

# **The Unfolding of the Prophecy**

By Keith J. Bowers

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## The Unfolding of the Prophecy

Gwythant looked up from the cooking fire, seeing the plume of black smoke pouring from the city of Hunda. The horde had finally arrived there. Hunda's standing army was the largest and most well trained in the entire Two Plains region. Obviously they had failed if the city was in flames. He nervously gripped the blackened sword that had been girded onto him by his wife. His brown hair was clipped short in standard military fashion and his thin frame was hidden by his old leather armor. It had been his fathers when he had been conscripted. Now, at twenty-two, it was his.

To his left stood the great mountains of the Sentry, standing watch over the two plains. Their white caps stood out against the blueness of the sky. Quickly though, the haze of the burning city was beginning to obscure the wondrous sight.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. Turning he saw Lindel, his commander, drawing his attention to the fast approaching rider. Lindel was fast approaching middle age, unlike Gwythant, who barely had passed into his second decade. The horse was foamed at the mouth and across its chest. The rider sat hunched over, urging the horse onward. Lindel left Gwythant's side, reaching out to grab the reins as the horse flew by. Jerking to a stop, the horse reared up and whinnied its fear and anger. Lindel reached up and calmed the horse. "Gwyth, take these," he stated as he passed the reins to Gwythant. The horse jerked slightly as Gwythant placed his hand on the beast's snout, stroking it gently. Lindel touched the rider who moaned quietly. Lindel's hand came away bloody. "Get this man down!" he shouted to those around him. Two other men took the rider down, laying him onto the ground. The front of the man's tunic was soaked in blood.

Three ragged tears extended from his upper chest to his lower abdomen. They looked a lot like claw marks. The sight of it was profoundly disturbing.

Demons. They were the claw marks of demons.

Gwythant shuddered involuntarily. So it was true. The invaders that pillaged the West were the demons of legend. He felt an urge to flee but fear and shame held him in his place. A true warrior would never run from battle. Glancing around him, he wondered if any of the others held the same fear and doubt. From the shifting looks he received, he knew that they did.

Lindel whispered to the man, shaking him gently. "What happened? How fares Hunda?"

The man stirred and moaned again. His eye fluttered and blood could be seen dribbling from his mouth. "Hunda's gone. Burned." He moaned again. "I fled, leaving the battle when the lines collapsed. We killed hundreds of them and still they came!" Gwythant watched as the wounded man's hands gripped Lindel's lapel. "They are the beasts of legend. They are hideous monsters with claws and fangs and..." The rider fell into a spasm of bloody coughing. He arched his back and gasped once more before lying still.

Lindel did not move for a long time. Behind him, the rest of the group shifted their feet nervously. Finally their commander looked up. "Well, now. I guess our course is clear."

"And what is that?" Hemmel asked. Gwythant looked over at the nervous red head. "What do we do?" Gwythant knew that Lindel would perform his duty. They would stay. They would fight. And most likely, they would die.

Demons.

Lindel stood up and faced the twenty men who he had served with for nearly a decade. He approached Hemmel and stared at him right in the face. Everyone knew what was coming next. Lindel would now show his authority.

"We leave. We run," Lindel stated quietly. It came out as nearly a whisper. "We get our families and we try to find protection in the hills." Everyone's eyes widened. No one, not even Gwythant expected the simple decree. "I know you expected us to stand here and fight, but there is little we could do except die here on this plain. Hunda was our best hope. Hopefully Parsha will fare better." He shook his head slowly. "We leave now. Pack up and go your separate ways."

There was something blowing on the wind. Some sound, a strange, bizarre sliding of metal upon metal. A brief flicker of movement caught Gwythant's eye and he spun to the left. Nothing.

"What the hell was that?" one of the others chirped up. Gwythant spun around, looking for the motion.

"I saw it too."

"What?" Lindel asked, straining to see the evading movement. "What is it?" His question was drowned out by a scream, as Kenval, a blond haired man of no small size, was torn limb from limb by a shimmering force. Behind him, Gwythant heard another scream. He turned again, drawing his sword. Fear shook his arm as the black steel was drawn from its home. A silvery distortion was clawing Markus apart, just feet away. Gwythant slashed downward, disregarding Markus' spray of blood as his head was ripped off. The black steel bit deep into the unseen creature and a black ooze appeared

on his blade. A horrendous thing shuddered and came into focus, it's claws still imbedded in Markus' corpse.

Gwythant stumbled back, spinning away from the carnage. All around him, he saw his compatriots embattled with shimmering, ghostly beasts. Terror coursed through him as he watched as Lindel was lifted up off the ground in front of him and ripped in two. Bile and intestines sprayed, coating and making the beast visible. The gore only made the demonic creature even more horrible.

Gwythant screamed and swung down his blade. The black blade, cut into the scarlet neck and a foul liquid oozed out. The creature howled and threw away the severed corpse of Lindel. Flickering into sight, it snapped its dagger-like teeth at Gwythant, who, finding a deeper source of courage, lashed out again and again at the now wounded demon. He plunged the sword to the hilt into the beast's gaping maw, skewering it. It howled and began to fall. The weight of the creature pulled the sword from his hands. Falling to his knees, Gwythant tugged at the slippery sword and felt the black blood that oozed out over it begin to burn his hands. An acrid smoke wafted up as he pulled the sword free of the creature.

Screaming from the pain, he dropped the blade and was struck from behind by another of the invisible beasts. He saw puncture wounds appear on his forearms, stabbing through his thin leather armor and into the soft flesh. Gwythant felt himself tugged and flying through the air like a doll thrown by his little girl. He felt his body strike the ground a split second before everything went black.

Pain. Bitter dull pain.

Gwythant felt drops of rain on his face, cool and damp. His breath was ragged and shallow. He tried to open his eyes and they cracked open. Blood or some other substance was caked on them. He touched his face with his hands and was rewarded with agony. Looking at his hands, they were fiery red and blistered. His left arm ached where the beast had clamped onto him.

The beasts. Demon's children.

The simple thought of them sent him upright, looking around the camp. The tents were torn to shreds while wreckage and destruction were everywhere. His friends, his fellow soldiers were lying in crumpled heaps. Blood soaked the terrain around their fallen forms. Several of them looked as if parts of them had been consumed. Smoke continued to billow from the cooking fires. Standing up, Gwythant staggered around, looking for others that had survived the hellish assault.

Rain began to fall in earnest now, the dark clouds of thunderstorms overtaking and consuming the smoke from the fires of Hunda. Each time a droplet struck his hands, it was both simultaneously agony and relief. Unsure of what to do, he pulled a torn mass of a bloodied tent over himself and allowed the rain to pour down upon him.

He sat in the rain, the dried gore sliding off amid the torrent. Slowly, the amount of devastation began to sink into his pain-addled mind. The events melded together and the situation he was in became clear. The warbeasts themselves were not the demons that burned Hunda. What had attacked them was called warhounds, the offspring of demons and animals, usually dogs. The one he killed laid nearby, the offending smell of it nauseating him. It held the shape of a dog, but three times the size. It was close to the

size of a small bull. Huge fangs and teeth marred it's face. Crusty scales covered it's back and legs, providing a crude armor. It was horrible to look at so Gwythant turned away from it, focusing instead on the growing puddles that formed around the crushed grasses.

The horde would have passed shortly after their scouting children. His wounds and deathlike state must have fooled the horde as it passed him by. It just seemed impossible that Hunda had fallen, his friends were dead but he had survived the massacre.

After a long while of simply staring at Lindel's unblinking corpse he broke down, crying for home and for his dead comrades.

He slept through the night clad in the remnants of the tent. It provided little warmth, but his wounds became enflamed and by morning puss oozed from the bite marks in his left arm. Sometime during the night, the rain ceased and the sky cleared.

As the sun met his eyes, his thoughts turned from his own survival to that of his wife and child. Kyra, little Kyra was safe at home with Melina. Twenty miles to the north, they were cloistered in the home of his parents. He had sent them there when he was called up to help stop the horde as it made its way east across the plains. That had been a month ago, when the horde was believed to be invading tribes of bandits. It wasn't until the western cities of Fanim and Vria were utterly destroyed and the survivors had told of stories of demons riding on serpents and hellish warhounds that ripped the throats out of their victims. No one listened to the priests that called for the coming of Nightfall. It was not so very long ago that Hunda was a bustling city. Not so very long ago. There was nothing left to do but go home and await some word on reorganizing an army against the horde. From what remained, the demons left no survivors. His survival was a mistake.

Gwythant wrapped his now peeling fingers with strips torn from the tent. Finding a poultice mix among the tattered remains of the healer, he applied it to his oozing arm and wrapped it tightly. It ached constantly now. Mel would have other herbs and salves at the cabin. He picked up his black sword and looked back to Hunda. The fires had renewed since the rain had passed by. Slowly and with great reluctance, he cleaned the dried gore from the sword. Not all of it had washed away with the rain. It went back into its sheath and he slung it over his shoulder.

One step after another he began the long walk toward where his wife and child lay hidden.

Signs of human death and dismemberment greeted him at every turn. He found a pair of human soldiers, dead from wounds inflicted by the beasts. They had somehow managed to escape the slaughter of Hunda but had died here. Their horses lay half consumed amid the clearing. After nearly a day of walking, he had left the plain and entered the foothills of the Sentry Mountains. Hours before, he had found human bones picked clean and muddy markings of a great host that had trudged through the plains, heading east towards the city of Parsha.

A merchant city, it held over a hundred thousand souls. There was no need to warn them, they had their warning shown to them when Hunda burned. He could do

nothing for them. The priests had said that Nightfall was approaching. The prophecy of when demons would run amok across the world. Somewhere, somehow, the gates had been opened to the Abyss. They had warned their followers. It seemed that the truthsayers and magicians had been right for once.

Nightfall.

Once it was a child's tale. Now it was a grim reality.

The air was getting cooler as the sun sat to his left. His clothes had long since dried, providing him some decent warmth. From the hills he was beginning to climb he could see out onto the plain, seeing Hunda burning in the distance. Turning away from it, he looked instead towards Parsha, which he could see still was not burning. Some movement caught his eye. From all around Parsha, he could see little forms, looking like bugs from the distance he was at. They poured around the city's walls. A deep-seated ache settled over body and he sat down amid the fledging undergrowth. From his vantage point, he watched as the first plumes of smoke ignite and begin to engulf Parsha. Over the next few hours, he simply sat and, in horrid fascination, watched the city burn. He fell asleep under the saplings, his body suffering.

Gwythant awoke to silence. Not a bird or an insect disturbed his sleep. It was disconcerting to him not to hear their welcome cries to the morning sun. Clouds had again regained their place in the heavens, hiding the sun from him. His hands ached now, but they no longer caused him to scream when he flexed his fingers to do a simple task. He opened the makeshift bandage on his arm, staring down at the bloody mess. The wound still gaped but fresh blood did not spill. It was disturbing to look at. The wound now had black streaks emanating from it in a radiating fashion. Not wanting to think of the consequences that might come his way, he rewrapped the wound with the poultice. The bandages were beginning to smell sickly sweet. Pulling his sword onto his back, Gwythant again began to walk up the hillside towards the mountains.

One look behind him and he instantly regretted it. Parsha had joined Hunda in billowing smoke. The fires had begun to fade in the first city, but remained strong in Parsha. It seemed like the entire plain was aflame around the second city. He felt badly for the peasants that lived outside the city, but their fate would be the same as those inside. Death and slaughter.

Onward he went up the hills, finding trees and rock outcroppings that he recognized. He was getting close to the cabin. His father had left the cities of the plains twenty years prior and had died there while hunting. His mother had maintained the household, coming back to the city with herbs and dried fruit of that she sold and traded for staples. Melina would often travel to the cabin before Kyra was born, maintaining the place even after Gwythant's mother had passed on. Both Gwythant and Melina had moved there to escape the bustle of Hunda once Melina was close to birthing little Kyra. He rounded the rock outcropping that protected the cabin from the elements. There were few neighbors within a mile of the place, but that fact did not hide them when the call to arms went up for the defense of the plains cities.

That had been a month ago.

It was all gone now.

Gwythant fell to his knees at the sight of that was before him. The cabin was razed to the ground. Wisps of smoke danced around burned timber. He sobbed and cried, burying his face in the dirt path that led up to the devastation. Beating his fist on the ground as his tears mixed with the ground. Slowly shock settled in and in a dreamlike state, he stood up and staggered around.

Melina had been torn in two, her upper torso lay mangled and bloody. Her face was no longer beautiful. Her arms reached towards her right, as if in a last act, reaching out to something she desperately wanted. His eyes followed her path, even though his mind screamed for him not to look. Unable to stop himself, his eyes tracked to a tree where a bloodied form hung as if suspended.

Unsure of what it was, Gwythant focused on the thing, discovering it had been nailed to the tree with two large metal spikes. As it came into focus it became clearer. It was a little thing, small with tiny arms and chubby legs. Something inside of Gwythant snapped.

Gwythant remembered little of the next few hours. He did not remember burying his wife or his child. He did not remember gathering them up, digging the shallow graves with his sword and swollen hands before placing them within the confines of the ground. When he returned to himself, he knelt over freshly turned soil with broken timbers serving as grave markers. His arms now ached and the left bled foul pus. No longer white, it was now a pale yellow green. The black streaks now continued up his arm and neared his shoulder.

Tears no longer came to him. He knew his wounds were infected and he would likely join his loved ones shortly. Days at the least.

He built a fire nearby, warming himself as the sun set for the second time since his inception into this new hellish world. The fire burned hot as he sat there staring at the dancing flames. He poked the wood with his sword, watching it glow red from the heat. Anger grew as the hours passed. There was no urge to sleep, mourning for his lover and his child kept him awake.

As the fire reached its peak, for some reason of which he was unsure of, he pulled the red-hot sword from the coals. It stood in front of him, shimmering from the heat. Resolving his will, he plunged the blade into the wound on his arm, searing the flesh. It sizzled as it pierced the diseased flesh. There was a popping sound and a huge mass of bloody pus rushed outward from around the blade. The blade slid completely through his arm like it was soft cheese. Releasing his scream, it echoed throughout the forest. Blackness overtook him.

Gwythant awoke with the now cooled blade still thrust into his arm. The fire had burned down low indicating several hours had passed. Gripping the blade firmly, he tore it out of the wound. He swooned with the fresh pain and threw the blade back into the fire.

“I’ll kill them all. They failed the first time, they’ll fail again. So long as I live, I will follow and kill them one by one. One purpose, one goal. No other.” It was the first time he had spoken in three days. He did not recognize his own voice.

Standing up, he walked into the ruins of the cabin, searching for any of the vials and medicines left by his mother. After digging for several minutes, he found a new poultice package and some dried roots. As he prepared the poultice, he chewed on the bitter tasting roots. He knew he might not be able to save the arm, but the lancing might provide him with enough time to catch the horde and die honorably fighting those that killed his family.

His arm freshly wrapped, he grabbed the sword from the embers of the fire and began walking towards down the mountains, heading towards the smoking fires of Parsha.

Within a day he had reached the plain, merging with the trampled grasses that encompassed the terrain. He turned east, trudging along feeling the mud squishing beneath his boots. As he approached the outskirts of Parsha, he could see the devastation more clearly. The outer hovels of the farming poor had been burned to the ground. Rotting corpses were scattered about, flies buzzing in huge swarms. Most of the victims looked to have been eaten in some fashion, very few of them looked as if they had been struck down with weapons. He determined that the outskirts must have been given to the demons' children, leaving the glory of the town proper to the true demons. He jointed up with the main highway, which soon changed from a packed dirt path to a cobblestone-paved road. The rocks, smoothed as the road was, caused his feet to ache. The boots were worn and suited for the wilderness and not for city travel.

All around him were flies and rancid smells. He picked up a bit of cloth he found along the road and fashioned a mask to filter out some of the smells. There were no soldiers here, only peasants. The army must have made its stand within the walls. He could find no survivors, but actively did not call out to any that might be wounded. The demons might have left stragglers behind.

Gwythant stopped at the outer wall that protected Parsha. Holes had been ripped in the thick wall and he could see into the city. Entering one of the massive holes, he found the carnage. They had made their stand in the city. Finding several warbeasts intermingled with human corpses, he knew that they had fought for their survival. He saw piles of humanoid creatures with huge horns and vicious claws. Teeth long and razor sharp. He stumbled back, realizing that this was the true enemy. Approaching the dead demons cautiously, he looked over the corpse.

The demons towered over a man by a full head or more. They had no need for weapons since their claws looked sharper than any blade. A thick scaly armor grew over their shoulders and around their chests. Their heads were human in shape, but the many fangs caused the face to be distorted and distended. Gwythant continued to study the creatures until the sun began to set in the west. As darkness began to fall, he could hear the night creatures, rats and dogs, beginning to come out and feast upon the dead. Gwythant left the city, knowing that the pillaging had only just begun for them, but he was days behind the true horde.

For days he walked on, from town to town, following the devastation. He caught sight of a child once, quickly disappearing into the still smoldering ruins. As the days

passed, he ate what he could from the destroyed kitchens of the homes he encountered. Entering a village, he knew he was catching the horde, because the fires were still hot. Flames still licked at the wooden crossbeams of a once proud state house.

The next city up the mountain chain was Cymbl. Close to the river Montou, it facilitated river trade through the south to the sea. Gwythant had never been there before, only hearing stories of it from the travelers that passed through Hunda to get to the west. Cymbl was the last city on this side of the Sentry Mountains. There were no other human establishments other than small fishing villages to the southeast.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of tearing flesh. Spinning, Gwythant's sword leaped into his hands. He saw nothing. The sound came again, off to his left. Walking quietly, he rounded a burned out husk of a building. The sight he saw nearly made him wretch. A demon no more than five feet tall knelt over the lifeless corpse of a child, feasting upon the exposed belly.

Fresh rage billowed up and Gwythant raised the sword over his head. He dashed forward and swung the blade down. The creature looked back at him in surprise. The sword cleaved through the thick armor of its shoulder, continuing down until it exited under the ribcage. It gurgled at him and collapsed atop the corpse.

Gwythant staggered back, gasping at the exertion. "Bastard. I told you I would hunt you, kill you if I could." He looked up at the sky. "See goddess! One more have I rid from this earth!" He didn't know who he was shouting at, he hadn't worshipped the goddess since he was a child. Slashing downward, he cut off the middle claw of the demon. Laughing, he cleaned the sword of the burning blood. Picking up the claw, he placed it into a bag he had devised. They were his trophies. Wallowing in his success, he danced around joyfully until his rotations returned him to face the half eaten child. His happiness left him immediately and he turned and once again he set out to follow the destruction.

Every day it was the same. He would rise, find a demon, slay it and take the trophy. It was rarely that simple, sometimes he would find two or three of the stragglers, dispatching one before the others would return to face his blade. Sometimes they would be feasting on the dead, other times he found one copulating with a chained dog. He had killed them both that day. Singularly, they were vicious but slow, as if they had to think about every action they took. He attributed it to the fact that the forms they took were not their natural forms. Demons were never natural to this world.

He could tell they were close to Cymbl since the fires of the towns became larger and larger. Smoke choked the air and the demons he found were larger and stronger. The claws he took he weaved into his armor. His back and shoulders were covered with the talons from the fallen demons. He took little pride in it but their presence did comfort him. He knew they could be killed. In numbers was when they were a true threat. Their strength could be used against them, as could their insatiable need to breed and feed.

Not once did he encounter anyone other than a demon or one of its children. Not once. His arm still ached and the blackness lines continued up into his shoulder and neck. It was then that the cursed ability began to manifest. He had sensed movement all during the day as he traipsed through the plain, hearing the same metal on metal sound. As the sound came closer, Gwythant saw the invisible creature stalking him. It was a

warbeast, but for some reason he could see the creature as it approached him. The warbeast, not knowing that its invisibility was compromised, died quickly on Gwythant's blade.

The next day, he discovered he was able to approach his quarry without them sensing his presence. To his amazement, they believed he was one of them, even beginning to converse with him in their guttural tongue before Gwythant cut them down. The black blood no longer burned to his touch. Perhaps it was the fevers that came and went or perhaps it was because he was so close to death.

Gwythant feared he was becoming one of them and longed for the day that they would overwhelm him. For that to happen he had to catch the horde. It would not happen today.

"Ho!" The voice called out to him. Gwythant slid the sword out of the back of the slain demon. "Ho there!" Gwythant's ears perked up, looking for the sound. The voice was human. Most certainly. In the distance a man jumped down from the ruined tower in the middle of the street. He landed in a heap, obviously wounded. Gwythant watched as the man struggled to his feet.

Obviously a soldier from the sword he dragged behind him in his free hand, the man's left arm was bound in bandages, as was his head. "Demonslayer! I greet you!"

Gwythant finished cleaning his blade. Night was beginning to fall. The demons, he found, could see him better at night. Night was their best friend. Being this close to the horde, Gwythant knew he had to hide soon. Close meant that he was a good three days still behind them and was losing ground. Fighting stragglers was not efficient towards the total goal. The answer would come to him in time, likely in a battle or a dream. Now he had to deal with the first of his own kind he had seen alive since the child over two weeks before.

The man hobbled quickly up to him, but when Gwythant showed him his blade as a warning, he skidded to a stop. "Hey, whoa! You're the first I've seen since they came."

"That may be so, but I take no chances." Gwythant looked over the man, noting the wounds and soldier's attire. "How did you survive?"

"Hid mostly. After Parsha fell, the armies fell back to just outside of the great wall. There they died." He backed up and sat down on a crumbled stone wall. "I was one of the lucky ones that remained inside. Lucky. I watched as every last one was slaughtered below. I heard their screams for us to let them in, heard their cries to their mothers, their children, their wives." He put his head in his hands. "Then the night came and the horror began. The walls were breached by unseen beasts to torment us until daybreak. Then they shattered the wall and streamed inward to finish the job. I hid in the west tower, barricaded in the dungeon. Cowardly, I know." He looked up at Gwythant.

"Your name soldier?"

"Gwythant of Highspire."

"Not of a town then?"

"Highspire is north of Hunda. A region and not a town."

"Family there?"

"Not anymore."

The man was silent for a moment. “Why don’t you sit? Rest. They won’t be coming out for at least another hour. Most have gone on towards the Great Pass.”

Gwythant eyed the man. To sit would be a great joy, but not until he felt secure. He turned around looking to see three demons step from around the ruins of a building. His sword was already out before he turned back to face the yet unnamed man. He sat smiling stupidly up at Gwythant, a knowing grin on his face. “Traitor!” Gwythant spat out.

“No traitor,” the man slurred. Gwythant watched as the man literally fell apart. Blood oozed out, wounds opened and the man’s left arm fell off. “Just a meat puppet.” Within seconds, the man collapsed in a heap next to where he sat. Another demon appeared from behind a nearby pile of loose bricks and began walking towards him. Gwythant could sense that this one was the one controlling the deceased man.

Gwythant was already running, blade up and outstretched. The demon’s teeth filled mouth worked to speak. “Yes, a meat puppet held together by hellspawn magic.” The voice was high and difficult to understand. It hunched down, putting out its claws, ready to accept Gwythant’s assault. Instead of striking head on, Gwythant went into a slide, bringing the blade close to him and sliding under the demon’s claws. As he slid to a stop, Gwythant thrust upwards, disemboweling the demon’s belly. Hot black fluids spilled all around him as he scrambled out from under the dying creature. Rising he watched as the other two roared and danced like spiders across the terrain towards him. He had never encountered demons like these. Feeling fear for the first time in nearly two weeks, Gwythant nearly turned to run. Instead he charged them.

Seconds before he reached the duo, he stopped mid-stride, spinning his blade flat out in front of him, cleaving the first in two. He felt the claws of the second rake his back, feeling the rapid repeating strikes on his trophies. Gwythant continued his turn, raising the black blade high before sending it crashing down on through the puzzled demon’s skull.

The battle suddenly over, Gwythant leaned back against a fire-blackened wall. They knew he was hunting them. There would be more of them and they would be trickier to defeat. As the shadow’s lengthened, Gwythant disappeared into the approaching night.

The sun warmed his festering arm. It had become infected again, beginning to expel a newly foul stench. Obviously, impaling his arm on his sword had helped some, but had not thoroughly purged the wound. The arm itself was beginning to stiffen. Cleaning the wound had no effect, but he was grateful that it didn’t hurt any longer. He wasn’t sure why it didn’t. He could barely feel his fingers, even though they still moved.

Three days had passed since his encounter with the hunter demons. Since that time, he had not once seen any of them. Cymbl had finished burning by the time he had reached the city proper. Irrked that once again he had missed the fight again, Gwythant remained on the river’s edge watching the corpses float by.

Reevaluating his goals, he realized that walking he would never catch the horde. The demons left no livestock alive and he had no way of moving faster. He thought long and hard as to where they were going. There were no large cities on this side of the Sentry Mountains. Which meant they were moving on across the Great Pass and onto the

plains of Lyr. He knew there were many other cities there, though he had never been there.

He flexed his arm again, watching the puss squirt out. New black lines were beginning to form. Time was short now. He had to reach them soon. Looking back at the mountains behind him, a distant memory of his father slowly surfaced. There was another pass. One that was very small and discovered long after the Great Pass had been established. It was two days journey back and then up into the mountains. Gwythant counted the mountaintops, finding the third one from the end of the line. The Salvation Pass. During one of the wars that were waged over the fertile plains, invaders that held the Great Pass had cut off the cities of this plain. Only when the Salvation Pass was discovered did the armies of the allies of Hunda manage to come to the rescue of the beleaguered cities. That had been over three hundred years prior.

It was a story, just like many stories was rarely true. His father had been through the pass, and had told him enough of it to know where it generally laid. It was his only choice. He would never catch the horde this way. He would never find the death he wanted, in battle with those that took from him. Only the horde, confronted directly, would end his pain.

Standing up, Gwythant decided to take to the mountains, following a memory told to him by his father. He left the charred remnants of Cymbel behind and struck out into the hills.

The mountain air and green of the trees was refreshing to him. As he left the foothills behind, he eventually reached the point where he could see the entire plain behind him. To his right he could see the blackened corpses of the cities on the seaside plain. He counted twenty blackened patches of scorched earth. In the distance he could see the blueness of the ocean at the very limits of his vision. The river below looked black and diseased as it flowed towards the ocean.

To his left he could see the swarming masses of the demon horde. From this height they looked like teeming ants, fighting over food. They were marching up the main road that led through the Great Pass. The pass was beyond his sight, hidden by Hed Mountain. He took heart that they had not yet reached the pass. Time was still on his side.

He felt something strike his hands as he sat on the stone outcropping. Small and white, it immediately disappeared. The wind picked up and more of the flakes landed around him. Snow. Sighing, Gwythant knew that this was just another hurdle he would have to face to reach the death he sought.

The snow was piled high along the trail. Barely visible, Gwythant staggered along. His left fingers were black and cold, but he felt no pain. The black streaks wound all over his arm up into his chest. His left eye teared constantly, leaving frozen tracks down his face. His legs had gone numb two days before. Rest was impossible so he simply continued on through the day and through the night.

He was close now. The trail was close to being a figment of his imagination, but spots of it bore proof that it existed. And so he continued. Reason left him. Pushing onward was his sole purpose.

Gwythant used his sword as a pick, slamming it into the ice as he would a walking stick. The pass was there, he saw it as he rounded the cliff. Through it he through he caught sight of a second mountain range off in the distance. The wind whipped him around and he plunged the sword into the ice to balance him. It crunched and slipped throwing him to the icy ground. His hand released the sword as he grabbed for purchase. Down he slid, plunging slowly towards the cliff's edge. In frustration, his fingers gripped at anything he could touch. Finally, he stopped, his left arm wedged into crevice. He felt it snap, but felt no pain. He scrabbled for his sword, which slid by him and off the edge. Downward, he watched it fall straight arrowed until it disappeared.

Frustration and anger overwhelmed him as he battled back up the ice and finally reaching the pass. There he collapsed, the last of his strength left him. His back was against the sheer rock face that rose upward towards the top of the third mountain in the pass. Snow and wind pounded down around him, blinding and stinging his face. Gasping for air, Gwythant's vision left him enveloping him in darkness. He fought against its encroachment. He screamed out.

"I rose from the dead to avenge my wife and child! I killed them, killed them all. Grant me strength to avenge them! Grant me that!" His screams competed against the storms wrath, small and insignificant in comparison to the terrible winds.

Gwythant was soon swallowed by the cold blackness.

His cheeks felt warm. Gwythant slowly opened his eyes, seeing incredible things before them. A black haired woman, dressed in blinding white, stood before him. In each of her hands she held a silver sword. Both radiated warmth and power. She did not speak she simply held the swords by the blades out to him.

He recognized her immediately, and was instantaneously struck with awe. It was his Goddess and the steel she held were the Swords of Light.

"Me?" he croaked.

She simply stared at him, no acknowledgement or denial.

Gwythant reached out to accept both the blades but only his right arm responded. His left arm twitched but remained immovable. What parts were visible from under the snow were black and ugly. Gwythant grasped the hilt of the first sword, feeling an incredible warmth go shooting up his arm. It flowed across his shoulders, and he could feel it beginning the battle for the diseased parts of him. His head dripped sweat and he turned his eyes away from the goddess to watch the fight for his body. His mangled arm pinked and large volumes of green puss and yellow fluids shot from the still fresh wound. Pain returned hot and sharp. The wound quickly sealed and the healing power proceeded down into this forearm, returning his fingers to their usual colored state. His fingers flexed and the pain he felt earlier faded away.

He felt hot and sweated, and the cold no longer bothered him. After taking the other sword in his left hand, the goddess faded from his sight. Only the swords remained.

Perhaps the prophecy was true after all.

Gwythant looked down over the golden plains of Lyr, not yet seeing the horde. He saw three cities within two days journey from the mouth of the Great Pass. He chose the spot where he and the swords would make his stand.

As he picked his way down the mountainside, he thought back over the last few weeks, only now seeing how the events matched up with the sayings of Nightfall Prophecy. It bounced around through his thoughts...

*The demons would rise  
Both from the earth and sky  
To eat the dead  
Slay the living  
One would die  
Rise again,  
One purpose  
Slay the demon horde  
Tricked not by lies  
Given the swords  
Of light and strength  
To strike them down  
Both one and all*

Gwythant chuckled at it, knowing that not even with two magical swords could he hope to slay the entire horde. Only a seasoned army could hope to accomplish such a thing. Still, the thought nagged at him even though his purpose remained clear. He would die battling the horde. If he won it was an added bonus. Otherwise, he was content with his choice.

He could see the first of the demon scouts emerging from behind the mountains. The largest city he had ever seen lay directly in their path. Gwythant was going to be between them within a day.

A grim, accepting smile crossed his face.

A storm was coming. Lightning danced in the heavens as Gwythant trudged across the golden plains of Lyr. Black clouds stood gathering power behind the coming horde. He could feel their footfalls pounding across the surface of the ground. Electricity was in the air. Gwythant stopped.

He stood atop a small rise, looking out towards the black specks that were the horde. Their children would be in the advance groups. He didn't know how to stop them, believing that the cursed gifts would have left him with the departure of his diseases. He had come to rely on the unintentional gifts, especially the abilities to see the invisible.

The swords began glowing, shining a great light out from their blades. Something told him to raise the swords and he did so. The blinding light illuminated the area all around him in an unnatural light. Warbeasts flickered into sight all around him.

They were already here.

He watched as they ceased their stalking of him and slinked back towards the marching horde. They would be here soon enough.

The mass of them was frightening. The forceful wind and rain did nothing to bolster his spirits. Battle-hardened as he was, the sight of so many of them struck more than fear into his heart. It petrified him. Some rode on the snake-like beasts that he had heard of but had never seen. The warbeasts, visible now, snarled around their masters' feet.

They stopped a hundred yards from him, looking at the man who wore their talons as armor. Then, as one, they began to make a guttural sound that slowly rose up and up until it encompassed every last one of them.

It was then that he realized that they were laughing at him.

Then suddenly as it began, they surged forward as one mass. Gwythant raised the swords in preparation of this final battle. Smiling, he steeled his resolve and vanquished all fear from his mind. They rose all around him swelling up his little hill until he could smell their stench.

And then he struck with both blades and was quickly overwhelmed.

In those first seconds, Gwythant slashed and parried, quickly dancing around the bodies that fell around him. He fought on, killing another, impaling a third and decapitating a fourth. He felt strikes on his back, legs and chest. His makeshift armor held and he felt no pain. He lashed out again and again, though his strength was beginning to fail.

The swords seemed alive. For it seemed like hours, Gwythant fought and slaughtered the demons around him. After the first few minutes he was covered in gore. Now, he was swimming in it. He fought on, allowing the swords to do their work. He fought to stay atop the bodies, before finally jumping down from the piles of the dead to battle anew on the now bloodied plains of Lyr. His strength had left him, replaced by the righteous power of the Swords of Light. Up and down the blades went, flying around him in his hands, independent of each other. Cleaving head from shoulders, spilling intestines and bile, severing arms and legs. It never stopped.

Gwythant could take no more. It seemed like days had passed as he watched the blades use his body. He could no longer make it move of his own will. The swords danced with him across the plain, causing a great slaughter. Demons fell at the sight of him. He watched in his timeless way how they had laughed, then became serious and now the demons became fear. He saw the terror pour from their bodies as readily as their

blood that spilled once the swords took their lives. Gwythant watched a countless number of them be massacred. At first he was joyful, then somber and finally overwhelmed by the sheer number of deaths he was imparting. His mind could no longer accept the amount of deaths, even though it was justice. Gwythant screamed as his mind went to blackness.

Gwythant opened his eyes. Sticky with drying blood, he cracked them open. The first sight was that of a demon with one of the Swords of Light embedded in its forehead. The other Sword was thrust into the chest of another. Gwythant's hands were still on the hilts.

It fascinated him that the blades themselves were clean of blood and gore. His body was exhausted and unable to move. He sat on his knees atop several demon corpses.

He glanced around, seeing a horrible sight unlike anything he had ever witnessed. As far as the eye could see were piles upon piles of dead demon corpses. It was utterly horrifying. For a moment he believed he was in the Abyss. In fear, he looked up and was greeted with the sun blinding his eyes.

The storm had passed.

The prophecy fulfilled.

He looked down to see the Goddess standing before him. She bent down and gently took the swords from him. He rested back onto his laurels watching the swords slowly fade away from her hands.

She came no closer but spoke directly to him.

“For all that you suffered. For all that you endured. I thank you.”

Gwythant struggled to his feet, looking down at his bloodstained hands. His old blackened sword flickered into existence by his feet. He looked up at the Goddess questioningly. He left his questions unasked, turning away from her. He knew that everything he loved in this world had gone away. No one, not even the Goddess, could ever return them to him.

Gwythant had won the battle for the Light, but lost everything to the Darkness.

The End