed, you do know it." replied the Lion.

The Lion paused, and looked again at the scar on the chest of Fighter. "Tell me, Fighter, when one is wounded, what must the Healer do?"

"The Healer must heal the wound," came the reply.

"And how does he do such a thing?"

"By one of two ways that I have seen," replied Fighter. "Either by salve or by heated steel."

"You are correct," replied the Lion. "Either the wounded must accept the salve or the hot steel. The first heals over time, the second heals quickly, but leaves a great scar."

"Why do you tell me this?" shouted Fighter. "Do I not already know all this? Look upon my chest, above my heart -- surely you see the scar left by the heated steel. I no longer even let myself feel in that part of my life! Your Healer failed! He should not have allowed such a scar!" Fighter stood up, and began to quickly put the breastplate back onto his shoulders.

"The Healer did what he must do," replied the Lion. "He had no choice -- unless the wound is attended to, a fighter will die. And thus, the Healer attended to your wound."

“And he allowed such a scar? Some days it pains me; most often I allow it no feeling! You dare to call that healing?” shouted Fighter, adjusting the breastplate.

“It is healing,” replied the Lion, “but never forget that you have the scar only because you refused the salve.”

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5. ANY~

Several days passed since the conversation in the throne room concerning DarkFire, and Fighter was behind his own home, a simple stone and wood structure, attending to his roses.

A portal opened and shimmered, and the Lion stepped through.

“Ah,” said the Lion, “I see you are enjoying the roses again.”

“Indeed, Lion, you know that I enjoy these very much,” replied Fighter. “Few things in all this fine city give me so much pure pleasure.”

The Lion watched Fighter studying the leaves of one of his rose bushes. And the Lion noticed the glimmer of the metal guards on the wrists of Fighter.

“Yet here, in the garden,” spoke out the Lion, “You wear some of your armor?”

“I wear no armor here,” replied Fighter.

“Tell me, then” said the Lion. “What is upon your wrists?”

Fighter replied, “It is the copper guards.”

“And why do you wear them?” asked the Lion.

“You well know the answer,” replied Fighter. “All Fighters wear whatever guards they must, in order to show no weakness to the enemy.”

“To show no weakness?” asked the Lion, “or to hide vulnerability? There is a difference.”

“There is no difference.” Replied Fighter tersely. “If an enemy sees a weakness or a vulnerability, he will attack it.”

6. LONG

On yet another day, on a high hill overlooking one of the many valleys of FadingEarth, Fighter and the Lion sat down together.

“Come,” said the Lion, “It is time to teach you.”

“There are four tribes within the FadingEarth, each with its own markings. They are the Nons, whose marking is their own image upon their bellies; the Elfin, who’s marking is a picture of their burrows to the left of their hearts; and the Fighters, who wear the symbol of the sword and scales upon their right forearm. Do you understand this?” asked the Lion.

“I understand,” replied Fighter, somewhat irritated at the simple lesson, for many that knew the Lion also knew those three tribes by name.

“Good,” replied the Lion, “I shall continue, for there is more to learn than just the names.”

Fighter was silent, and bit concerned that the Lion had guessed his thoughts so easily.

The Lion continued, “The Nons fear commitment and loss of self. Though they have entered FadingEarth, they are forever hungry for more.”

“For more of what?” asked Fighter.

“For more that their eyes have seen, their tongues have tasted, their loins have lusted for,” replied the Lion.

“And the Elfin,” continued the Lion, “Live for the safety and security of their burrows. They continuously patch and repair their tunnels, forever watching for the next collapse. They live for dirt and mud.”

“They are disgusting,” said Fighter, turning his head and spiting.

The Lion grinned, his white fangs showing. “You were once Elfin, yourself, Fighter.”

“And I was disgusting,” Fighter replied. “How I hated the Elfin that I was -- forever digging for more. Lion, I tell you the truth, I found not enough.”

“But some Elfin,” continued the Lion, “do find what they search for. They build their walls with dirt or mud. If anything threatens their burrow, they retreat. Indeed, some will fight to the death to protect their dirt and mud.”

Fighter replied, “The dirt I found was dry; the mud I found was insufficient. Is it no wonder I begged you for a new name? Is it no wonder that I begged you, years ago, to accept me into the third tribe?”

“Fighter,” replied the Lion, “It was I who guided you to dry dirt. It was I who forbid your mud to grow.”

Fighter paused, and then said, “Yes. I know.” He paused again, as if searching for words to describe the painful memories of finding only dry dirt and no mud, but no words came. Finally, Fighter spoke.

“Yes,” repeated Fighter, “I know it was you that was behind all that pain.”

The Lion waited for a moment, the breezes of the hilltop overlooking the valley seemed to move the grasses underneath his golden frame, as if the very grass bowed to the Lion.

“Have you ever forgiven me?” asked the Lion.

“No,” came the answer.

And then, only silence.

The Lion waited.

The Fighter swallowed hard. Words almost came to him – words to tell the Lion how badly he had been wounded as one of the Elfin. Words to state – no, to shout – his anger. But he dismissed the thoughts as quickly as possible – after all, a good fighter must feel no pain.

The Lion watched the face of Fighter. He whispered, “An honest heart is better than a hidden heart.”

“No.” softly replied Fighter.

And then again, silence.

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7. ER~T

“Let us continue the lesson,” spoke the Lion. “After the Elfin, are the Fighters. They live for what is right and true; they weigh the words of many upon the scales; they fight to expand the TrueKingdom within FadingEarth.”

At this, Fighter smiled. He was glad that the subject of the lesson had changed. “You see, it is good that I am a Fighter! It is good that you gave me that name, and that I accepted it. I and my brothers will bleed and die for you! Your kingdom will grow because of us!”

“Perhaps,” said the Lion, “perhaps.”

Then the Lion continued, “There are four tribes within the FadingEarth. Do you know the fourth?”

“No,” replied Fighter. “I do not.”

“Do you wish to know the fourth tribe?” asked the Lion.

“To know, yes; but to pay, perhaps not,” replied Fighter.

“Well spoken,” replied the Lion. “For with knowledge there is always a price.”

“And what price do you, Lion, attach to this piece of knowledge?” asked Fighter, flashing a smile with his blond short hair glistening.

The Lion paused for a moment, and then looked straight at Fighter. “I require,” said the Lion, “only the mirror.”

“Only the mirror!” shouted Fighter, standing up. “You think me mad!” Fighter began to pace in front of the sitting Lion. He shook his fists. “Once, you showed me my true shape in the mirror, and I hated you for many days!”

8. O~TH

A few hours later, Fighter summoned a portal, and entered into the throne room. There, he saw the Lion, looking upward towards the cloud that encircled the highest part of the throne room, above the throne itself.

Fighter paused and watched. Not a single flame was moving on the walls – they all seemed to be pointing at the cloud as if they were men raising hands in praise. The living stones supported his weight as always – but they too seem to be ever-so-slightly slanted also towards the cloud.

Fighter, by habit, did not look directly at the cloud – it had the same effect on him that staring at the noon-day sun did – it hurt his eyes. The fact that the light coming from the cloud was soft and welcoming did not matter – the light of the cloud still hurt his eyes.

Finally, the Lion’s lips ceased moving, and he lowered his head. The Lion turned his large cat-like body away from the throne. The flames began to move about the walls and the stones upon the floor flattened.

Fighter approached the Lion. “Lion,” said Fighter, “you look disturbed.”

“I am,” replied the Lion. “The needs of the other world disturb me.”

“How can anything disturb the Lion? Can you not do anything?” asked Fighter.

“No, my fighting friend, I cannot do everything that I wish to do,” replied the Lion. “I am forever bound by words that I spoke years ago, ‘The Lion for the open door; the tribesmen for the people.’ These words have bound me.”

The Lion looked at the darkened archway. His eyes watered, and a tear slipped down his cheeks.

“Lion,” said Fighter. “Do not cry; send the tribesmen!”

9. E~PA

“A woman!” shouted Fighter to the Lion shaking his fist. The copper wrist-guard seemed to reflect his anger as much as the light of the flames. “Lion!” continued Fighter still shouting, “You swore that the men were to lead in battle! What madness is this?”

“I swore that husbands were to lead their wives,” replied the Lion calmly, “But in my presence, there is no difference between male and female.”

But the woman who entered the throne room only smiled at Fighter. “I understand,” she said, “I too, was once a Fighter, and my hair was once blond.”

Fighter winced at the comment. “Only Fighters that dedicate themselves to the Altar of the Pure dye their hair blond!” He spitted the words.

“Indeed,” the woman smiled back, “We called it the Altar of the Pure – but I came to realize that it was an altar of exclusion. I am no longer afraid to let others know that I am not pure.”

Fighter stopped and looked at the woman’s hair. She had long hair that flowed past her shoulders, and it was brown in color -- simple, human, and brown. And she wore no armor – only a soft robe of simple white cloth.

“I wear armor!” Shouted Fighter. “And I still make my hair blond!”

But the woman simply smiled – as if she understood something that Fighter did not. “I understand,” she simply replied, “I was once of your tribe.”

Fighter stared at her, and then he saw it – a raised mark of two lines – one vertical and one horizontal crossing over the first – it was like a tattoo on her forehead.

And then the woman turned toward the Lion and stretched out her arms to greet him – and that was when Fighter realized that her right arm was withered. It was almost a child’s arm attached to a woman’s body – an obvious defect of birth.

And Fighter stared. His eyes could not move from the sight of the arm. “She is a cripple!” he thought. “And yet, she said that once she was a Fighter?” Fighter glanced at the darkened archway – the one that would require great power to enter! The disparity between the powerless arm and the darkness of the archway was so great, that Fighter became silent – his mouth hanging open with no words.

And the woman began to speak to the Lion, and though Fighter heard their words, he could not understand them:

“Is your heart undivided?” asked the Lion. “And have you filled your mind with things of good report? Are your tears and laughter available for my suffering and joy? Is your knowledge and understanding deep? Have you been pouring your strength into my living waters? Can you live by the highest Law – the law of bearing one another’s burdens? Can you live in mercy and share it with others?”

To each question the woman answered yes, and smiled.

And then the Lion’s lips moved, and Fighter knew that he had uttered her name, but he could not hear it. Fighter stood speechless, his arms hanging limp by the side of his armor. And out of the mouth of the Lion came fire that descended upon the woman.

And the woman smiled as the fire bathed her -- her robe began to glow and glisten and turn white. Her face began to glow with light, and her eyes became like flames. Her skin turned to bronze, pure bronze glowing as if fresh from the furnace. But her power -- her power radiated like heat -- her power filled the throne room. The raised mark upon her forehead glowed with red light.

“Lion!” yelled out Fighter, “Tell me her name! Of what tribe is she?”

But the Lion did not answer, for he was still speaking fire to the woman.

Finally, the fire ceased, and the Lion and the woman walked towards the darkened archway. The Lion looked at the walls of the throne room, and growled slowly and deeply – part of Fighter’s mind told him that the Lion had spoken, but part of his mind told him it was only a growl. Then, from the wall flew seven flames.

10. TTER

Several days had past, and Fighter wished to speak to the Lion. He reached out with his hands to create the portal, but then stopped. He put both hands down slowly.

“Come now, brave Fighter,” he said to himself, “You brag that you fear nothing... but now, you fear telling the Lion the truth...”

Fighter swallowed hard. And then, with resolve, he motioned with his hands for the portal – waving his right hand down, and then his left hand across. Some men said the symbol made by the hands stood for death; others said it stood for peace. Fighter knew it as the only way to the throne room. A silver portal appeared, and Fighter stepped through it.

Now in the throne room, Fighter looked at the Lion – a golden creature larger than the base of the silver throne that stretched into the cloud; a creature revered by the moving flames upon the wall; a creature served by the living stones of the room. Fighter felt two strong feelings: a sudden awareness of the Lion’s humble purity and a deep desire to avoid disappointing the Lion.

Fighter wanted to say something...but the words choked his throat...and he moved his lips as if in pain... but no words came out. He hung his head in shame, almost ready to leave.

The Lion watched. “Speak the words of your heart, good Fighter. As my book of ForeverPromises says, *I will never leave you or forsake you. I will never condemn you.*”

Somehow those words gave Fighter the strength to speak.

“Lion,” said Fighter slowly, struggling to say his words, “I... hurt.”

“I understand,” replied the Lion, still sitting to the side of the throne.

“The craving.... It has started... again,” said Fighter. “I...hurt.”

“When a man has deep pain, he will crave release,” said the Lion. And then he added softly, “If a man craves deeply enough, all battle lines drawn in his mind may vanish.”

“I know,” moaned Fighter; “I know. Tell me, what causes my pain?” He stood before the Lion.

The Lion paused. “Not always is a man ready to hear the truth.”

“Lion,” said Fighter, “I have been fighting for you for many years. I have always fought for you alone -- none have ever stood beside me except a few, and that was many years ago. Even the woman you gave me releases the DreamKiller -- she does not fight with me. Of all my children, only one even walks with you, the others are Nons. I am alone. Tell me the truth -- I must know it.”

“You have already said it, my fighter,” replied the Lion. “The pain you have is because you have been alone for too long.”

Fighter stared at the ground and said, “The woman you gave me is Elfin -- she cannot join me. She cannot heal this level of loneliness.”

“That is true,” replied the Lion. “She will change on the day of her choosing or she may never change. I have called her, but she has refused to hear. I will not force the issue, even on your behalf.”

“My one son that walks with you is just now becoming a fighter. He is too young and tender to help me.”

“He is not as ‘young’ as you imply, Fighter,” replied the Lion. “Already he has won several battles and has refused to resign from the Hills of the Gauntlet. But you are right -- he cannot cure your loneliness.”

“And the woman that drank DarkFire with me?” asked Fighter, slowly lowering himself in obvious pain to his knees.

“Fighter,” replied the Lion, “As I have told you before, if you tell her of your hopes, she will forever become your ally. And then the Snake that is the tongue of the Serpent will race over to you, to bind you with cords that can scarcely be broken. You, good Fighter, are a citizen of my city; the

woman is a citizen of the other city -- much disaster would happen if you were bound by the Serpent to her.”

“I hear you... but I hurt,” said Fighter, now curled into a lump on the ground. “I ... simply... hurt.”

“I know,” replied the Lion, “I know.” And the throne room was silent except for the moaning of Fighter. And the Lion watched the body of Fighter collapse, then shake, then collapse again.

“Will you leave my presence?” asked the Lion gently.

“No,” moaned Fighter, “Though I long for the pain to stop, I will not leave your presence. I am sorry for the many times when I hurt and ran from your presence. I will stay here by your throne.” And then the pain increased, and Fighter lay upon the throne room’s floor, looking like a crumpled piece of body left upon the battlefield.

“I will not leave you, Lion,” Fighter whispered. “I will not leave you...”

And then Fighter fell into a deep and fitful sleep. He lost all consciousness.

“Enough!” said the Lion. “Enough!” he shouted, and his roar shook the pillars of the throne room. “Shadow, show yourself!” And from the side of the crumpled Fighter – who was still within his deep unconscious sleep - - appeared a slender and weak shadow, moving as it were, under its own choices.

“Enough!” shouted the Lion, rising from the side of the throne. “Enough!” And the slender shadow began to shake in fear. “No more shall you blind him! He has no strength, but this time he did not leave my presence! He is still within my throne room!”

But out of the ether from a corner of the room, a voice suddenly interrupted like the strike of a snake that had been coiled for the kill. “If he had the strength, he would have left your throne! I say that the shadow stays!”

“No!” replied the Lion, snarling at the voice, “This fighter is mine!”

But the voice, coming from a large and heavy shadow that crept along the wall, shot back, "Plead your case! I demand my right before the throne!"

And then the Lion turned to the cloud that was above the throne. "Father!" shouted the Lion, "This one is mine! I purchased him and have carved his name upon the Final Stone!"

"Again you plead for such as these!?" lashed out the voice from the heavy shadow on the wall. "Am I not the Snake! Do I not also have rights to accuse before the throne!" And then the Snake's voice shouted from the heavy shadow, "Give the fighter to me! I can make him curse your face!"

But the cloud above the throne did not answer either petitioner. Instead, light came out from the center of the cloud and descended upon the Lion. And the Lion shrank down in size, blurred in color, and became a small white lamb.

"No!" shouted the Snake. "Not even the Law of the Lamb shall save him! He shall be mine in this life, though he shall be yours in the life to come!"

But the words of the Snake made no difference. The Lion, now in the form of a Lamb, walked over to the collapsed fighter and stood next to him. And on the neck of the lamb a butcher's slash slowly appeared, and from the slash dropped a tear of crimson blood. And the blood fell upon the collapsed fighter.

From the mouth of the sleeping fighter came no words, but white smoke rising, which formed into a glowing purple gemstone that floated above his head. And then the gemstone shrank down and slipped into the eye of the Lamb.

"I will not leave!" screamed out the Snake. "The shadow that I have assigned to plague this fighter will not go! The Law of Choice is greater than even the Law of the Lamb!"

The lamb said nothing, but turned and looked at the slender shadow with one eye filled with the innocence of the lamb, and the other filled with the royal gemstone made from Fighter's smoke. Lightning flashed between the eyes and a sword of pure light formed in the center of the lightning, and then cut through the air and struck deeply into the shadow.

“Do not flee!” shouted the Snake, “The Lamb cannot overcome you!” But the slender shadow screamed as he saw himself being erased by the sword of light -- stroke by stroke. “Stay! Stay on!” shouted the Snake.

And then the Snake shouted, “Fighter! ... Fighter! Hear me within your fitful sleep! Do you not hate the woman for never joining you? Do you not hate your children for refusing to follow the Lion? Do you not hate the Lion himself – for he refuses to be silent and allow you to have the other woman in peace!”

“Hate!” shouted the voice of the Snake, “Hate that fills your heart and life! Feel it! Rejoice in it! It is yours to choose!”

Fighter moved upon the floor. The living stones moved about him somewhat shield his body from the large shadow of the snake. The living flames that crawled the walls amassed near the edge of the large shadow, and began to strike at the dark edges.

“The Law of Choice is greater than all of you!” shouted the voice of the Snake. The living stones still continued to move about Fighter, still trying to protect him, but the stones were somehow slowed down by the words of the Snake. The flames upon the wall upon the wall continued to attack the edges of the Snake’s shadow, but were pushed back as the Snake began to chant, “Law ... of... Choice!... Law ... of... Choice!”

“I hear you,” moaned the delirious Fighter, “I hear you. But I ... no longer ... choose hate.” And then, for a moment, Fighter awoke and came to his senses, “Lion within the lamb, save me from myself!”

“No!” screamed the Snake, but the last of the slender shadow erupted into flame. Black smoke curled up towards the ceiling of the throne room, and then was scattered by a gentle wind coming from the cloud above the throne.

The sword of light vanished. The voice of the Snake became but an echo, and the form of the lamb grew, changed color, and became the Lion once again.

And Fighter fell back asleep, exhausted, between the paws of the Lion.

The Last Days of a Man Named Fighter
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11. N~OF

“Is not the day good?” said the Lion.

“It is,” replied Fighter, walking beside the Lion. Fighter enjoyed such walks -- in the cool of the evening, the dusty road they trod upon seemed more welcoming.

“Are you recuperated from the battle?” asked the Lion.

“In some ways, yes; in some ways, no,” replied Fighter. “Yes, I am glad you showed me that my own hatred had created my own loneliness. But on the other hand...” And then he shrugged.

“What you are saying,” said the Lion; “Is that your loneliness remains?”

“Yes,” replied Fighter. “It remains. Though now, no shadow’s voice feeds my loneliness and makes it grow. Indeed, I have let go of my hate.”

“Fighter,” said the Lion, “Your loneliness shall always remain, until you take a friend -- a BloodFriend.”

“And who shall that be?” asked Fighter, raising his right hand and wrist-guard in mock questioning: “the woman you gave me?”

“I tell you the truth, it should have been her,” said the Lion. “But as often happens among the tribesmen, some stumble and fall.”

Fighter continued walking, and then softly said, “I have often stumbled and fallen.”

“That is most certainly true,” said the Lion with a smile. “But because you accepted the name and marking of the Fighter, when I made you to stand again, you continued to fight. The woman, even when I make her to stand, does not wish to fight for what is right. She is Elfin.”

“And you still love her?” asked Fighter.

“Yes, Fighter. Of course I love her. The Elfin are beautiful people -- they watch over their own, they weep with those that weep and rejoice with those that rejoice. You Fighters normally forget how to do such a thing.”

“Ho!” said Fighter, “It’s plain to see that you still love her.” And then he added with a slight grin, “I am impressed.”

“Indeed, Fighter,” replied the Lion. “Sometimes it is more difficult to love you Fighters than to love the Elfin.”

And then the Lion continued, “Your kind, dear Fighter, are often hot or cold. You see the world as right or wrong, black or white. This is good when dealing with truth. But then you treat the wounded Elfin and Nons as if they are truths, and not as if they are human. Indeed, you often forget that they are fellow tribesmen.”

Fighter paused. “What you have said is true. I apologize for the remark. I admit that I am often jealous of the love and tenderness which is in my Elfin wife.”

“Good,” replied the Lion. “Now then, back to the question at hand, you are in need of a BloodFriend -- whom shall it be?”

“It will be no one, then,” replied Fighter. “What is most right? It is for me to wait for the woman you gave me. One day, she will join me.”

“Spoken like a true fighter,” said the Lion. “And in the meantime?”

“In the meantime, I will fight the loneliness,” replied Fighter. “I have my wrist guard, my breastplate, and my sword.”

“You will not always win such battles,” replied the Lion. “Some of them you will lose. And when you loose, you become depressed. And when you are depressed, you are prone to drink the DarkFire -- and that one day may kill you.”

“All true,” replied Fighter, “all true.” And then Fighter turned toward the Lion. “Lion,” said Fighter. “You can be my BloodFriend!”

“Fighter,” said the Lion, “I can be your *friend*. And I will gladly sit at the Table of Hope with you. But I can only be a BloodFriend to those who belong to the fourth tribe.”

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12. THIS

Fighter and the Lion continued walking for some time – sandals and paws leaving indentations in the dust. The road was known as Choker’sDust Lane, and ran westward from the Lion’s city called DwellingStreet, to the city known as NewHope -- although the Lion always called it “FalseHope”.

“Lion,” said Fighter as the two walked beside an orchard. “I have let go of my hatred. But I am still grieved on occasion.”

“It is good to know grief,” replied the Lion, “It is one of the windows that let you share in my suffering. All who share in my suffering have right to my power.”

“That is good news,” said Fighter. “But can you explain to me my grief?”

“Over which battle, good Fighter, are you so grieved?” asked the Lion.

“Over the battle that never was,” laughed back Fighter. “Seriously, do you recall when you spoke to me to do battle for the Hurting Ones?”

“Yes,” replied the Lion. “I love them, and want all of them to hear of me.”

“And do you recall how you gave me the order of battle: first, to go to the gathering in DwellingStreet and obtain other fighters to join me, then to establish the battlefield, and then to fight? Do you recall that order of battle?”

“Indeed, I do,” replied the Lion.

“But when I went to the gathering and begged them for simply the permission to recruit other fighters, suddenly, they withdrew all support from me.”

“That is true, Fighter,” replied the Lion. “And then with their lips they asked you to study other battles and to entertain their children. But with their hearts, they spoke the words: ‘to the ones that are like us, we will

become like them; but to those that are not, we will not become like them -
- they must first become like us.”

“And the Hurting Ones,” said Fighter, “they will never become first like them -- they are a rouge tribe of another place. Their clothing, their markings, their songs, all these are not like the elders of the Gathering.”

“And,” asked the Lion, “do you hate them for letting so many be in danger of the death that is truly death?”

“No,” replied Fighter. “I no longer hate them. But while hate has lost its grip upon me, I am still grieved over their actions.”

“And you should be grieved, Fighter, for they grieve me,” replied the Lion. “Yet allow me to give you understanding, so that although you grieve, the Serpent will have difficulty deceiving you into hating them again.”

The Lion stopped walking and turned toward the orchard. The branches of each ancient short tree were heavy with almonds, even though the summer’s sun had made the ground dry.

“This field is known as The Planter’s Orchard,” said the Lion softly, as if recalling memories deep and strong. Fighter nodded his head. He had heard the stories as a youth, how a young man named Angel replanted it 150 years before.

Then the Lion smiled, and added, “But that name is of a time gone past. What I wish to teach does not require such history now.”

And then the Lion spoke: “From the heartwood come three branches. In the past, there were other branches, but now the living tree has three: the family, the power, and the knowledge. All three branches are loved because they are living and connected to the heartwood -- none are wrong. But as every branch grows further from the heartwood, they are less right.”

Fighter listened, and the Lion continued, “The Gatherings have tended to emphasize either family or power or knowledge. Those that live within the family-branch meet, and love, and pray in groups that are small. Those that live within the power-branch meet, and pray to encounter me at any cost -- they come in groups of all sizes. Those that live within the knowledge-branch meet and teach. Of what branch was your gathering?”

Fighter thought and then replied, "They are of the family-branch, always meeting in small groups. Knowledge is not that important to them and power is seldom discussed. But love and prayer within the small groups is revered. Indeed, we almost create idols to the family."

"You are right, Fighter," replied the Lion. "And how does each branch reach out to those that do not know my name?"

"I would suppose," replied Fighter, "the family-branch would reach out through small groups; the power branch through any method that encountered your power; and the knowledge-branch always through the preaching of your words."

"You are right once again Fighter," replied the Lion. "And so, when you proposed to recruit fighters, they did not oppose you. But when you proposed that the battleground be their sanctuary, then all was lost."

"What was I to do?" said Fighter, "Should I have proposed that their small groups be the battleground? The Hurting Ones do not even speak their language."

"That is also true," replied the Lion.

"And if you knew that my Gathering would never agree to reach the Hurting Ones within their accursed sanctuary, why did you even ask me to propose such a thing?" asked Fighter. "Do you know that they even allow the Exercisers and those that train dogs to use their property? Their reasoning is as accursed as is their sanctuary!" Fighter crossed his arms across his breastplate and stared at the orchard trees in anger.

"Their sanctuary is not accursed, Fighter, it is blessed," replied the Lion. "Indeed, it is blessed by my presence. And I shall bless that gathering -- not because they are right in refusing to reach out to the Hurting Ones, but because of my great love and forgiveness towards them."

Fighter paused, uncrossed his arms, and asked, "Will the Hurting Ones now suffer because the Gathering refused to open to them?"

"No," replied the Lion. "They will not suffer. For I will raise up more fellow fighters, even if I must breathe life into bones to do so."

13. ~WOR

Fighter was within the hidden room and sat at the Table of Hope, alone.

He sat on a chair. There was one other chair within the hidden room, and it was empty.

He gently held the body of a dream-dove -- its wings hung limp, its neck twisted awkwardly to one side.

He could hear his wife singing softly in the other room the words to the song, "All Glory to the Lion."

"All glory to the Lion, all praise to the one..." The words drifted through the small room where Fighter sat.

"All glory," said Fighter, "all glory for this?" He stroked the head of the dream-dove; its neck feathers were soft and comforting, but its eyes tightly closed, clenched shut in death.

"Who gives us golden moments, by the light of his one..." The next words of the song had reached Fighter's ears.

"Is this yet another 'golden moment'?" asked Fighter to himself. But there was no answer. Only silence... only cold silence and the flicker of the candle upon the table.

"Sent to conquer all, sent to conquer all..." The words of the chorus drifted into the room.

Fighter placed the first two fingers of his right hand upon his lips, and then touched the dove with those same fingers. "How I wish I could give you life with but a kiss," he said. "How I wish you, my dream-dove, would live again." But the body of the dream-dove simply rolled about in his hand like a small feathered sack of sand.

Fighter wanted to cry, but he could not -- not this time, not here. And so he sat.

“How I wish,” said Fighter, “That someone could comfort me. “ He paused. “But if I invite my woman – the very woman that the Lion gave to me – she will release the DreamKiller. And to watch the DreamKiller devour even the remnant of one of my dream-doves, is more than I can stand.”

Fighter walked over to the golden cage that was near the Table of Hope. “Look,” he said, still speaking to himself, “almost all my doves are asleep forever. Some died like this one, on their own. Others were silenced forever by the DreamKiller. Still others have escaped and flown away, only to be captured by another tribesman. Indeed, how much it hurt to see another succeed with the same dream-dove that flew out of my reach.”

Fighter opened the door to the cage, and gently laid down the dream-dove by the bodies of others. “Only two dream-doves yet live,” he said. “May the Lion preserve them. They are all I have.”

And Fighter closed the door to the cage, and sat back down upon his chair.

The other chair near the table sat empty.

“Bitter,” whispered a voice. Fighter heard it, but did not reply.

“Bitter ... and bitterness..,” hissed the same voice.

“Yes,” Fighter said softly to himself. “I am bitter.”

“Bitterness,” hissed the voice, “is goods ... it grows... can heals... so sads... those wounds... and scars...”

Fighter thought of the scar upon his chest. It was true that it hurt -- it hurt now. But he had managed to ignore it. Until now.

“Bitterness,” hissed the voice, “Its woods... is thicks ... and strongs... it is. It keeps... the womans... aways. If womans... if comes... she sees... last doves... last doves. And when... she comes...” the voice continued to hiss, “she says... ‘share dreams’... but thens... she lets DreamKillers loose....”

Fighter heard the words clearly. He wanted to not hear them, but the shear truth of the words held him enchained by the thought.

“Bitterness,” hissed the voice, “Precious... is bitterness... it helps... to saves... your dreams....”

Fighter continued to sit and say nothing. His scar hurt. The image of trusting his wife with his last two dream-doves depressed him even further.

“Not lots... just littles... little bitterness... you needs,” hissed the voice. “A roots... a single roots... is all... you needs.”

“Bitterness,” mouthed Fighter, thinking the word over in his mind.

“Precious... bitterness...,” hissed the voice.

Fighter was silent for a moment, and then he slapped the table, “Done!” he said, out loud to the voice. And at that, a small orange root shaped like a twisted carrot appeared at the center of the Table of Hope.

“Your dreams... your doves... so safes... now, so safes...,” hissed the voice, “Bitterness... is goods....”

Silence covered the hidden room. And then the voice hissed, “The womans... her DreamKillers, yes?... they cannots... cannots touches... whats... it cannots... finds. Bitterness... precious bitterness... it hides... your precious.... dream-doves....”

There was an odd sense of coldness in the air – almost like the skin on a dead man – and the skin on Fighter’s shoulders and neck tingled back in response. But Fighter chose to ignore those feelings.

“Let bitterness... much grows..., good fighters...,” softly cooed the hissing voice. “Let bitterness... much grows....”.

Out of the corner of his eye, Fighter thought he saw a shadow flickering... a long slender shadow, but one that radiated great perverted power.

“Enough... enough... I am indeed bitter... I shall go now,” was all that Fighter could say. And he stumbled out of the hidden room leaving the small root behind atop the Table of Hope.

The long slender shadow reached over, and touched the orange twisted
root.

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14. LD,~

The next day, when Fighter was walking the mountain trails, the Lion appeared to walk beside him.

“May I join you, good Fighter?” asked the Lion.

“Who am I to say no to you?” replied Fighter.

For a few moments they walked in silence.

“You sound tense,” replied the Lion softly. But Fighter did not reply.

“Tell me,” said the Lion, “How is your scar?”

“I do not wish to discuss that,” replied Fighter. But the truth was that the scar ached with every step.

“Very well,” replied the Lion. “But I thought it best to join you.”

“Do what you wish,” replied Fighter, “Are you not the Lion?”

And both walked together in silence for several more moments. But then the moments stretched into minutes, and the minutes into hours. Neither spoke.

Finally, the Lion stopped walking.

“Blood,” said the Lion. “Look upon the ground, Fighter.”

It was indeed blood. Fighter could easily make out the drops of wet-red upon the dirt and stone.

“Good,” said Fighter, “I am in the mood to fight. Send me against them!”

“Indeed, you are in a mood to fight even those that love you,” replied the Lion. And then he continued, “However, a tribesman has been wounded –

this is his blood. And those that wounded him are not of my kingdom forever.”

“Then send me!” demanded Fighter, shaking his fist at the Lion.

“Fighter,” continued the Lion, “You shall find them around the corner of the trail – I have foreseen that they draw the tribesman into the cave. Go quickly, my Fighter! Go now!”

Fighter clapped his hands together, and the sword appeared. He looked at the blade and smiled... then he began to run ahead.

The Lion called out, “The Breastplate! Do not remove it! Be forewarned!” But Fighter, if he heard the Lion at all, did not reply.

The Lion looked towards the heavens, and softly spoke, “His anger is already great, and feeds from the root -- and it is only a day old!”

But a voice came out of the clouds, sounding like thunder, “I will not be mocked. He must reap what he has sown.”

But Fighter did not hear the words; he thought that it had only thundered.

And Fighter reached the corner of the trail, turned, and then saw two robed figures dragging the body of a young man, perhaps a boy, towards a cave.

“Leeches!” shouted Fighter, “Turn!”

The two figures dropped the body of the youth, and one walked delicately – like a woman -- towards Fighter, while the other turned about stiffly.

“The ‘boy’ does not wish you here!” said the first leech, pulling back its hood and revealing the face of a black spider.

“Be gone! Be gone!” Said the second leech, waving stumps of arms hidden with his robe. “To stand against us is to suffer for nothing! For nothing!” The hood hiding his face slipped back and revealed the face of an owl.

But Fighter stood his ground, and pointed the sword at the tribesman’s body. “By the Lion!” he shouted, “I choose to stand in the gap!” And at

that moment, a thorn wall appeared and covered the tribesman's body like a sphere.

"So be it, then, let us fight..." said the first leech in a seductive and female voice. And then the robe that covered the leech's body dropped -- revealing the body of a black spider... webbing of white came from the spider-leech's mouth and covered her own body... and then the webbing tore, and the nude body of a human woman was revealed. But her head was still the blackened head of a spider -- and venom dripped from her fangs.

"Remember me!" shouted the disrobed and naked leech, "Am I not reflection the unbridled lust you once craved?" And then the leech lifted her breasts, one in each delicate hand -- the breasts were large and rounded. The spider-leech's woman-voice laughed out, "Come to me Fighter, come! Place these within your hands and mouth. Let me bite you once again!"

But the second leech softly spoke, "And remember how I, yes, how I supplied you darkness? No one knew who you were, no one knew. You could hide within my night, yes, my night, and enjoy my companion's gift to you."

"Lust, I offer you...pleasure without pain..." chanted the first leech, stepping slowly forward, moving its human hips seductively.

"No one will ever know your pleasure will affect no one else" cooed the second leech with a hollow voice. And then, out of his mouth poured darkness, and it engulfed the trail, the leeches, and Fighter.

"You think me blinded by simple lies?" said Fighter, "You forget that I still remember the years you kept me in a cave!" And even in the darkness, he began to swing his sword, calling out, "I will not abandon my brother!"

"Your prayer-sword will not work here..." sweetly lied the first leech, "Remember how much you once loved my venom!" And in the darkness, Fighter swore he felt the hands of the leech suddenly caress his lower body.

"I offer you pleasure without limitation..." dripped the words from the fangs of the leech. And in the darkness, Fighter could hear the dripping of the venom landing upon the ground but a half-step in front of him. "Let

me come closer to you... pleasure... all the pleasure you lust for ... can ...
be ... yours..."

And then Fighter felt the hot breath coming from the mouth of the spider-
leech, and the smell of the venom was like rich flowers in summer's heavy
evening air. He stopped swinging his sword and shivered in anticipation as
the venom slid between his neck and breastplate.

The heat of the leech's breath smothered his lips, "Release the sword, and
my body shall be yours. . . all yours ... all yours for every pleasure you
have craved..."

Fighter lowered his sword.

"Good," cooed the leech, "Let me remove your breastplate, and then your
naked chest can rub against my breasts..." And with her two arms, she
began to loosen the leather shoulder straps that held his breastplate.

"Yes...", she said, as the breastplate slid to the ground. "Now we can be as
one..."

"No one," whispered out the owl leech, "No one, good Fighter, will ever
know. You are hidden, yes hidden, within my darkness."

"Hidden...", mumbled Fighter, "...in darkness..." He could feel the fangs
being pressed against his throat, "... no one will know..."

He could smell the sweet breath,

"By the Lion....," said Fighter,

He could feel the soft breasts against his chest sliding on the dripping
venom,

"By the Lion," said Fighter,

He could feel his loins aching for pleasure. The leech whispered in his ear,
"Lust without restraint... lust without love... pure lust.... harsh lust...
demanding... taking... stealing... all that ... lust wishes... no asking the
other... only taking..."

But Fighter also thought he heard the very faint sounds of paws – lion paws on dusty trails – coming closer.

“By the Lion,” said Fighter, “You lie!” And he thrust his left free hand instinctively forward, and grasped the neck of the spider-leech, squeezing his thumb into her partially-human pink skinned throat.

“Even if there is darkness to hide within,” shouted Fighter, “will not the Lion see it? I give no mercy to myself! I give no mercy to you!”

And Fighter swung the sword up into the belly of the spider-leech. Her body suddenly convulsed and pulled back. “Taste the ‘venom’ then, of my weapon!” hissed Fighter into the darkness.

“What is happening?” called out the owl leech, “I do not hear the moans of pleasure mixed with death.”

“Nor shall you!” shouted Fighter, withdrawing his sword from the belly of the spider-leech.

And at that, the owl leech closed his mouth, and the darkness vanished. He stiffly began to walk towards the cave, tottering awkwardly.

“Do not depart so quickly, my friend!” shouted Fighter. But the owl leech screamed out an incantation, and his clothing vanished, revealing the body and the folded wings of a vulture – only with an owl’s head. He lunged for the opening of the cave, spreading his large black wings in flight.

“Take this with you – a gift of the Lion!” shouted Fighter, hurling his sword like a lance. It cut through the air, and then through the black feathers of the owl leech’s back. The leech dropped to the dusty ground, dead.

Fighter clapped his hands together, and the sword reappeared between them. He turned towards the body of the spider-leech.

She lay upon the ground, bleeding heavily from her stomach, and beginning to shake in her death throes. Fighter forced himself to watch: her beautiful legs began to twist into the shapes of two carved dead men, her curvaceous and inviting lower body became black like the dirt of a freshly dug grave, and her breasts shrank back into her body, turning stone

gray and hardening into rock -- the shape of a rough and lumpish double grave stone.

As she coughed the last of her life, Fighter picked up his breastplate, and strapped the metal back onto his shoulders. He turned, and the last of the spider-leech's venom was burning acid, writing upon her own chest, now a grave stone of rock, in ancient script, "Lust without restraint - None but the dead dwell here."

While Fighter was still standing, with his eyes viewing the dead spider-leech, the Lion approached Fighter. "Why?" asked the Lion. "Did you let the spider-leech come so close to you?"

"Because of the memories of pleasure," replied Fighter, adjusting his breastplate, "And because of the memories of darkness."

"And why," asked the Lion, "Did you finally refuse her fangs?"

"Because of the memories of pain." replied Fighter. "Yes... because of the memories of pain... and a certain sound that I thought I heard." And neither said anything more.

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15. BUT~

The young man's body, within the sphere of thorns, again quivered and shook. In a delirium, his body rolled toward the thorned wall, his arm thrashed to the side, and slammed against the thorns. Fresh lines of blood appeared.

"We have waited three days," said Fighter, watching the occasional thrashing of the young man. "Three days! And he has not yet released the fever."

"That is why I have not yet removed the protection," replied the Lion sitting beside the thorn sphere.

"You pick a difficult way to protect your fighters," said Fighter, shaking his head and walking about.

"It is not difficult, but it is my way," replied the Lion. "You invoked the protection, but he must release the fever in order for the thorns to go."

"And what if he refuses to release the fever?" asked Fighter.

"You yourself know the answer," replied the Lion. He turned his immense head toward the young man, and looked through the twisted thorns at a swollen red infection -- its open sores pocketed some of the youth's left shoulder.

The Lion spoke, "If any fighter refuses to release the fever, then I am forced to hedge him in with thorns. It is better that he bleed on my thorns, than be consumed by the Serpent."

"But you forget," said Fighter, "that the fever gives the greatest of dreams. Men have held on to the fever for weeks at a time. The reality of the thorn's pain may or may not awaken him!"

"All true," said the Lion, "All true, good Fighter. When a man loves his dreams more than my reality, he is slow to release the fever."

Both paused and said nothing for a time. Then finally, Fighter spoke.

"He is a fool," said Fighter.

"He is," replied the Lion. "But weren't you also?"

Fighter paused. The Lion, he thought, at times is blunt.

"True," said Fighter. "I retained the right to the fever for many years. I refused to release it. I admit that. But he is a fool. He is younger than me, and has many years that he could fight. I have less than half a life-time left. Why does he not see that?"

"Because you were blessed by the Healer, when he opened your eyes to see the shortness of life," replied the Lion. "That is why you see! That is why the dreams no longer mean anything to you -- you were touched by the Healer! The Fighter that sees his life is but the morning's mist, is blessed."

"Perhaps," joked Fighter, "I should be touched by him again."

"Why do you say that?" asked the Lion.

"My scar is beginning to burn and ache," replied Fighter.

"That is because the spider-leech's venom touched it," replied the Lion. "And you are right that you need the Healer. Shall I call for him?"

"No," said Fighter. "Do not call him. The scar is part of me. I may have relinquished the right to the fever, but I refuse to ever release my right to my scar. I give myself no mercy."

"Then you are still," replied the Lion softly, "a fool."

And then the Lion continued, "Consider this, my good fighter: you are free to fight, because you ran the 'seven of eight hills' of the Gauntlet, and because I called you by the name of Fighter. But you are not totally free."

The Lion paused and looked at the youth within the sphere of thorns. "This young man is also of the tribe of Fighter, for I have called him by that name and he dared to hear my voice. He has run but the first two hills of the Gauntlet, and has stumbled many times. But I have forgiven that."

The Lion continued, "His eyes have not been touched by the Healer, for he is still too frightened of my reality. And so, my heart breaks for him. But what you say, Fighter, is an even deeper grief to me."

"In what way?" asked Fighter. "Am I not free to fight for you? Have I not walked seven of the eight hills? Indeed, I would have run the Gauntlet to the top of the eighth hill, but I was forbidden by your own deputies!"

The Lion turned his head and looked at Fighter with his golden eyes. "If a man does not give me his scars," replied the Lion calmly, "Then he is forever forbidden to run the last of the Gauntlet -- he cannot enter even the lowest part of the eighth hill."

Fighter stared hard at the eyes of the Lion, but the Lion's eyes showed tears beginning to form.

"Listen to me," continued the Lion. "You refused to yield your right to the fever for many years. Yet, when you finally called for the Healer, he came. And he searched out the deep roots of the fever within your mind -- and for you, he knew the cure. That is why he showed you the shortness of your life."

Fighter sighed, and turned away from the Lion's face. Looking into the distance, Fighter spoke, as if remembering some ancient battle-pain. "Once my eyes were opened," said Fighter, "That is, once I saw the shortness of my life, I had, absolutely had, to release the fever. I could not have lived with myself, if I spent all my remaining days in dreams."

"And so," said the Lion moving closer to Fighter's field of vision, "you trusted the Healer for one cure, but you will not trust him for another -- the healing of your scar?"

"I do trust the Healer," replied Fighter, turning to face the Lion. "I trust him very much. But some part of me begs me, bribes me, even applauds me that I should never give up my scar. It is my right to wear it. It is somehow part of my significance. I will show my own self no mercy!"

"You have said more truth than you realize," replied the Lion. "Much more truth... than you even comprehend. Because my way is 'mercy', and you cannot even comprehend my way."

And the Lion turned away from Fighter and moved his lips, as if pleading with an unseen friend. Fighter, though unable to see the Lion's face, could see the tears of the Lion striking the dry ground, and Fighter hung his head in shame.

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16. BE~T

The ground shook.

It trembled.

Leviathan was coming.

"How can this be?" shouted Fighter to the Lion.

The wind blew.

Trees began to bend.

All of the elements began to flee his presence -- Leviathan was coming.

"Lion!" shouted Fighter above the screaming of the wind. "Lion! What brings Leviathan here?"

"This youth within the sphere is chosen by the living throne!" shouted back Lion. "But he is also a member of the ruling class of another plane. Though he is a young man here; he is a fully grown man there. And Leviathan wishes to consume their government."

"Then I fight!" shouted Fighter, and he clapped his hands, and the prayer-sword appeared. And then Fighter, his breastplate gleaming in the sun, stood between the wind and the body within the sphere.

Dark clouds began to hide the sun. Fighter's breastplate reflected the churning purple clouds.

A sense of fear began to electrify the air. Fighter's skin on his forearms pricked up and the hair stood on end.

Leviathan was suddenly here. Fighter's face felt the sting of dirt kicked up by the wind, but he stood his ground and did not even turn his head.

17. RANS

"Good fight," said the Lion. "You were not deceived nor frightened."

"I recalled your battle instructions, even written within that book of ForeverPromises," said Fighter, "*Resist him and he will flee.*"

"Indeed," said the Lion, "When I created the powers that we now call Leviathan, I created them to flee before nothing. Nothing, that is, but me. And since you are one of my tribesmen, Leviathan is forced to flee from you."

"Do you not mean," said Fighter, "that Leviathan flees because I am a Fighter? Because I show no one mercy? I show not even mercy to my own self?"

"No, I tell you the truth," laughed the Lion with a smile, "Even the Nons that know me, with their small prayer-goads can cause Leviathan to flee. And the Elfin, with their little prayer-daggers can cause Leviathan to flee. And you Fighters, with your prayer-swords, can also cause him to flee."

"And what of the fourth tribe?" asked Fighter, "I assume they have the largest weapon of prayer?"

"Good Fighter," replied the Lion, "They do not need a pointed goad, or dagger, or sword -- they are esteemed so highly that they are the weapon itself. They live a life of continuous prayer."

"Always fighting then?" asked Fighter.

"No," replied the Lion. "To you, prayer is a battle cry for a moment of glory. To the fourth tribe, prayer is breath that involves every moment of life. They are a living sword of prayer with every breath, every thought, and every hope. They are not always 'fighting', they are always walking in trust and victory. They know mercy for their own selves; and the give mercy freely to others."

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18. FORM

"What is this noise!" shouted the young man within the sphere of thorns.
"I say, no, I demand to be released immediately!"

"Young fighter," replied the Lion, turning to face the sphere of thorns, "It is good to see that you released the fever. Welcome back to the reality that is truly real."

"I do not care what 'reality' this is!" replied the young man, sitting up on the dirt. "Aren't I a man? A great government official? Am I not a gifted speaker and negotiator? Why am I not being given the honor that is due to me!"

"He has, perhaps," whispered Fighter to the Lion, "a small amount of pride?"

"Much more than most," sighed the Lion.

"And who is this, that stands by the side of the Lion?" demanded the young man, shaking a skinny arm.

"I am called Fighter," replied Fighter, "And it has been my privilege to watch over you."

"To watch over me?" said the one within the thorns. "Do you realize who I am? To watch over me? What gall! Someone of my caliber can most certainly handle all the affairs of this world on my own! And how dare you stand so close to the Lion -- such a position should be given to those who are like me!"

"Young fighter," said the Lion, "You are welcome to stand next to me."

"Indeed," added in Fighter, trying desperately hard to control his own tongue, "Anyone who dares to walk with the Lion, and to use his prayer-sword, I consider a man. Please join us."

The Lion blew white smoke from his mouth, and the thorn sphere withdrew back into the ground from which it had sprung.

"You are free," said the Lion to the young man. "I ask you to join us."

"To the Fire-Lake with both of you!" shouted the young man, "I sense my freedom now!" He staggered out of where the sphere had been, clapped his hands, and a prayer-sword appeared.

"Back away!" said the mouth of the youth, "Or I shall surely pray against you, and the Lion shall do as I bid!" Then he swung the sword awkwardly over his head, but his arms twisted across each other, and the sword tumbled free and into the ground in front of the youth. But the youth, looking confused and in another direction, staggered forward, and promptly tripped over it. He fell face first upon the ground.

"Young fighter," said the Lion to the one upon the ground, "Perhaps we should go and fight the Serpent's Clan together. You shall do very well with me."

"Are you joking?" interrupted Fighter, finally losing control of his tongue. "This 'boy' cursed us both; he drew out a sword against us; and tripped on his face! He is a hazard to us and a detriment to the tribe of Fighters!"

"Fighter," replied the Lion, "I already heard you speak the truth: anyone who dares to walk with the Lion and to use the sword -- he is no longer a boy, but a man."

"Indeed!" shouted the youth, attempting to lift his chest up from the ground. "I am a man. And certainly, using this sword-thing will only require a moment's effort. And then I can return to more important endeavors."

"He is not a man, he is an embarrassment!" said Fighter, and he turned his back towards the youth, crossed his arms over his breastplate, and looked off into the distance in disgust.

But the Lion ignored Fighter and addressed the youth, "What makes a man that follows me, is his willingness to face the enemy with his sword. What makes a great man is his willingness to face himself. What makes a man like me, is that he shows mercy."

"Get on with it!" said the youth, rubbing the sores on his shoulder with filthy hands, "Surely there is more to being a man than simple prayer. What of brilliance?"

"It matters not," replied the Lion.

"What of giftedness?" asked the youth.

"Those that are willing to admit their need to another, and to pray together, are the most gifted of all," replied the Lion.

"But if prayer is so easy and so powerful," said the youth, "Then only a fool would not do it."

"Well spoken!" said the Lion. And then the Lion added with a smile, "Then, young fighter, will you choose to be a man or a fool?"

The youth paused. And then a grin began to break out across his dirt-spattered face, "I believe," he said, "that I have trapped myself with my own words." He paused, and then added, "Forgive me of my arrogance, Lion. I would gladly learn to pray. I wish to be a man."

"Then receive the power," said the Lion advancing towards the youth that was before him.

And though Fighter's back was toward the youth, he could suddenly sense raw power, like the warming rays of the sun, tingling the hairs on the back of his neck. Fighter turned around.

And there, before the Lion stood not a youth, but a man. A giant of a man. With a sword one-third again as long and as heavy as the one worn by Fighter.

A deep voice came out the youth-turned-to-man, "Lion! Forgive me! Teach me to pray!"

"Lion!" said Fighter, "what have you created?"

"Have you never seen," said the Lion, "one to whom I have given the gift of intercession?"

19. ED~B

"You look disturbed, good Fighter," said the Lion, as the song of the giant grew more and more distant.

"I am tired," said Fighter.

"Yes, you are tired," said the Lion, "But you are also tempted to become jealous, because I am generous."

"Yes," replied Fighter, softly, "I confess to that temptation. But then..."

"But then what, good Fighter?" asked the Lion, continuing softly, "But then what? To the man that confesses his weakness, I am willing to give much. You are confessing, therefore, be bold and ask."

"Lion," said Fighter, "my long years of battle for you, have taught me that jealousy is a snare and a trap. So I refuse that sin. But..." Fighter paused, and then said, "I do indeed long for that kind of power."

"That power is so small, for the one that is departing us, only knows prayer. He has not yet learned mercy." Replied the Lion.

Fighter was silent. Mercy had been mentioned more in the last few days, than ever before. But, he thought, I must refuse to be merciful to my own self. It is not right that I need the Lion's mercy.

"Good Fighter," replied the Lion, "Soon you will have greater power than even the giant. Meet me at the base of the eighth mountain of the Gauntlet. But for now, you must go home. I perceive that you must first visit your Table of Hope."

And with those cryptic instructions, the Lion turned his head towards a portal that had appeared, stepped forward through it, and vanished.

"Yes, Lion," said Fighter to no one in particular, "I am tired. I will go home. Some time spent with my dream-doves will encourage me, and then, yes then, I will be ready to enter into the eighth mountain."

And Fighter turned down the trail that would bring him home.

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20. Y~TH

Fighter reached the door of his home, and entered in. His wife greeted him with a kiss, and he enjoyed the freshness of her love.

"I am tired," he said, "please allow me to go the room to rest."

His wife smiled and laughed. She said a word or two and then walked away.

"How much I once loved that smile," thought Fighter. "But now, I am of a different tribe. And I have fought so many times, and always alone. Always alone."

Fighter recalled the words to a popular drinking song, one he had heard while drinking DarkFire: *'Loneliness eats like acid, etching scars upon the mirror of our love. The brilliance is gone; love shines no more. Drink and forget, drink and forget....'*

"Our love is forever scarred," thought Fighter, as he trudged up the stairs to the resting room. "Its brilliance is forever gone."

In the room, Fighter looked slowly at the two large beds -- the love-bed and the sleeper. Whenever one desired intimacy, he or she would retire and sleep upon the love-bed, as a gesture to their partner. Fighter smiled at the thoughts of all the enjoyment he and the women had shared upon that bed. But then he realized that it had been many days since he had lain upon it, hoping for his wife to join him.

"Indeed," said Fighter, speaking softly as if to the bed, "I do not lay upon you, for I so seldom now desire her."

"She is your enemy...," whispered a voice from the ether.

"Be gone!" said Fighter, "You are not welcome here!"

"She deserted you many times...," whispered another voice from a dark corner.

"Return to the pit!" said Fighter. "All such shadows, I bind you now!"
And both voices could say no more.

"Good," thought Fighter. "Now then, I came here, not to rest, but to visit
my hidden room wherein lies my Table of Hope... and my precious dream-
doves."

And with that, Fighter closed his eyes, and a door known only to him
appeared. He stepped forward, and pulled on the handle.

But the door would not open.

"What is this?" said Fighter. And he pulled upon the handle again, only
harder. The door moved but the breadth of a thumb and finger, and when
he released the handle, it snapped shut upon him.

"To me!" Fighter said, clapping his hands together, and his prayer-sword
immediately appeared in his hands.

In a smooth movement, Fighter pulled upon the handle of the door with his
left hand, and, as soon as the door opened but the width of a man's foot, his
right hand swung the sword through the gap. A few leaves and twisted
orange-colored branches fell to the ground.

"What is this...?" he said.

And then the door swung open.

"No!" screamed out Fighter, as he faced thousands of twisted orange
branches. On every branch were thorns and eyes that looked in every
direction; on the corner of every eye were jagged green leaves, and on
every leaf was written the accounts of every deed his wife had every done
against him, imagined or real.

"My dream-doves!" yelled Fighter, "Where are they?" And then he began
to swing his sword.

But the branches that he struck, immediately re-grew. And every branch
his arms brushed against tore at his skin.

"May the Lion curse you!" shouted Fighter, as he stared at the scratched lines of red blood forming on his forearms above the wrist-guards. "I will not yield!"

And he began to force his way into the room and swung his sword all the more furiously. Hit after hit, his blade cut through the twisted branches; but jagged cut after cut continued to be etched upon his forearms.

The branches that fell to the floor quickly had death glaze over their eyes; but the eyes that remained looked back towards the roots of bitter memories, and recalled yet another wrong done by the woman. The eyes then squeezed themselves shut until a tear of blood formed, and nurtured by the red liquid, from the corner of the eye would grow another leaf, with the history of the woman's wrongs written upon it.

Fighter continued cursing and swinging his sword.

"I will not yield!" he shouted.

The poison within the thorns began to work into the flesh of Fighter. His arms became heavy, his shoulders began to ache, and then finally, his hands, holding his prayer-sword, began to cramp -- each finger began to pull away from the handle of his sword.

"I will not... I must not... yield," Fighter said, as if speaking to his own hands. But he could do nothing to force his fingers forward.

"No...," he moaned, "No, not this...." He took a step back, and the sword slipped between his fingers, and fell useless to the floor. His arms ached from the poison, and his head began to pound from its effect.

"My strength," moaned Fighter, "where is my strength...?" The weight of his own breastplate became unbearable; his body began to stagger like a battle-weary and sleep-deprived soldier. And then, slumping to one knee, then to the other, he slowly crumbled to the floor, as if he were a wooden puppet in toy-armor being lowered by unseen stings.

On the floor, he closed his eyes. But then, he sensed it... a shape – a shape that was long and slender, yet built with great perverted power.

And then, he felt it: the tingling of vibrations as the movement of hard scrapping scales slid across the floor of his hidden room.

And then, he heard it: a voice. A voice that was sweet and gentle, yet hissing all the same.

"Bitterness," hissed the voice, "precious... bitterness... how quicks ... it grows." And the air in the hidden room suddenly became cold, like the skin on a dead man, and a shivering sensation tingled the back of Fighter's neck.

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21. E~RE

Fighter said nothing, as the horror of what the plant truly was, began to grip him.

"Precious," hissed the voice, "very precious.... You wants ... small roots... but small mans...bitterness ... becomes ... death trees."

The voice laughed, but not in joy, but rather like the death rattles that are shook slowly, methodically, and in rhythm as diseased men are buried.

"Yes ..." hissed the voice, "Bitterness... grows... becomes... death trees.... And nows... I, the givers... of deaths... I ... comes... too."

The shape became more real, the scrapping noise grew thicker, and the death-breath sound of a dying man parted the fabric of the air within the hidden room. Glistening with scales of rock-crystal made to look like diamonds, the Serpent emerged from the blackness of the pit.

"Yes...," hissed the Serpent, "How you's... likes this... my bitterness?"

Fighter said nothing as he saw the Serpent emerge. His mind could scarcely operate. The poison of bitterness was causing his arms to ache, his head to pound, and his body to begin to shake.

The Serpent smiled and scrapped across the floor to the legs of Fighter.

Fighter could not move -- he could not speak. The Serpent smiled again, and simply began to coil his mass around the body of Fighter.

"Soons...," said the Serpent slowly, "Soons..., I squeezes... I squeezes you's... and you's... becomes... consumes... with bitterness."

The scales of the Serpent began to glisten red as their sharp edges dug into Fighter's skin through his trousers. But Fighter, now completely paralyzed from the poison of bitterness, could not move at all.

"Soons...", said the Serpent, "Soons..., your frames... your fleshs... it lives ... but ... your hopes... they all's... dies ...forevers..."

Fighter's body began to shake more and more as the coils of the Serpent tightened around him.

"Goods...", hissed the Serpent, "So ... goods.... This vessels...of yours... it shatters ... shatters soon Your frames ... of simple fleshs... cannot exists ...without hopes...."

The Serpent continued to coil, "Soon... simple fleshs... soons... I breaks ... you downs.... soons..., you collapses."

Fighter's head rolled back; the Serpent's body now circled about his legs, waist, and chest. Fighter could hardly breathe. The simple thought of even praying was suddenly too much of a burden to bear. He began to shake even more uncontrollably.

"Goods..., so very goods... this is," hissed the Serpent, "So very goods... for fleshs... for fleshs to sees ... to sees no hopes.... Nows..., I breaks you's ... I breaks you's downs... downs to nothingness...."

Fighter looked towards the door that had led to his hidden room. There, on the Table of Hope, was the root -- not a small twisted orange root, but a pulsating, living thing that had covered over the table so completely, that nothing else could have been placed on the table top.

Next to the covered table, Fighter could make out the cage that had held the last of his dream-doves -- it was now torn open and covered with twisted vines. Impaled upon large thorns were the last two of his dream-doves -- one limp and lifeless and the other shaking with its wings impaled.

"You likes... this canvass ... of deaths...?" said the Serpent, "Alls... is deads ... all feathers... all deads because... of you's...."

And the Serpent laughed, "You fleshs ... you puts... your hopes ... in dreams... yes? Nows..., your dreams... all dead... Nows..., you haves... no hopes."

The Serpent's coiling was complete, even up to the shoulders of Fighter. And the Serpent lifted his scaled head and stared down at the drained face

of Fighter. "Little mans... weak fleshes... let breakdowns... consume you...."

Fighter's body now shook uncontrollably, tears came to his eyes at the least thought of resistance; even the simplest movement was overwhelmed by the presence of the Serpent.

Fighter closed his eyes and searched within himself -- he wanted to collapse, for he knew that it would somehow release him from all burdens. All he needed to do was to somehow give himself permission to give up all hope.

And hope? Fighter knew he had no hope – for the Serpent had told him so, and the poison of bitterness, the exhaustion of a useless fight, these combined to somehow make the Serpent's words seemed true... inarguably true... even as real as the Lion's own words often seemed.

And so Fighter looked inside himself for permission... permission to breakdown... to be consumed... to be overcome. Fighter's heart looked for permission to collapse, but a thought... a simple thought... one so old... from the days of his youth... even from his Elfin days ... returned to him: *'for yet will I trust him'*.

Such a simple thought -- it was like a ray of small pure light showing the exit out of a cave of darkness. Fighter opened his eyes and looked into the face of the Serpent, now inches from his own face.

"Yes?..." hissed the Serpent, "Yes..., what says... you... little fleshes...?"

Fighter barely spoke, his lips but forming the words: "I ... will... yet... trust... Him."

The air erupted! It parted! And the Lion entered the room!

He roared and snarled revealing his teeth! The Serpent began to uncoil!

The Lion leaped through the air! And sank his fangs into the lower neck of the Serpent!

The Serpent screamed, hissed, and struck back at the Lion, sinking his own dagger-teeth into the Lion's left paw!

The Lion released his strangle-hold on the Serpent's neck, and roared out, "Golgotha!" and lifted his right paw high into the air – only to bring it down full force upon the head of the Serpent!

The head of the Serpent crushed open, like a dry and hollow melon, and out of its skull swarmed flies.

The room was silent. The Lion looked about -- to the left and then to the right. He then looked upward, slowly lifting his red-stained left paw, as if to heaven. And then, as if having gained a silent permission, he spoke: "Good Fighter, this blood I have given freely and it is for your healing. Will you accept it?"

Fighter could hardly move his lips from the poison within his body. He was still trembling within the remains of the coiled Serpent. Fighter thought the word "yes" and tried to mouth the sound.

The Lion smiled, "I hear your heart, good Fighter." And the Lion held his paw over the body of Fighter.

A drop of the Lion's blood touched the portion of the Serpent's body that was still coiled around Fighter, and the crystal-rock diamond scales became gray-dust coals -- the Serpent's body crumbled into ashes, as if it had been burned years ago in some great lake of fire.

A second drop of blood touched the body of Fighter, and each wound began to close on its own, his shaking slowed and then stopped; his blurred vision began to clear; the pounding within his head ceased. Fighter's strength returned. And in moments, not measured by time, but measured by increasing hope, he slowly arose from the floor.

The Lion spoke softly, "I have healed you, good Fighter. But only you can destroy this death tree. You know what you must do."

"I do know," said Fighter. "I was a fool...."

"You were deceived, as well, my Fighter," said the Lion. "I forgive you."

Fighter's strength fully returned, and he stood before the Lion. "I was," he said, "a fool to use prayer, where prayer does little good."

The Lion said nothing; he merely waited.

Fighter straightened himself. And then he spoke to the death tree these words: "In the name of the Lion, I forgive my wife."

The plant began to shake.

"I will recall her sins no more!" said Fighter.

At this statement, every eye upon the tree glazed over in death.

"I will look upon her as clothed by the Lion's love!"

At this, every leaf curled up and shriveled.

"I forgive her completely!" said Fighter, with even more strength, "As the Lion has forgiven me!"

The plant began to shrink back, to shake, it's leaves fell to the ground. It's roots retracted from the edges of the table and its vines fell from every wall. Soon, there was nothing but a small twisted orange root laying upon the table, with two crumpled dream-doves by it.

"Peace," said the Lion, "Peace I give unto you."

"Peace I accept," said Fighter, "And peace I give to my wife."

"Mercy," said the Lion, "I give to you in abundance."

"Mercy, I accept," said Fighter, "And mercy I give to my wife."

And at that, the orange root erupted into flame, and burned until nothing was left -- not even ashes remained.

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22. NEWI

Fighter walked slowly forward in the hidden room. He walked over to the Table of Hope, and then sat upon the chair next to it. He stared at the two dream-doves.

“They were the only two I had left,” said Fighter.

“Yes,” replied the Lion, “they were the last of your dreams.”

“And now I have no dreams,” said Fighter. And then he slowly added, “And my own bitterness is what killed them.”

“What you say is true, good Fighter,” replied the Lion, entering the room. “What you say is very true -- a root of bitterness can spring up, and it will always destroy much.”

“And I came so close to breakdown,” said Fighter. He slumped forward against the edge of the table; his breastplate was heavily scratched and even dented from the constriction of the Serpent.

“You came close to breakdown because these dream-doves were your treasure,” said the Lion. And then, the golden one continued, “You filled your most treasured world with bitterness, and for a moment, you believed the lies of the Serpent that there was ‘no hope’. Where your treasure is,” continued the Lion, “there lives your heart. You would be wiser to place your treasures in me, where nothing can kill them.”

But Fighter did not really hear the Lion’s words, he looked at the doves, and simply said, “There was no hope...”

There is,” replied the Lion, “always hope. For I have set this law in place: ‘Forever shall abide faith, hope, and love.’”

But again Fighter did not really hear the Lion’s words. The Lion looked at him, hung down his huge head, and sighed. And the Lion sat down by the side of Fighter and waited patiently, as Fighter gently touched the bodies of the doves with his blood-stained hands.

Finally, Fighter spoke, "Lion," he said, "It is difficult for me to breathe. Why?"

The Lion turned his head and spoke softly into the air, and his words became a warm cloud that floated over to Fighter. The cloud formed two arms and gently touched Fighter's chest and back. And then, the front cloud lifted off Fighter's breastplate.

"Look, good Fighter," said the Lion, "Look upon your scar. That is why you are having trouble breathing."

And Fighter looked down upon his chest and saw the scar -- once it was a long white line that slanted across his chest, but now it was red and swollen, torn open and weeping clear white plasma with blood.

The Lion spoke again, "You need the Healer. You need him desperately -- your encounter with the spider-leech, and now your fight against bitterness, has opened old wounds. Shall I call him for you?"

"Lion," replied Fighter. "I have no choice. The pain of the scar is becoming unbearable."

"It is painful," replied the Lion, "because it was touched by the acid-venom of the spider-leech days ago -- and then you continued to serve me without taking care of your own wounds. Wounds that are not attended to become weeping scars that can kill. And now the bitterness... it has done you much damage."

Neither said a word for a time. Both simply sat as Fighter weighed out the words of the Lion. Finally, Fighter spoke, "I am willing to resign my right to own this scar -- it has brought me nothing but pain."

"Indeed," said the Lion softly, "the truth is that you kept your ownership of the scar all this time hoping that your wife would see the pain, and upon seeing it, that she would be affected by it."

Fighter weighed out the words of the Lion.

"I confess," replied Fighter, "that what you say is true. But my scar has not hurt the woman as I hoped -- and it is killing me."

“Well said, good Fighter,” replied the Lion, “well said.”

“And,” added the Lion, “You are learning to accept that you need mercy.”

The Fighter swallowed hard and then said, “Tis a very difficult lesson.”

“And,” continued the Lion, “You are learning to give mercy.”

Fighter nodded.

And then the Lion looked upward and roared, “Healer! I send you!
Come!”

And within the hidden room, a gentle breeze began to blow. The happy laughter of a child echoed within the room, and the Healer appeared -- he was the height and shape of a small child and wore a simple robe of white cloth. His sash was of gold cloth and his shoes of simple leather. His head was covered with curly locks of hair and he clapped his fat little hands together with absolute delight -- his smile was like that of a two-year-old celebrating some simple gift with a joy that could not be easily articulated.

“Healer,” spoke the Lion, “anoint his scar with salve. Take of mine, and give to him.”

And the healer squealed with delight! And then raced forward towards Fighter as if to hug him with a child’s pure love -- but as the body of the Healer touched Fighter, the Healer vanished.

But Fighter suddenly straightened up. He began to smile. “What is this?” he said, to no one in particular. And then Fighter, despite himself, began to chuckle, and then to chuckle with smiles, and then chuckles became laughter.

“It would appear,” said the Lion watching, “that the Healer has first chosen to restore the joy of your salvation.”

Fighter laughed back, “You are right!” And then, he regained control of himself. “Lion,” said Fighter, “It has been a long time since I simply enjoyed a moment.”

“Indeed,” replied the Lion, “You are just learning to give mercy to yourself and others. So, of course, one cannot laugh unless they receive and give mercy.”

Fighter laughed all the more.

“Good,” replied the Lion. And then the Lion called out, “Healer, now open his eyes!”

The laughter of a child sounded out again though the Healer himself remained unseen, but suddenly the face of Fighter went slack as if intrigued by some deep and strange thought.

The Lion waited, and then said, “What did you see?”

“I saw three things,” replied Fighter, shaking his head, as if amazed he could imagine something so clearly.

“Three things, indeed?” Queried the Lion.

“Yes,” continued Fighter. “In my mind there appeared a ship upon ocean water that was so deep no one could measure it. And then appeared a single mountain against the night’s sky -- and above the mountain were thousands of stars, again so high that no man could measure it. Those two visions were wondrous!”

But then, Fighter paused, and then he added, “But the third thing I saw was a woman: stripped, beaten and covered with many wounds, and she was abandoned in the desert.”

“You have seen well, good Fighter,” replied the Lion. “The ship and mountain are you. Carrying the ship is an ocean of forgiveness that can never be measured; and above the mountain is the vastness of love that can never be limited by the mind of man.”

The Lion paused and said no more.

“But what of the woman?” asked Fighter.

“I must go,” replied the Lion, and he turned toward the door that led one out of the hidden room.

“Lion,” said Fighter, “what of the woman?”

“Good Fighter,” replied the Lion, “Some interpretations are difficult to hear.”

“Lion,” replied Fighter, “who was the woman? and who inflicted upon her so much pain?” Fighter slammed his wrist-guarded fist down upon the table. “I demand to know these things!”

The Lion stopped walking towards the door. “Do you really wish to know?” he asked.

“Yes,” replied Fighter. “I must know! And I must know now!”

“Good Fighter,” replied the Lion, “The woman is your wife and you are the one that inflicted those wounds upon her.”

And instantly the scar upon Fighter’s chest stopped bleeding.

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23. NG~O

Two days had passed since Fighter and the Lion had last spoke.

Fighter stood out in the garden by his home. His wife was inside the house cooking.

Fighter thought of his scar – still red and swollen lying across his chest. “You have stopped bleeding,” he said, as if speaking to the scar. “But you are still a part of my life.” Fighter sighed, “How can I ever be rid of you?”

Fighter walked among his roses.

And then, he understood.

He began to pick roses -- one after another, until his arms were filled with the traditional three-sets-of-seven. And then he walked into the house.

“These, my wife,” said Fighter, “are for you.”

His wife smiled and took the roses. She laughed and smiled again. “What, good husband,” she said, “is the special day?”

Fighter hesitated -- he was not quite sure what to say. And so, he said, “Perhaps I saw a picture of forgiveness and love. Enough to lift ships or caress a mountain. And perhaps, I realized that you should see a glimpse of the same. I confess that I have neglected you far too long.”

“Husband,” replied his wife, “your words are beautiful!” And she kissed him upon his lips.

Later that night, as he lay upon the love-bed with his wife sleeping next to him, Fighter thought he heard a noise -- that of a small child laughing in delight.

“Thank you, Healer,” thought Fighter. He looked at his sleeping wife -- her shape covered with a thin blanket of cloth, and spoke softly, “I must

24. F~YO

The next day, Fighter sat in the hidden room and the Lion was beside him. Both looked at the feathered object before them that laid upon the table.

“I had thought they were all dead,” said Fighter.

“No, good Fighter,” replied the lion, “This one last dream-dove lives. But its wings are infected badly. Unless you act soon, it will also die.”

“I had thought that the bitterness had killed them both,” said Fighter.

“The Serpent lied to you. One dream-dove was indeed dead. But the other,” replied the Lion, “this other was impaled upon thorns. So, it still lives.”

“But you just said...”

“That you must act soon,” replied the Lion. “Good Fighter, you know what you must do...”

“Indeed,” said Fighter. “I do know what must be done. But what if...?” his voice trailed off.

“It is a question of trust,” replied the Lion. “If you give the Healer your dream-dove, you have committed to him the last of your treasures. If you trust the Healer, then you will survive the turning over of your dream to him. If you do not trust him, you will survive, but not nearly as well. It is always difficult for a Fighter to loose the last of his treasures.”

The dove before them lay like a dead animal, except that its black eyes were opened and occasionally the small eyelids blinked. Its wings were spread to each side – unmoving dusty brown feathers with splotches of rust-red from dried blood. Both wings had lumps of swelling from the infections.

“What if,” continued Fighter, “What if the Healer chooses to not return the dream-dove to me?”

“You know, good Fighter, it is very possible that the dream-dove will never be returned to you. That is reality...my reality. Yet the Healer and I will do as my Father commands – it is possible that my Father will give to you the same again, it is equally possible that my Father will not give to you that particular dream-dove ever again.”

Fighter swallowed hard. “So then, some dreams can be lost forever?”

“Come, good Fighter,” said the Lion. “Let us reason together. If you do not give the last of your dreams – the last of your glorious plans – to the Healer, it will die. And then, you will have no probability of enjoying your dream-dove again.”

The Lion continued, “But if you do give, then the Healer will one day give back to you. There is no guarantee that the Healer will return to you the same dream-dove at all, but the Healer will always give back much more than you dare to give to him.”

Fighter bit his lip. He thought for a moment. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but then closed his lips in silence. The Lion sat quietly by his side. The dove ceased moving and closed her eyes.

“The dream-dove, good Fighter,” said the Lion, “nears death.”

Fighter looked at the limp dove, and then turned his gaze down upon his own scratched and damaged breastplate. For a moment, he thought about the un-scarred chest that now lived under that metal.

“Then call him,” said Fighter placing his face into his hands, “call the Healer.”

The Lion spoke into the air, the space above the table top glistened, the air shimmered, and the Healer appeared standing on the table.

The Healer clapped his chubby hands and smiled. With the innocent laugh of a child, he lifted up the dying dream-dove and held it near his chest. He then touched two fingers of his right hand to his lips, and then graced the same two fingers upon the dream-dove – the dove’s head immediately lifted up, its wings tucked in next to its body, and the traces of swelling

and blood shrank down until they disappeared. The dove's eyes looked about the room and blinked.

Fighter looked up at the dove and the childlike form of the Healer. "Good-bye my treasure," he said. "Good-bye my dream..."

And the Healer and dove vanished.

"Come," said the Lion, "We can go on from here..."

But Fighter, for a very long minute, said nothing in return. And then he rose from the table, and softly said, "I have nothing to live for..."

"Good Fighter!" said the Lion, "That is not true! This lie does not come from the Snake or the Serpent, it does not come from the shadows that they assigned to plague you – this thought comes from your own despair. Do not listen to it!"

"Did you not hear me, Lion?" said Fighter, "I have nothing... Nothing at all now!" Fighter glared at the Lion, and then shook his wrist-guarded fist, "I have ... nothing ... to live for!"

"Do not listen to this voice!" shouted the Lion. "Fighters live for their dreams! Their dreams are their treasure! You are now called to the eighth mountain!"

And with that, Fighter turned his back on the Lion, and spoke ancient words into the air: "*Dry places...*"

"Stop!" shouted the Lion, "you must not go there!"

"*Seeking rest...*" continued Fighter.

"Fighter, hear me!" said the Lion, "Many go there and few return!"

"*And finding none!*" Fighter's words echoed in the hidden room, his body glistened, and a dull and cracked portal appeared in the space before him – the portal engulfed his body as if sucking up a small piece of dirt, and then both the fighter and portal vanished.

25. UR~M

Dry Places. Here, the wind blew, always. The wind picked up the heat from the endless sand of the desert, and draped it in smothering caresses across Fighter's face.

Dry Places. A land that Fighter had only heard of, but now, due to his own incantation, he walked in it.

His leather war-sandals protected his feet from the heat that rose in waves, causing the distant dunes to appear as if they were rippling reflections upon water. But in Dry Places, there was no water. Just sun. Just sand. Just wind.

Fighter walked on.

His mind was numb... unthinking. His last dream-dove was gone, perhaps forever. And his mind could not process that realization – instead, his mind registered nothing because the shock was too great.

Fighter's feet moved him forward.

In Dry Places there is no night – the sun never sets. Indeed, it never moves from its high point in the sky. Fighter could feel the sun pushing waves of light and warmth onto him like the hot-air wave that strikes the baker's face when he opens his oven. Unforgiving light... perceptible warmth that was a weight upon his shoulders... pushing a man down.

Fighter walked on.

Time lost its meaning to Fighter. Here, in Dry Places, there was time, but those that wandered within such sands, soon have no need for time as others see time. To those that live 'outside', time is a new day, a new hour, or a new hope. When one walks in Dry Places, there is no new day... there is no new hour... there is no hope.

Fighter's feet staggered, but he walked on.

The heat, so men have said, is inescapable in Dry Places – it can make one become a madmen just by the endless sweat that it causes to trickle on the edge of your forehead. But the dry wind pulls away the beads of sweat, even before those beads can slip down to cool the eyebrows. In Dry Places, many things begin, but nothing can ever come to completion.

Fighter's knees buckled... he fell to all fours.

How long Fighter remained in that position, breathing deeply like a man that had nearly drowned, did not matter. It may have been minutes... it may have been days. But as he arose, he reached over to his wrist guards, and twisted them off – they simply fell to the ground. Here in Dry Places, it is said that there is no need to hide your weaknesses – for in Dry Places, men drop their guards not because they are strong or not because they have friends, but because they no longer care.

Fighter pushed himself up and walked on.

No greenery greeted his eyes, no plants appeared anywhere near him. Not even dead plants stood nearby – they had all been erased by the wind and sand when the Serpent breathed Dry Places into existence. It had been the Serpent's hope to place all mankind within its bounds, but the Lion and Serpent had battled over ownership of this wasted land until the Father had spoken deep words – “Dry Places shall be.”

Thus, Dry Places was not owned by the Lion, nor owned by the Serpent. It was instead, traversed by man.

Fighter crumpled -- he fell to his side and lay there.

Fighter's lips were now cracked, and his tongue had swollen from the lack of water. He tried to stand, but only managed to roll over to his stomach and to push himself up, slowly, until he was on his knees, using his hands upon each thigh to keep himself from toppling.

Then he reached up, to one shoulder, and loosened the strap that held his breastplate. He reached to the other shoulder, and moved his sand-covered fingers, until the entire breastplate fell to the ground. In Dry Places, it is said that men lose all sense of truth, not because they wish to do evil, but because they do not want to carry the weight that truth always brings with it.

Fighter then struggled to his feet, and walked on.

Fighter noticed that footsteps – markings in the sand – appeared near him. These were not yet fully erased by the wind. The meandering markings of another person did not intrigue Fighter, but he followed them nonetheless. It is said that men follow in Dry Places, not by choice, but because they are incapable of choosing.

The footsteps were soon joined by others.

Fighter struggled with the thought that perhaps he wasn't alone. Perhaps others had gone before him, down this very pathway. Perhaps they knew something, but what, he did not care. Perhaps they could share a smile, a look of concern, a moment of laughter – the subject matter would be of no importance, truth or lies would not matter, but the comfort of another human would be all in all... the everything that one could want... the anything that he so desperately needed.

He grasped his sweat-soaked tunic and pulled it over his head, and then threw it aside. It is said, that in Dry Places, men do not choose their company, but they choose whatever gives them a drop of hope.

Fighter struggled to walk faster. His trousers stuck to his legs, heavy with sweat. He halted and pulled them off. In near madness from the heat, he untied his war-sandals, and threw them aside. He rose, sand clinging in patches to his sweaty skin, dressed only in his loin cloth.

And then he saw more footsteps in the shifting sands! Some old and nearly erased by the wind, but some fairly new! Fighter staggered forward even faster!

Fighter moved like a blind man on unfamiliar ground -- he stumbled on every small rock and tripped over even the smallest of sandy rises. His breath came in only short gasps. Time again lost its meaning, but somehow was measured by hot dry breaths that scorched his throat.

He stared at the sun until it nearly blinded him, but did not speak a word to the heavens -- and then stumbled forward again. He rubbed his sandy hands through his not-so-short-cropped blond hair -- not aware that during this time in dry places, the true brown color of his hair was now obviously

showing at the roots. It is said, that in Dry Places, men do not abandon purity, but the realization of their humanness overwhelms them.

Fighter staggered forward! Around the corner! But one more dune! There, surely there, the creators of the footprints would be found!

Fighter rounded the last corner by the dune, moving like a drunken sailor hoping for one more drink before the ship departs forever.

But then, he stopped.

Before him were corpses, everywhere. Dead men...dead women...withered bodies. The wind blew sand upon some, and shook tattered clothing into rags on others.

And before him was one man, kneeling in the sand, with his back towards Fighter.

Fighter struggled forward and reached the man. He grasped the man's shoulder and then stood, and watched, as the remains of what had been a living man slowly toppled over to its side. Fighter stood and stared at what was before him.

The body of the toppled man had been dead perhaps for only a few hours – its face had not yet fully withered into the dry shape of the other corpses. On his stiffened right forearm, was the symbol of the sword and scales, and through his chest was the prayer-sword that he had forced himself to fall upon.

It is said that in Dry Places, men make choices. The corpse before Fighter had made a choice – to kill himself.

Fighter looked about at the desolation; near the scattered corpses were three large boulders. On the first was carved: “All men serve their god – who is your god?” On the second was carved: “Does pain end when life ends?” And on the third was carved: “Those that lead many to righteousness will shine like the stars in the heavens.”

Fighter numbly held out his hands and clapped them together – his own prayer-sword appeared. He grasped the hilt. He lowered himself to both

knees. He placed the point of the sword against his own chest. He then leaned forward.

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26. IND.

“I do not ask!” said the shadow, “I demand!”

The shape of the shadow was now enormous, like a blackened storm cloud about to sweep apart the villages of the mountains.

“Pity...” came the reply from a six-winged man. “How hard do you wish to play...?”

“To PLAY!” thundered the black shadow as his lightning arced within himself. “It is enough that you, a deputy, should oppose me! A mere deputy!! I once had more contact with the Lion in a day than you do in a year!” And then the cloud thundered, “Step aside, or show your weapons!”

“I have no need of weapons, my war-cry is enough,” replied the six winged man. “And, as you know, the deep words of the Father established only one portal between all of our world and the Dry Places eons ago.”

The man glanced over his shoulder -- behind his top wings shimmered the dull portal. “It would appear that this “mere deputy” is all that stands between you and the Fighter you hope to deceive.”

“To deceive...? Little one,” thundered the shadow, “I do not come just to deceive, but to deceive a man to the point that HE KILLS HIMSELF!”

And at that, the shadow, in the form of blackened thunder cloud, began to twist himself. His lightning arcs curved around and within himself, twisting and tearing his own matter apart, until the spiritual ether shook under the weight and terror of a violent giant tornado.

“My weapon,” howled out the shadow, now in the shape of a blackened funnel, “is HATE! Hate that fills me! Hate for all that the Lion dares to protect! Hate especially for those that are soon to be invited to the eighth mountain! Show your weapon, deputy! LET US ‘PLAY’!!”

At this challenge, the six-winged man stood and faced the shadow-now-become-tornado. He raised his two hands towards the heavens and swore, saying, “By him that lives forever, I am the Deputy of the Rock!”

At his words, his skin glistened, and his shape began to change: his feet became like granite, and adhered to the ground itself; his body became like marble, and his eyes like purple amethyst; his wings angled themselves sharply outward and then turned into sheets of diamonds.

“To battle!” howled the shadow-tornado, and he began to advance. His lightning arced up and over the top of his twisted black body and hurled itself at the deputy. It struck deeply into the chest of the deputy, and thousands of volts sizzled the air and crackled, but the deputy did not yield his position.

Seeing the unmoving deputy, the shadow-tornado howled out in a rage, and hurled the base of his funnel shape right on top of the deputy’s form. “I shall tear you out of the way!” shouted the shadow. “Feel my hate! Hate for all that have even the smallest chance of touching the eighth mountain! Hate that will even destroy you!” But the deputy remained adhered to the ground and unmoving.

The Deputy of the Rock slowly turned his marble head and peered through the portal behind him. As the tornado raged upon him, he watched Fighter through the portal. He watched him for the days, the minutes, the hours that Fighter walked within the Dry Places – for to him, time was less important than the life he had been given to protect.

He watched, and stood unmoving, until he saw Fighter reach the place of corpses. At the sight of so many deceived into taking their own lives, he could stand it no more.

“Shadow!” shouted the deputy, “Neither of us are to interfere with this man called Fighter – the Father has spoken. And, until now, I would have simply endured your foolishness, and permitted you no entry! But no longer! The sight of so many deceived into entering eternal life while there are still others that have not heard of the Lion – such a sight drives me to use my weapon!”

The shadow-tornado laughed back, his violent winds carrying his words like stinging sleet, “That one shall bear my mark! That one shall be

deceived! His corpse shall be my trophy!” His lightening raced like torn hopes and scared the ground all around the deputy.

But the Deputy of the Rock looked straight before himself, and spoke with authority into the wind, saying: “COUNSELOR!” and before him a link of gold chain, pure as glass, and as large as a man’s thigh, appeared.

And then the deputy called out, “WONDERFUL!”, and another link, interlaced with the first, appeared. The Deputy of the Rock then shouted out, with a link appearing at each phrase, “THE ALMIGHTY GOD... THE EVERLASTING FATHER ... PRINCE OF PEACE... LORD OF LORDS... KING OF KINGS... THE PROMISED ONE... THE ANOINTED... THE ALPHA AND THE OMEGA!!” And before him stood a massive chain, unmoving, even in the midst of the tornado winds.

The Deputy of the Rock took the golden chain and began to swing it above his head, round and round, until it created a humming sound as it cut through the tornado winds – it was like the sound of the silver battle horn used in ancient times! Times when the sacred assembly met to beseech the Father!

The wind howled! The chain sang out!

The rocks near the portal broke apart from the tornado! The deputy stood unmoving!

And then the deputy released the chain, sending end-spinning-over-end into the center of the tornado!

And suddenly, at the touch of the holy gold, the shadow’s voice screamed out, “HE IS LORD!...” and the tornado shrank to the size of a hill, then to the size of a boulder, and then to the size of a small twisted man-like figure having six disfigured wings with four faces on one head wrapped in a crisscrossed chain of pure gold.

The Deputy of the Rock looked upon the twisted and disfigured one before him. “So,” said the Deputy, “I did not realize that you were once indeed a senior to those of us that are now called deputies.”

“I once,” coughed one of the faces of the shadow-man, “spent endless days with the Lion... more days than you shall ever know!”

27. ”~(R

Fighter could feel the end point of the sword against his chest.

His leaning forward had positioned the sword hilt into the sand, and the blade so that it would slide between his ribs and into his heart.

But Fighter did not feel the sword, as much as he felt the weight of the loneliness against his heart.

He thought of the release that but a single prayer for death would give to him – in a moment, it would be over... just the shifting of his weight... a simple fall forward... a moment of pain... and death would come.

Fighter’s cracked lips began to move... his swollen tongue formed stumbling words,

“I ... am ... nothing,” whispered Fighter.

But only the wind of Dry Places heard his words.

“I ... do not ... deserve ... to keep...this life....”

The moving of his lips caused fresh blood to appear in the cracks.

“I... have... lost... all... my... dreams.”

Some sand shifted under his knees.

Fighter swallowed hard, but no moisture went down his throat.

He could still imagine the corpse he had just found, fallen on a sword. For a moment, he imagined all the release from life that the other man had sought.

“Peace...” Fighter whispered.

In delirium, Fighter's body swayed. The end point of the sword crossed through the outer skin. Red drops of blood formed around the point of steel. Yet the drops scarcely moved, for Dry Places absorbed their moisture and began to cause them to congeal.

"Peace..." he whispered, "peace from death... no... peace from God..."

He remembered the three stones with the three carvings.

"Who is... my God?" he whispered.

He paused, his swollen tongue could barely move.

"My pain... is great... but death... will not ... stop my pain" He could barely pronounce the words.

"And... by the Lion... I ... still... want... to shine ... like a star..." At that moment, he slowly straightened his back, and the sword slipped to the side and dropped into the sand.

"Lion..." he whispered in a small hoarse voice, "forgive ... me... have mercy..."

Fighter slumped forward onto the sand and closed his eyes.

Immediately, portals opened.

Fighter did not see seven small flames appearing by him. He did not hear their foreign language or feel the comfort web they laid upon his sunburned flesh and scorched feet.

He did not hear the footsteps of the Lion approaching and did not sense that it was the Lion's own body that stood over him and gave him shade.

He did not hear the laughter of the child-like Healer, as he trickled healing waters into his mouth.

He did not see the Deputy of the Rock examining corpses near him, and finding a tornado-shaped mark upon three of them.

Fighter perceived none of these things.

Yet, when he awoke from his deep sleep, he was again all alone. But by him, scratched into the sand were these words, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?”

Fighter chuckled. And then, he laughed. He stood and looked at the corpses near him.

“Indeed,” he said, “What I am seeking is living! It will not be found among you that are dead....” He looked at the corpses, and then added, “may justice be done to the one that deceived you to this place....”

Fighter reached down to the ground to pick up the hilt of his prayer-sword – but it, of course, had vanished and the sand bore only an impression. Fighter shook his head at himself, and clapped his hands. The sword appeared and he pointed it towards the heavens.

“By the Lion!” he shouted, “I will leave this place! I wish to be at the eighth mountain! I wish to know the name of the fourth tribe! I will pay the price of the mirror! Hear me, O Lion!”

And the ground trembled under Fighter’s feet. The sands parted, and a deep crevice appeared directly in front of Fighter. A voice spoke, sounding like the thunder of many rushing waters, “I call you now... by the name of the fourth tribe...enter into the eighth mountain!”

And the very substance of the air was ripped in two, from as high as the eyes could see to the very depth of the bottomless crevice that had appeared. Thunder and lightening and smoke poured through an enormous portal that had appeared – it was a gateway that was filled with white light, and rounded like a giant pearl! The very holiness of the Father shone through the portal like painful light! And Fighter hurled himself forward, into the portal, into the light, and was gone.

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28. OMAN

Fighter looked about. To every side of him were walls with living flames moving about.

Fighter stood still and then looked down. Beneath his feet, living stones were cushioning and balancing his every step.

Fighter blinked, and looked ahead -- before him was the Lion sitting next to a large throne.

He was within the throne room of the Lion.

“Lion...?” he began to say.

“Welcome,” replied the Lion, “to the beginning of the eighth mountain!”

“But...” began Fighter.

“Good Fighter,” replied the Lion. “The throne room has always been the entrance to the eighth mountain.”

And both were silent for a moment.

And then the Lion called out, “Are you willing to be called by the name of the fourth tribe, good Fighter?”

“I am,” replied Fighter. “Though I apologize for my near-nakedness. It would appear in my foolishness I have discarded my wrist guard and my breast-plate.”

“I never created the copper wrist guard – those of the fourth tribe never need such things,” replied the Lion. “And the weight of truth that you carried on your breast-plate is no more needed as well Look! Look within the mirror! And see yourself as you truly are!”

Fighter walked forward. There, to the right of the throne had appeared a large oval mirror having a black ebony surface. He walked until he came

before it, and stared deeply into it. Suddenly, his reflection appeared – warped, disfigured, scarred, with fingers missing on both hands and dirt-filth covered bandages on almost all his skin.

“I confess,” said Fighter hanging his head in shame, “that this is me....”

“Look again,” replied the Lion softly.

And Fighter raised his head, and suddenly the reflection changed! He saw himself, and more than himself! Here was a reflection of a man in white robes, glistening like the sun on pure white snow! A man of great stature and power – the muscles of the man’s legs and arms were obvious even under the robes! And the face! The face of the man radiated confidence and power and empathy and hope! And the face was Fighter’s own face!

“Lion!” called out Fighter, “What wonder is this?”

“It is no ‘wonder’, good Fighter,” replied the Lion. “It is the heated steel and the salve of the mirror. You must see both reflections, since both are true.”

Fighter turned towards the Lion to speak, but as he turned, suddenly he was clothed with the very robes that he had seen in the mirror.

“You are clothed with my forgiveness and mercy – this is the custom of the those of the fourth tribe. They forever wear forgiveness and show such clothing to all that meet them.”

“But what of truth?” asked Fighter, “What of that breast-plate of truth that I labored with so many years?”

“Ah, you-who-are-about-to-be-renamed,” replied the Lion. “you will no longer ‘wear’ the truth, but you shall live it.” The Lion looked towards the mirror, and out of its reflective surface flew the breast-plate that Fighter had worn, but suddenly, it shone like silver and gold, with jewels of truth imbedded and glistening – and it hovered before the Lion.

“I write these now upon your heart!” spoke the Lion. And the brilliant breast-plate rippled in the air, and its very substance became white-energy, and burst into light, and then it flowed into the chest of Fighter.

“And I shall also give to you,” said the Lion, “your prayer-sword as it was always meant to be...” And at those words, the dusty hilt of Fighter’s prayer-sword with blade appeared, and then it raced through the air towards Fighter, towards his head, towards his mouth, and suddenly, it stopped! And then gently touched his lips – and vanished.

“No more shall prayer be an occasion to battle,” said the Lion, “but it shall reside upon your lips as a normal part of your life, your breath, and your thoughts! For I have spoken it.”

“Come before the throne!” demanded the Lion. And Fighter complied.

A being shaped like a man, but having six wings, stepped forward through a portal. In his arms he carried six disfigured wings wrapped in a golden chain.

“Deputy of the Rock!” roared the Lion, “Place the just payment upon the altar!” And, as the Lion spoke, an altar appeared before the Deputy.

And the Deputy placed the wings upon the altar that appeared among the living stones – it shone as if made of brass. And fire– hot and searing finality – descended from the cloud that was upon the top of the throne, and the wings upon the altar were quickly reduced to ashes.

The Deputy looked at the Lion, and then said, “Justice is done.”

As the smoke cleared from the altar, on the top of the altar stood the Healer! He smiled and reached down into the ashes, and pulled out a small piece of carved wood – wood that had somehow survived the fire and that was somehow carved in the shape of a dream-dove.

The Healer jumped down from the altar and raced his child-like body over to Fighter, and then held out the carving for him to take. Fighter smiled and took the carving. Healer clapped his chubby hands and laughed.

Fighter sighed within himself, for though he was thrilled at all he had so quickly experienced -- he had hoped somehow, some way, to one day again have a living dream-dove. Perhaps, he thought, he might even have his own living dreams again. And as he looked at the carving, it blinked its eyes.

“It lives!?” called out Fighter.

“Indeed it does!” replied the Lion. “It is a dream-dove carved from the heart-wood of the living tree, and from the lives of those that did not survive Dry Places. And that heart-wood has a name; it is called ‘Reconciliation’. For if that is your dream, you shall never lose your hope or treasure again.”

“And the disfigured wings that were burned...?” asked Fighter.

“I have often chosen that out of the tragedy of a few should come the reconciliation of many,” replied the Lion. And the Deputy of the Rock, standing to one side, nodded his head knowingly and, finally, smiled.

Fighter hugged the living-wood dream-dove to his chest. And all within the room were silent.

Finally, Fighter spoke, his blue eyes almost glistening with tears, “Thank you... thank you Lion! Thank you Healer! And thank you, Deputy! Thank you, O Father that dwells above the throne! May this one, named Fighter, never forget this day!”

But everyone was silent. The Deputy smiled. The Healer covered his child-like lips with one chubby hand and giggled. Then the Lion turned and spoke, “...’Fighter’? I know no one in this room by that name? Perhaps you, the one with the dove, should touch your own forehead...”

And slowly, hesitatingly, the one-who-was-called-Fighter reached up with one hand, and felt his forehead. A mark had appeared. A raised mark of two lines – one vertical and one horizontal crossing over the first.

“Tell me,” said the Lion, “how does it feel to have the mark of the fourth tribe, my good BridgeMaker?”

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29. S~12

The days that followed were simple in structure – each morning, BridgeMaker left his simple home in DwellingStreet, and came to the throne room. He would spend most of the day with the Lion. But yet each day was also complex, as the Lion taught him new concepts – the Laws of the Bridge.

One day, following the lesson, the Lion said, “Beware of the Serpent – for it hates the BridgeMakers more than any other tribesmen.”

“But the Serpent is dead!” replied BridgeMaker. “I saw it myself, as if in a dream -- yet clearly, when you shouted that war-cry and crushed his skull.”

The Lion shook his golden mane. “The flies you saw leave the crushed skull, they are the spirit of the Serpent. They will reform into another shape – yet another Serpent. In this plane, I crush for but a time; in other planes I have crushed him for all eternity.”

BridgeMaker paused. “‘Other planes’? How your words go beyond me, Lion. I simply do not understand.”

“It is all right to not understand,” replied the Lion. “Indeed, the man who thinks he knows all is but a fool, and the man that admits he does not understand, is close to learning.”

BridgeMaker’s face took on another look, as a new thought crossed his mind. “Tell me,” said BridgeMaker, “that war-cry... ‘Gol...go...tha’.

What does that mean?”

“It is the war-cry of gateway that you saw – the one with the burned arch,” replied the Lion. “In that plane, the Serpent stuck me with death.”

“The Lion cannot die!” said BridgeMaker.

“That is true,” said the Lion. “But I can accept death on behalf of another.” The Lion paused and then continued, “BridgeMaker, you will too one day understand the depth of love that I have. And as I recorded in my book of

ForeverPromises, *Greater love has no man than this that he lay down his life for another.*”

“Listen, my BridgeMaker,” continued the Lion, shaking his golden mane. “You know that the Nons wear their marking near their belly, for though they are part of FadingEarth and their names are carved in the Final Stone, their god is always their belly.”

BridgeMaker smiled at the thought -- he had never fully realized that the placement of the marking had meaning.

“And the Elfin,” continued the Lion, “wear their marking near their heart, for all too often their emotions are their god. Thus, when they accept the name of Elfin, the Healer properly places the mark.”

BridgeMaker smiled softly. “And I suppose,” he said, “that Fighters wear their marking on their right forearm because of a significance?”

“Indeed,” laughed the Lion. “The Fighters accept my calling, and the Healer places the mark upon their forearm, for they know that they have been called to battle for me.” Then the Lion added, “But unfortunately, some then begin to worship their muscle, their strength, and even their armor -- these things often become their gods.”

“Some,” said the Lion, “abandon mercy for their own selves, and drive their own self into a life of discipline that is unneeded. And then, they often deny mercy to others.”

“But you, good BridgeMaker,” continued the Lion, “have the marking of two lines upon your forehead. The horizontal line stands for the bridge; and the vertical line stands for the Maker of it. Over time, the old tattoo upon your right forearm will fade away, and the new become more and more glorious. Indeed, even those that are not of my city, will notice the essence of the marking as you become to your fellow men as a light becomes to distant ships.”

“And,” said the Lion, looking in love at BridgeMaker, “only I shall be your god. And hope will be your deep well, and faith and love will be drawn from it. The marking has been placed upon your forehead to remind you that you are more fragile than ever -- for now you cannot

exist without abiding in me even as your body cannot exist without the head.”

The Lion paused.

BridgeMaker sat quietly, taking in all the teachings.

“But what,” asked BridgeMaker, “of the woman that I saw so long ago?”

“She was also of the tribe of BridgeMakers.” Replied the Lion. “And I have sent her to a people to which she will show more mercy than many fighters could ever show. It is the BridgeMakers, not the Fighters, that do much for my kingdom.”

“Yes,” replied BridgeMaker touching the raised mark on his own forehead, “I am beginning to understand.”

“And BridgeMaker,” concluded the Lion, “now you will have more power in my presence than a prince would have in the court of his father, the king.”

“Come,” said the Lion, “it is time for you to pass into an archway.” At that the Lion rose and walked to the base of the throne.

The Lion turned about, and faced BridgeMaker. And then, the Lion said, “Is your heart undivided?”

BridgeMaker stood before the Lion in his robe of white and replied, “Yes. My heart is undivided.”

“And have you filled your mind with things of good report?” asked the Lion.

“Yes. I have done that,” replied BridgeMaker.

“Are your tears and laughter available for my suffering and joy?”

At that question, BridgeMaker paused. “Lion,” he replied, “I have seldom cried or laughed.”

“Trust me, good BridgeMaker,” replied the Lion, “you will do that and much more.” The Lion paused and seemed to smile, and then he said, “For now, that is enough questions. Later, I will teach you to show mercy even to lepers. For now, I only ask the questions that will strengthen your heart.”

And out of the mouth of the Lion came fire, and the fire fell upon BridgeMaker.

BridgeMaker’s clothing began to glow. It glistened, and then turned white. His face began to become radiant like the glow that surrounds the full moon in the mists of early spring. His eyes transformed: the blue eyes became red and orange dancing flames. His skin began to glow burnished red, like the hot bronze of the furnace fire, and the throne room filled with power.

Raw power -- power like one senses from the shaking of the ground when Leviathan approaches; power like one hears from the screaming of the wind caused by the demon called Tornado; power like a mother holding her first born son. Raw power – yet covered by love.

The Lion turned his head and looked towards the side of the throne room – an archway then appeared. “Come with me, good BridgeMaker!” roared the Lion. “For this is the archway that I have chosen for you! This is where you will apply the Laws of the Bridge!”

And the transfigured BridgeMaker walked towards the archway – its stones showing cracks and fissures, with bent black grasses choking the base of the stones. The air of the archway smelled of dying vegetation – heavy and sweet, yet repulsive.

“You will walk through this archway, good BridgeMaker!” roared the Lion. “For this archway shall lead you to the place of my choosing!”

“I shall walk wherever you send me, O Lion!” replied the mouth of the power-filled BridgeMaker.

“You do not always need to address me as ‘Lion’” came the reply. “You may also address me as BloodFriend!” And having said that, the Lion spoke to the walls of the throne room, “Come forth, seven flames.” And from the throne flew seven flames.

30. :2)~

BridgeMaker looked about. The seven flames, though he could sense them, he could not see them. His clothing and skin no longer glowed – all seemed normal. Indeed, even the white robes had been replaced by normal clothing.

And there he stood... in a garden... in a rose garden.

“This is but my own rose garden...” softly whispered BridgeMaker.

“Husband!” sang out a voice. And BridgeMaker turned about, and suddenly was facing his wife.

“I did not hear you come into the garden!” she sang out, “But it is so good to see you!”

She stood there with her beautiful eyes, smiling at him. “You do seem rather distant... husband... is all well?”

“All is... well, indeed,” replied a confused BridgeMaker. The thoughts raced through his mind: how can this be? I should have been sent to a dark area... but to be sent first home? Surely this is a mistake! To build bridges here?

But then, into the garden flew a dove.

“Look!” said BridgeMaker’s wife. “It is that rare dove! Never have I seen one like it! Its wings shine like carved wood! Do you know that it has been visiting the garden for several days now? Have you ever seen anything like it?”

“Only once before,” replied BridgeMaker. “Only once before....”

And the dove of reconciliation looked at BridgeMaker and blinked its eyes.

BridgeMaker smiled, for then he understood. There was no mistake.

This was indeed the place of the Lion's choosing.

He was to build bridges first here – at his own home, with his own wife, in the city of the Lion known as DwellingStreet.

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EPILOGUE.

The Lion appeared by the bridge.

BridgeMaker bowed before the Lion.

“Is it done?” asked the Lion.

“Yes,” replied BridgeMaker. “As you, BloodFriend, instructed, I wrote many words, and then placed them within a crystal vase.”

“Did you shatter the vase, so that only reflections could be understood?” asked the Lion.

And the BridgeMaker pointed to the first manuscript, now shattered like crystal on the ground.

And then, the BridgeMaker pointed to the second manuscript, which you, dear reader, have just read.

The Lion smiled.

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For those that do not understand the code of the titles in each chapter, I think that it is one reflection that can be explained:

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (Romans 12:2)

Much love in Christ, always;

Caryn LeMur