

The Monarch Stone

The earth shook.

It was odd, how the earth shook. It should not have been shaking, and he could not possibly see what could have caused it.

It was a very brief shaking, only a slight tremor, lasting perhaps seven or so seconds, dying out as swiftly as it had come. It confused him very much. Why should the earth shake?

Was it the Suruve, giving a warning to the people of the physical realm? Was it merely a slight shifting of plates beneath the surface of the ground? Or was it something else entirely, something so simple and yet so complex that it was not able to enter into his mind at all?

That was the first sign that something was amiss. The first sign that something was not as it should be.

Hacim sniffed the air nervously. An odd scent went up his nose, a scent he had smelt only once before. He remembered that occasion many years back on which this scent had caught his nose, though he wished he could forget it. What a horrible time that had been.

The smell was something like an organized foulness. A foulness so deliberate that it made it even more foul.

And then he felt it again. A slight tremor beneath his feet, so subtle and yet so obvious. What could it possibly be? It must be a warning, must it not? But nay, one could never be too certain about anything...

He heard it. After that second tremor, and after that horrible smell, he heard it. The flapping of wings, loud and clear, bringing back poignant memories of death, of blood, of tears...

Hacim ducked below the rise, hiding himself from the evil that was coming. He peeked over the rim, just enough to see what was happening, but not so that he could be seen by anyone or anything.

A bat flew low, hovering for a moment before dropping from the air, and landing on the ground. But it was not a bat.

It had been, but no longer was it a bat. It was a man, very tall and thin, dressed all in black, with pale skin, skin paler than ice, and sharp piercing eyes the very sight of which were terrifying to behold.

Hacim had seen this thing of evil once. On the battlefield, not so terribly long ago. It felt like ages.

The thin man sniffed the air once, then grinned. Not a delighted grin. Not a joyful grin. Merely a small, malicious, grin.

"Ah, my Master will be very pleased," it said in a soft voice. "Very pleased to see where I have gone. And even more pleased will He be when He sees what I shall do. Ah, yes."

"You serve no master, for you no longer have any master that you are able to serve," Hacim spoke, rising from behind the ridge, unable to contain himself. "I know you, Vesper. I saw you on the field of battle."

Vesper turned to stare Hacim straight in the eye. Vesper's eyes were so cold and so utterly lifeless and sharp that Hacim could hardly bear to look at them. But he held his gaze nonetheless. "I know you, Hacim," he snarled. "How little you know of the ways of my Master. He can never truly be defeated..."

"I saw Silfeen the Great strike him down, we all did!" Hacim bellowed.

"You still call Silfeen 'great.' What has he ever done to be called great? Only my Master is Great. My Master is the very definition of Great."

"And what did he do to be called 'great'? All he did was bring pain and turmoil to this world!"

"You know nothing of my Master!" Vesper bellowed, lunging forward to Hacim.

Hacim swerved aside, stumbling down into his ditch.

Hacim concentrated hard on the dirt below him, felt it, caressed it with his fingers, savored its substance. His mind searched, searched, until it found the word.

Screaming the word aloud, Hacim leapt up, and so did the dirt on the ground all about him. It flew at Vesper, pelting him from all sides, so that he stumbled from the sheer force of the dirt. "Blast!" he cried in agony.

But Hacim's victory was short-lived.

Vesper once more became a bat, flying away before becoming a wolf, falling to the ground with a hard *thump*, and bounding towards the castle.

Hacim tried to search for another word, but could not find any. He proceeded to run as fast as his legs could possibly carry him, after the wolf that was running for King Silfeen the Great.

He ran, feet pounding the soft ground beneath him, seeming to send tremors through it. He thought he could feel other things beneath his feet as well, but there was no time to dwell on them. He had a duty, a duty to protect his friend, whom he had accompanied on all his travels and achievements that had earned him fame. Hacim had been the one to teach him of magic, and of

morality. Silfeen's fame was spread throughout all Looteria now, as the one who had at last defeated the Dark Lord, the ruler of tyranny for over a thousand years.

But the Dark Lord was gone now. Hacim had been there when Silfeen struck him the killing blow, had witnessed the Dark Lord's shriveled form as it crumpled to a thousand pieces, and blew away as miniscule burning ashes on the breeze.

The Dark Lord was gone, but his servants had lived on. One of his greatest servants Hacim was currently chasing. They had been eager for revenge on Silfeen ever since their master's death.

If Silfeen was killed today, the entire world might be thrown back into chaos and war, and Hacim would have lost his closest and wisest companion.

Vesper, as a wolf, knocked down the guards in an instant, and, becoming a bat, squeezed through the large portcullis.