



The Almighty BushGod by Frank Skwierc

A Book in the Making



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Chapter One

Brief Encounter

In an ancient time a man lay quietly in a bed made of straw staring out into the deep and clear night sky. He wants to believe in Love but finds he has no such emotions lying within. Yet, this very same man professes an undying love for a woman. How can such a beast latch hold of a man's heart and deny it of such an unknown yet wondrous feeling. He turns uneasily onto his side for he is also tormented with his own demons, those of mortal man. Wanted for crimes committed long ago that are now fading into his past he lives a life of a fugitive. Nearing forty the strength and agility he once prized so much in his life is also fading. The thick hard muscles he once possessed in his youth are now grown weaker and softer. He keeps his graying red hair cropped closely to his scalp. Suddenly, the silence that ran so deep just seconds before is broken by voices coming from outside the shelter of the barn. It is two men talking in short staccato tones. The sound of their voices are indistinguishable to the once feared worrier of his time. The man reaches beside him and grasp his sword, not to leap down from the loft and race outside into battles, but he grasped it to control the deep seeded fear that lay within him. In his mind he asks himself, {God why is it that a man who has lived a life such as I have, does not welcome death? But instead I fear it. What is it that you keep from me that I feel I must live, no matter how unpleasant life may become?}

He sits silently waiting for an answer, but finds that not even his own mind will comfort him with one. The two men outside the barn suddenly burst into laughter as the sultry voice of a woman is now present outside the walls. Light mummings and laughter is all that the man known only as {Brief Encounter} can hear from his straw bed in the loft of the barn. Brief pulls himself slowly up the side of the barn using his sword to balance him. He moves in closer to the hole in the roof and as he nears the opening the voices now become clearer. He attentively listens now, and overhears the woman asking the two men outside the shelter what their business was in town. Brief learns that they are after the bounty that's on his head and have been tracking him for weeks and that is what brings them to this part of the country. A breeze of crisp mountain air rushes threw the opening in the roof, ad sends chills running across Briefs' face and hands. He brushes one hand over his face to ward off the cold breeze and grasp the heel of his sword firmer to warm the other.

Foul words are heard much louder now as the two men and the woman are hit with the same light gale of wind that also gives them a chill of their own. Briefs' mind begins to ease as he hears the woman shouting to the two men to come join her at the hostelry for a quart of port wine. The two men accept and the three of them go clamoring off until the voices are no more. Brief slowly eases himself back down to the warmth and comfort of his mattress of straw. He curls to one side and kneads the straw closer to his body for warmth. Then he begins to beg his mind and body for a quick nod to sleep, for once both mind and body oblige him. As Brief sleeps he dreams of the long journey ahead of him. How he must cross the great mountains heading north through Saxon territory, and once over the mountains he enters the territories of the Huns and Romans who are currently at each-others' throats. Among them are the bounty hunters that would love to take Briefs head for the fifty gold talons that are affixed upon it.

However, Briefs' fight now is not with the Saxons, Huns, or Romans, he is after a group of Cossacks. The same Cossacks that raided the small settlement and is holding his Queen Trish captive in exchange for him. Unfortunately for the Cossacks, Brief has no intentions of just turning himself over to them. Each night while he dreams he fights this battle with the Cossacks over and over and the outcome is always the same, but even knowing that this may be his last quest, he is determined to see it through. Some may think he is doing this out of love, but how can that be when Brief has not yet known what those feelings are. Besides, how can one know this muse called love when no one can define what love really is? Brief is only doing this because of a vow he made to Trish several years back. He promised her that he would always be there in her hour of need. Never has that need been as great as it is right now.

Brief stirs restlessly as the cawing of a crow awakens him. He squints his eyes against the amber glow of the Sun as it begins to streak through the tattered roof above him. In a rushed realization to reality he frantically gathers his meager belongings together and descends the broken step ladder to the ground. Listening carefully he makes sure that his sudden arousal has not been noticed. Lashing the heavy iron sword to his side he makes his way to an open door, after insuring that there is no one about, he

leaves the protective sanctuary of the barn and disappears into the thick cold fog that shrouds over the landscape.

Moving quickly and in relative silence Brief crosses the now frosted pasture land to the woods beyond. The thick fog covers his movements from prying eyes, but the sound from his footsteps crushing the lightly frozen grassland keeps Brief on the alert. An encounter now in the open pasture is a fight that Brief would not so soon wish to contend with. Brief finally reaches the edge of the forest, he stops - turns - and kneels. Silently he scans the pasture for any sound or movement coming his way. Satisfied that he is not being trailed he rises, turns and quickly makes his way deeper into the woods to the spot where he left Barnicle his newly acquired steed. Confident now that he is not being followed Brief slows his pace through the woods and recalls what he heard the two men saying the night before. He remembers that the men mentioned that they were only tracking him for weeks and not years. He now realizes that the two men tracking him must have been sent after him when he took Barnicle and some petty coin from the Corsican Bandits he had been hiding out with.

Warlock, Barnicles' previous owner and leader of a savory lot of thugs and thieves, has always known about the fifty gold talons offered for the Head of the Almighty BushGod, but only now did he piece the puzzle together and make the connection that Brief Encounter and the BushGod maybe one in the same. Brief will now have to contend with new riders on his heels has Warlock told any of them who they are really after. Brief feels no regrets for the added danger that he has brought on himself by stealing from thieves, because without Barnicle and the money he took he would not have the resources to retrieve and save Trish.

Brief is awakened from his thoughts to the pounding of hoofs against the permafrost. It's his horse Barnicle ever alert and very much aware that his new master is forth coming. Brief greets the animal with a strong firm slap on his shoulder. Then reaching into a pocket in the thick bearskin hide that Brief is wearing to ward off the sudden change of weather threw the mountains and pulls out a hand filled with sugarcane stalks warmed from the heat of his body. He offers up the hand full of cane to the horse

and Barnicle devours the stalks of cane so quickly that Brief checks his hand to insure all his fingers are still accounted for. After putting a saddle and bridle on Barnicle the two continue their journey through the mountains. Barnicle begins galloping hard and strong as man and horse zigzag their way through the trees, with Brief on a constant vigil for their only enemy, Man...

Night comes quickly in the mountains, and Brief had been riding Barnicle very hard for the past several hours, both man and beast were now experiencing the rigors of their trip. Brief slows the animals pace and begins to scan the landscape ahead of him looking for a good place to make camp. Spring comes slowly in the mountains and large patches of snow still blanket the area making it for Brief to find a suitable place, but the many years Brief has spent roaming the country side has provided him with a type of sixth sense. Scanning the country side ahead of him, Briefs' eagle eyes sees that there is a break in the dense woods only a half mile ahead of him, but they must first make their way through the narrow pass that is cluttered with fallen gravel from many previous landslides. Barnicle not only is he fast but is very sure footed as well, he navigates the high gravel mound with ease, seemingly to never miss a step. Once both rider and horse are on the other side Brief dismounts and studies his surroundings.

Just across the clearing there is an area with several downed trees most likely put there by an avalanche. He decides that there would make a suitable place to spend the night. However, rather than ride strait across the open expanse he proceeds to circle around the clearing staying just inside the tree line keeping a constant eye on his destination, as well as, his back. Brief senses that he is being tracked but is not sure by how many, nor how much farther behind they are.

Further down the mountain the two Corsicans from town have been tracking a single rider that was spotted by a wood cutter leaving town and heading up the mountain. Following the trail was not easy for the two Corsicans, Ivan and Tolcan, because the ground is still covered in permafrost making hoof prints difficult to see. The two men have be after

Brief for three weeks now and feel that they are finally closing in on their prey. Their leader Warlock has promised them both two talons of gold for the return of his prize steed Barnicle and five gold talons each for the head of the man who calls himself Brief Encounter. The two men are unaware that this same man could be the man that the Asian Emperor Kang is offering fifty gold talons for his head. However, for Ivan and Tolcan the five gold talons that Warlock is offering is already like a King's ransom.

The two men sense that their quarry is less than a days' ride ahead of them, but with night falling they know how dangerous and treacherous the woods can be journeying at night. Experienced woodsmen that they are just a glance and a nod between them meant that they both agreed on finding a suitable place to camp this did not take them long. While Tolcan tended to their horses needs Ivan gathers wood for a fire. While both men work on their chosen tasks, they discuss plans for their upcoming encounter with Brief should they catch up with him the next day. They remember all the men laughing when their leader Warlock told them that he suspects that the middle age vagrant, known only to them as Brief Encounter, is now supposed to be some legendary warrior known as BushGod. Everyone has heard the tales told to them while they were in their teens about the Great Almighty BushGod, but like the tales of Hercules, son of the Gods, they do not believe them to be true without witnessing these events themselves. The only thing Ivan and Tolcan knew was they are after a middle aged man who appeared to be soft and weak.

The fire that Ivan built soon becomes a roaring blaze providing enough warmth for both them and their horses. Tolcan tells Ivan he is concerned that the light from the fire may be seen and give away their position. Ivan chuckles and replies that the forest is so thick that a man would have to have the sight of a hawk to see such a small flicker of light in the midst of all these trees. Tolcan not amused with Ivan's reply begins to kick large clumps of snow onto the blaze. Without warning Ivan spins around/ draws his sword/ and places the sharp cold blade against Tolcan's throat. Tolcan stands as if frozen as Ivan presses the sword harder against his neck which begins to bleed as a result. Ivan then reaches over with his free hand to disarm Tolcan and tosses the man's weapon several feet away.

Ivan moves even closer to Tolcan keeping constant pressure on the sword at Tolcan's throat until both men are face to face, with only inches separating them. In a low sinister voice Ivan speaks to Tolcan. "Look my old friend I would just as soon kill you right now then to freeze to death in these wretched woods, and the hell with that old man up ahead seeing our fire. Right now it is I you should be fearing and not some myth of an aging warrior. Now go and gather more dry wood for the fire before I change my mind and kill you anyway." He then shoves the off balanced Tolcan causing him to stumble backwards several feet before tumbling to the ground.

Tolcan, now incensed by Ivan's actions quickly leaps to his feet and runs to where his weapon was thrown. Picking up the double bladed axe he turns and extends the weapon towards Ivan and shouts out a promise of his own. "After this is over Ivan it will be you who will have my axe at his throat but unlike now you will be doing the dying." Ivan looks long and hard at the ox of a man standing before him before replying. "As you wish Tolcan, but until then save some of that hate for tomorrow, cowards like you will need all the hate and courage they can muster before going into battle." With nothing more than a grunt in reply Tolcan sheathes his axe, handle first, leaving the large double bladed head exposed. He turns and walks off into the cold dark woods in search of more dry wood for the fire as ordered. Meanwhile, Ivan kneels and begins to stir the now dwindling flame and adds more fuel to the fire with the remaining dry wood he gathered earlier, soon the blaze is restored to its once former glory.

Up near the top of the mountain in the safety of his encampment. Brief finishes gnawing the last of the flesh from the rabbit he killed. He then tosses the bones into the fire so as not to attract any wolves. His horse, Barnicle, calmly grazes on the short moist grass that has been exposed from the heat of the fire. Confident that he is still being followed by the two men from the previous night he decides it is time that he climb to the top of the fallen trees to look and see if he can find any sign that they are still on his trail. As he reaches the top of the debris he is greeted with a blast of wind, and the cold night air causes him to shiver. He looks for a place that is out of the wind, but with a good view of the landscape below him. As he struggles to see through the dense fog below he remembers the

telescope that Mohab gave to him over ten years ago. Mohab was the Mariner who dealt in trade from India to Japan and China. Besides that he is the man that helped him escape from Emperor Kang when he killed the Emperor's son, but that is a story for another time.

Brief lifts the small silver tube to his eye and tries again to see if he can locate any sign of the men who are following him. Just as he suspected he can see the faint amber glow of a camp fire as it twinkles like a star amid the dark and foggy night. Holding a fix on the position of the light he lowers the scope from his eye but now he can see nothing. Unsure of what he has seen he once again lifts the scope back into place against his eye. Like a beacon he quickly locates the tiny speck of light he saw just moments before. He estimates that the men are about a half a day's ride behind him. There is no time for him to back track and insure their numbers, but Brief knows that he must prepare a welcome for whom ever is out there.

With an angered force he slides the small telescope together and places it back into his pocket as he rises to his feet. After taking one last look down the mountain he turns and leaps the four or five meters off the pile of trees back to the ground within his encampment. The sound made from his landing startles Barnicle and the horse begins to whinny and pound his hooves in a show of defense. Brief approaches Barnicle and in a soft low voice he tries to calm the animal. "Easy boy, it is only I, no need to be frightened." He pauses for a moment and strokes the animals' neck before saying. "Well Barnicle it seems we will have visitors joining us for lunch tomorrow my friend. You must rest, as well as, should I, we both must rise very early to prepare a proper greeting for our guest." Brief reaches up slowly with one hand and begins to stroke the horses muzzle while offering more stalks of sugarcane with his other. The horse happily and greedily accepts the offering of affection. Sensing that Barnicle is feeling calm and safe again he returns to the warmth of the campfire.

Meanwhile, down at the camp below Ivan and Tolcan finish off some of the dried meat that they acquired before leaving town the night before. Ivan stands and stretches and looks over at Tolcan and in a matter of fact

way he asks, "So Tolcan what if this guy truly is worth fifty gold talons or more and we do kill him should we even let Warlock know?" there is a brief silence before Tolcan answers. "So you wants us to just kill this guy and take his head all the way to the Emperor. Well how the hell can we do that when we have just a hand full of silver between the two of us?" Tolcan replies in the most sarcastic voice he can muster. Ivan smiles at the big man's ignorance and confidently snaps back at him. "No you fool, you're missing the big picture. If this guy truly is the man they know as BushGod then we can ask practically anything for his head even a hundred gold talons, and besides he has that horse it's got to be worth at the least ten gold talons alone. That's enough to get us anywhere in this world. Just think about it you big ox and you see I know all we have to do is kill him and get all that gold ourselves." Tolcan contemplates what Ivan said and after several seconds of thought he responds, "Yeah, let's do it your way." "Great" Ivan says. "Then let's get some sleep so that we can pick that mother fuckers trail up again tomorrow."

Back at Brief's camp he is slowly nodding off to sleep and the only thing on his mind is Trish. It has been almost three years since he last saw her. He wonders if she even knows that it is his fault that her village was attacked and pillaged just a few weeks ago. He always thought that if he stayed as far from her as possible that she would surely be safe, but now what kind of horrors is she enduring at the hands of the Cossacks. As he imagines the type of pain and grief she is suffering from the constant raping and beatings she must endure makes his stomach turn. His only wish is that he will arrive in time to find her still alive and mentally worth saving.

Suddenly, like the tide of the ocean rushing in the memories of the times the two of them shared together begin to haunt him. The soft touch of her lips against his own and the warmth of her body against his almost brings a tear to his eye. Feeling the panic and hate beginning to well up inside him he starts thinking and talking out loud and begins screaming to the heavens above, "Oh God how can you spare such a man as I am Only to bring such pain to another? Is it because she found me worth saving once? Is this her payment for saving the life of a man who has only known hate all his life? Is that the reason you are content on destroying the

innocent soul of a woman who has shown only love and kindness to those around her?" Like a mad man Brief leaps to his feet and draws his sword and begins flailing it wildly at the heavens shouting, "Answer me God why don't you answer me!!??" Suddenly he stops, frozen in place as if he had become a statue, he stands there silently. His weapon still held high towards the heavens as if he had just driven his sword right through the heart of a star. He remains standing there with all his senses poised to detect any movement or sound of any kind, but there is no voice from the great beyond, no bright flash of light, nor did the earth begin to tremble beneath his feet. There was nothing from the Gods at all except silence. Brief lowers his sword and returns it to the thick leather sheath on his back.

Physically exhausted now he lowers himself back down on the blanket he uses to cover Barnacles' back and lays his head upon his saddle. His face is still filled with discus as he turns and looks into the now dwindling camp fire. Then in a very soft but angry voice he mumbles the words, "I have no God." Now he begins feeling the effects of the long journey through the woods and up the mountain as it begins to take its' toll on his body and he quickly falls asleep. However, while the body rest, the mind is still awake, because a man like him can never really sleep. The mind stays awake to insure that the heart will still beat, and that the lungs will still draw air. So with the many things the mind must do, how does it find the time to play and bring us those dreams that are filled with so much happiness?

One of the most wondrous things about the human mind is it always seems to find time for everything. Even time that exist outside the realms of our own thoughts. While Brief is sleeping his own mind begins to play games on him. Images of himself in strange surroundings begin to appear before his eyes, and with the visions there are sounds, aromas, even taste is among them, however, in Briefs dreams there are no feelings. There are no feelings like pain or happiness, not even the smallest of emotions can be felt. Even now as he sleeps motionless beside the fire he will soon be awoken by this very same mind and not remember a single thought that occurred throughout the night, at least not right away, because everyone has Deja vu.

The amber glow of the fire soon begins to pale in comparison with the coming dawn. Brief is awakened by the soothing and comforting sounds of birds singing. After a long yawn and good stretch he makes his way over to Barnicle and takes him by the reins down to a small stream of water created by the spring thaw. The cold crisp life giving water soon invigorates both man and beast. Confident that Barnicle would not run off he releases his reins and gives him a firm slap on the rump, the horse trots off to a nearby clump of bushes and begins eating the wild berries that are growing on them. Meanwhile Brief decides to get in a quick bath and shave in the cold mountain stream, once he was done with that he went back to camp and grab three animal skin bladders, an old steel Roman helmet and a hollow brass tube from the large cloth bag that he keep his tools and belongings in.

On the way back to the stream he stops and notches out a hole in a large pine tree and the sap begins to flow, he pounds the brass tube into the notched hole with the butt of his knife and places the steel helmet below so that the sap can flow into it, he then rips off a few handfuls of pine needles and tosses them into the helmet also. While the helmet is slowly filling with sap he fills the bladders with water and gathers more wood for his fire. Once he has done all this and the helmet now filled with sap he returns to camp. Brief places some more wood on the still burning embers, and in no time there is a roaring fire again. In the center of the fire he places the helmet full of sap that he has already deluded with water and waits for it to boil. Confident that his mixture will soon become a fine kerosene, Brief grabs his blanket and saddle made of wood, leather, and bone and straps it onto Barnicles' back while he is still grazing on the wild berries.

Gently stroking the side of the horse's neck Brief speaks softly to him. "We will not be leaving here just yet my friend, instead I have other plans, come you and I will start preparing a little welcome for our guest who are down below." Brief then climbs into his saddle and makes a clicking sound then gently kicks his heels against the horses' ribs and the horse takes off in a full gallop across the open expanse towards the mouth of the pass. Half way across the clearing Brief pulls up on the reins bringing the animal to a stop. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his trusty

telescope, although he can no longer see the glow from their camp fire he spots a small pillar of smoke rising from the dense forest below. The smoke being there lets him know that they have not broken camp. This is good because judging by the distance that the smoke is he would only have about three hours before they would arrive. This will be more than enough time to prepare for their arrival. Even Brief himself knows he will be outnumbered and it is necessary for him to rely on the element of surprise to eliminate these foes.

Down below Ivan and Tolcan have awakened and the two are silently going about their personal morning ritual before they break camp. This takes the men about an hour to complete and with ease the two men pick up the trail that Brief and Barnicle had left on the previous day. Ivan who is a good ten or twelve lengths ahead of Tolcan roars back to him, "Hurry along you dolt, that bastard has at least an hour of daylight ahead of us. He may have seen the smoke from our camp fire and knows by now that we are coming for him. He is most likely headed for the pass hoping to lose us on the other side." Tolcan listens to what Ivan has to say and then asks? "What if he isn't running?" Ivan slightly confused by Tolcan's comment yells back again. "What is that you said?"

Tolcan shouting now, "I said what if he is not running? What if he is just sitting up there just waiting for us? Even you said earlier that daylight reached him over an hour ago so why then do we still see smoke from his fire? Do you think he is just setting traps for us right now? You know if this guy really is the man they call BushGod it is rumored that his sword has drawn the blood of so many men that it now shines red." Ivan begins laughing out loud then replies, "You surprise me Tolcan, you mustn't fear these stories you have heard of that man BushGod, besides you have seen this man that we are after he is old and weakened and his reflexes are bound to be slow, he is certainly no match for the likes of us." Tolcan still wanting to be taken seriously shouts again, "Even a sickly old bear when cornered will turn and fight. Hell even a child knows that to kill without being killed not to rush in, but to approach with caution." Ivan thinks carefully about what Tolcan said and then answers, "Well if he wishes to stand and fight against us then my friend we will grant him his wish. But we face him on our terms. Seeing how you may be right we should not

underestimate this man he could possibly be laying out a trap or two for us. I will ride ahead and see if our foe has anything is store for us.” With no more being said Ivan kicks his heels into his horse and charges out of Tolcans’ sight.

Brief had taken more than an hour and a half working on the trap, and still had not finished with it. Feeling fatigued Brief thinks to himself. (Hell I sure am getting old there was a time when I would have been finished with this by now. At this rate I won’t be done for another hour at best.) Brief sighs and throws down the sling he was working on. Groaning he stands and begins stretching and twisting, hoping that it will relieve some of the cold and stiffness he was now feeling. Barnicle notices the actions of his master and begins to snort and pound his right front hoof to the ground. Brief smiles at the beast and then begins talking to him in a reassuring voice. “Take it easy big fellow. We still have at the least a couple of hours before we have to go to work.” Brief bends down and picks up the sling he had been working on, and quickly judges that the length was now adequate enough so he double checks the knots to make sure they are secure. While doing that he begins mumbling to himself. “Those deer hide skins were the only blankets I had. Now because of these bastards I have to sleep on the cold hard ground for who knows how long. But this sling will be of more use to me now.”

Satisfied with the sling he walks over to the fire and examines the thick oily mixture brewing in the helmet. Carefully he removes the helmet that contains the turpentine like mixture and places it on a clump of snow. It begins to cool and he slowly stirs it with a stick that lay nearby. Elated that the oily mixture is ready and made properly he picks up the helmet and cradles it in one arm and heads to Barnicle. As Brief approaches Barnicle the horse becomes slightly agitated from the pungent odor emitted from the helmet. Brief grabs the reins and gives them a firm pull and soon the horse yields to him. Then in a confident and strong voice Brief says to the horse. “Come Boy lets finish up our work and get back here for a short rest before our company arrives.”

With a tug on the reins and a gentle kick in the animals' ribs he gets the horse started off in the direction he wanted to go. Brief rides Barnicle fast and hard across the clearing to the pass on the other side to the place he plans to surprise his unwelcome guest. Soon they arrive to their destination where earlier that morning Brief, with the help of Barnicle, tethered a large tree branch. He begins pounding in several more large stones into the space of the limbs, and once again insures that the rope is still holding before finishing up. He then retrieves a bucket filled with oil and carries it over to the sling that was tied to a pair of lower limbs on a separate tree that was very near to the ground. The bottom of the sling was draped over a pile of carefully placed stones. He then places the helmet onto the sling and the weight of it draws the sling down into the stone pile concealing the helmet within. Brief then pulls the strips of raw hide away from the top of the stone pile. He lights the mixture in the helmet and steps back to inspect his work. Satisfied that he is finished he gathers up the rest of his equipment and stows it securely on the back of Barnicle. He looks the site over one last time and then rides out back to his camp across the clearing to take a short rest before the action starts.

Roughly, over three hours had passed since Ivan and Tolcan resumed their pursuit of Brief. They now were approaching the clearing in the woods where Brief was awaiting their arrival. Ivan pulls up hard on the reins of his horse and comes to a stop. He holds up one arm as a signal to Tolcan to slow his pace. Tolcan slowly creeps to his side and as he nears Ivan points and says to him. "These tracks here are more recent than those we have been following and they seem to be going back and forth from out there in the pasture. I think that it would be wise of us to split up now. You take out to the left of the pasture and I will go to the right. Keep yourself parallel to me and mind the tree line because you'll never know when one of those trees will come to life and cut you down. Then it will be too late for you to realize there was a man hidden within."

Tolcan begins laughing out loud before replying. "First you make joke of me for my wariness of this man, yet you fear the trees. That's a laugh, I have my ax for the trees." Ivan quickly draws his sword and turns it on Tolcan and in a threatening tone he replies. "You my ass of a friend, whose bravery is only matched by his cowardliness, may think what you

wish, but I am warning you he is near and he has had most of the morning to get ready to greet us.” Slowly Tolcan backs his horse away from Ivan. Once he is out of striking range he reaches over his shoulder and draws the large double edged axe he carries and beats the flat side of blade on his chest while rearing his horse. Then in a low animal like growl he spouts back. “You talk bravely with steel in your hand to men who bare no weapon. Well, go ahead try me now or are you afraid to be beaten by a coward.” Tolcan swings his axe in a crossing motion and the same time leaps off his horse firmly landing on the ground with the axe extended out towards Ivan.

With a low but sinister laugh Ivan slowly puts his sword down to his side and tells Tolcan. “I will gladly wet my steel with your blood, but not right now. First we kill this bastard then we can settle our own petty quarrels.” Ivan begins to slowly walk his horse in a circle around Tolcan who mirrors his every movement. Ivan goes on to say. “Or do you wish death come your way quickly and now.” Tolcan replies in a harsh tone. “No we will not fight now, first we kill Brief and collect the bounty, besides my fee for killing a man is four gold talons any you won’t have that until this job is finished. That will leave me one gold talon to see that you receive a proper burial.” Ivan always with a sarcastic tone in his voice spouts back at Tolcan. “Then we both agree we kill this bastard Brief first and collect the reward for his head. However, you must know one thing first my fee for killing a man is five gold talons, as far as, me burying you, I will leave your carcass to the jackals.”

Ivan lightly slaps the hind quarters of his horse with the flat edge of his sword and trots off in the direction he told Tolcan when they arrived at the pass. Tolcan still standing at guard watches Ivan carefully until he is a good ten to fifteen meters away before he dared to turn his back on Ivan, he then sets off on foot tugging on the reins of his horse to follow.

Tolcan walks his horse for about thirty meters before he decides to climb upon him again, he looks off to his right and sees that Ivan is a good fifty meters ahead of him and is almost half way to the end of the pasture. From here the mouth of the pass looks only wide enough for one man to

pass through at a time. He thinks to himself if this guy Brief were to ambush them it will be in the Pass itself and not out here in the expanse of the pasture. However, he still studies the woods to his left to make sure that no surprises are waiting for him. The further he gets he notices that the woods start to become darker and is filled with rotting fallen timber and large stones and is also becoming cloudy with mist brought on by the warmth of the Sun that is now high in the sky. This high in the mountains the air is thin and crisp and in places the snow still gathers around the trees. Now almost two thirds down the pasture and nearing the small gateway between the top of two large mountain peaks, he spots a small break in the dense timbers where the Sun shines strong.

He inspects the area very carefully for signs of a trap or ambush, confident that none exist he decides that this would be a good place to rest for a short while and warm himself before continuing. Tolcan dismounts his horse and makes his way to a large boulder in the center of all the rubble. He thinks to himself that this little circle of heaven was created by a massive rock slide long ago causing the trees to be turn on their sides and partly uprooted. Now the branches that once reached out side to side are standing tall towards the sky. Younger trees are now growing in and around them. With his horse in tow he heads towards the pile of boulders and stones and finds himself a comfortable spot to sit and absorb the warming rays of the Sun. Letting out a groan of fatigue he settles himself back against the large boulders and makes himself comfortable. Now that the two of them are nearer the pass Ivan is on fifteen to twenty meters parallel of where he is at.

As Ivan approaches the mouth of the pass he sees Tolcan sitting on a pile of stone across the way and wonders how he managed to get here before him. He tries to look ahead into the pass which is surround on both sides by sheer mountain side that seem to go straight up. It is so silent here that Ivan can hear the breathing of his horse. Feeling for the animals hard work getting him here, he begins stroking its neck and whispers into its' ear. "Well boy it looks as if we went a long way only to be brought back to the mouth of the Dragon. I will let you rest here for a while my friend while I go on foot and see what's in store for us up ahead." Ivan dismounts the animal and loops the free end of the reins over a nearby tree

branch before heading off. Cautiously he makes his way ahead into the gully that makes up the pass until he is within a few meters of the sheer cliff walls. He is now in position to see through the pass which he judges to be only thirty to forty meters and notices that it opens to another clearing on the other side.

Suddenly the echo of falling rocks and the whinny of a horse breaks the silence and quickly Ivan tries to conceal himself. He looks back and sees Tolcan stumbling around the rock pile he was resting in and is furious that he may have giving away that they are present. It only stands to reason that this pass would be an ideal place for an ambush or to ward off an attack. He looks again for any signs of movement in the pass and feels confident that no one is present except for Toucans' clumsy ass. Looking back again to where Tolcan is he sees the man standing there relieving himself and the only thing in his mind is that he might have to kill that man sooner than he thought. Ivan makes his way back to his horse and once there he picks up a few small stones and tosses them in Toucans' direction to get his attention. Tolcan notices the falling stores landing all around him so leaps to his feet and moves swiftly to his horse, grabbing his reins he pulls the animal back out of sight and into the shelter of the woods.

Tolcan quickly draws his axe and crouches behind the cover of a large stout tree. Peering around the tree he tries to pinpoint where the stones were coming from. Not seeing any movement or detecting any more stones coming his way he decides it is time he got out of there and get to the mouth of the pass. He rises and mounts his horse and cautiously heads off. While heading for the pass he keeps a constant guard, holding the huge axe in one hand ready to strike anything that moves. Ivan from across the way is astounded by the actions of Tolcan and thinks to himself what an idiot of a man, does he not know that I would be the one trying to get his attention. Ivan sees that Tolcan is headed for the pass so he decides he will just meet up with him there.

The moment that Tolcan arrives at the mouth of the pass he sees Ivan emerge from behind a tree. Ivan in the most snide and sarcastic voice says

to the approaching Tolcan. "Glad to see that you are willing to join me. The way you took off into the woods I thought for sure you were on your way back to your mother. Now get off that damn animal we need to make plans before we proceed any further." Tolcan with his axe still in his hand leaps off his horse and points the axe at Ivan and replies. "I see now it was you that was tossing the rocks at me. I swear I will take great pleasure in dismembering you once we are through with killing this man Brief." Ivan lowers his head in disgust and groans. "You truly are an ignorant ass of a man. Sit down now. We must be very cautious now one wrong move and we may both die, do you remember the signals we used when we attacked the castle gate at Anwari." "Sure I do, but why?" Tolcan asks. "Great" says Ivan. Then the two men begin conversing softly to each other for several minutes before they head out to the pass.

Slowly the two men approach the pass in silence and once there Ivan takes up a position on the right side while Tolcan remains on the left. Although the pass is only about five meters wide, it may as well have been a mile wide. The entire length of the pass was completely covered with loose gravel. By horse or by foot the sound the loose gravel would make would surely attract attention and let someone know they were on the way. Ivan instructs Tolcan to stay put with several hand jesters in a language only the two of them could possibly understand. He then proceeds into the pass on horseback, while Tolcan tries to conceal himself and his horse behind some large boulders at the mouth of the pass. Half way down the length of the pass Ivan dismounts his horse and crouches down low and signals back to Tolcan. Tolcan then rides slowly up to Ivan and dismounts his animal too. He begins crawling up a large loose gravel mound at the other side of the pass as he reaches the top he peers over only to see that the huge loose gravel mound extends several more meters down the other side before it comes to rest in the clearing on the other side.

The clearing on the other side is covered with tall dead grass about a meter high, and is dotted with patches of snow. Ivan squints his eyes as he looks into the thick mangled mess of downed trees full of new growth to

either side of the open patch of ground. Ivan's keen eyes catch some movement within the tree line on the left side and instinctively he ducks back down so that he is not spotted. Tolcan begins to become restless wanting to know what is making Ivan act so suspiciously. Ivan signals to Tolcan to move quietly back down the gravel hill to the horses waiting below.

Once the two men are back at the bottom of the gravel mound Ivan in a low voice tells Tolcan what he saw. "Tolcan off to the left flank I could see a hooded figure sitting with his back to us. He is wearing what looks to me like that old bear skin shroud that Brief wore. I don't see the horse but it appears he is leaning on his broad sword." Tolcan with a huge grin replies, "That's got to be him the one who calls himself Brief Encounter. We must rush in and kill him now before he detects our presence." Ivan grabs Tolcan by the shoulder and says, "No you fool he is way too far away for us to surprise him we will have to move in slowly hoping he does not hear us coming." Tolcan then suggest, "Why sneak up let's just mount up and charge up and over this mound of rubble and ride in hard before he could react we will be upon him." Ivan becoming angry with Tolcan says to him, "Look you battle hungry boob, like I said I did not see the horse so I am sure it is saddled and ready for a quick retreat and we both know that our horses are no match for that animal and he would once again elude us." No what we need to do is first get our horses to the top of this rubble without drawing his attention to our presence once the two of us accomplish that we can mount our beast and charge down for the attack. If we are swift enough he will not have time to run and be forced to stand and fight. There is no way he could oust us on foot. Since you are so eager I will even let you lead the attack."

Tolcan please at hearing this nods his approval to Ivan's plan. Ivan hand Tolcan the reins of his horse and says to him, "Now you wait here I will climb to the top of this rubble and keep an eye on Brief when I signal you bring the horses up as quietly as you can. If all goes right from there we can mount our horses and charge down the hill and in for the attack. Remember wait for my signal." With that being said Ivan makes his way back to the top of the gravel mound. Once at the top he gets down on his belly and peers over the top and looks down in the direction where he

located the figure he saw before and sees that he is still there. He signals to Tolcan to approach with the horses. Just a meter from the top Tolcan holds up with the horses and waits for Ivan. As Ivan approaches he tells Tolcan "He appears to be having a meal I could smell some smoke coming from within the trees but I am sure he does not know we are here."

Brief hidden in the dense brush keeps a steady eye on the men knowing the attack will be coming soon, but he is ready for them. Silently he waits hoping that they will get close enough to launch his attack before they see through his trap. He looks out over the tethered trees that he and Barnicle set and knows he can reach each in seconds and cut them loose releasing their own surprise for his attackers.

The two men remain still for a few moments. Then Ivan gives Tolcan the signal he had been waiting for and he kicks his horse sharply in the ribs with his heels, the horse rears up slightly before galloping down the hill. Ivan holds back until Tolcan is half way down the gravel mound before slapping the hind quarters of his horse and like a shot the animal takes off in pursuit. Tolcan reaches the bottom only seconds before Ivan. Tolcan pulls hard on the reins turning his horse's head to the left so abruptly that the animal has to drive its hooves into the loose stone and gravel and barely can keep its footing but manages not to tumble. Tolcan somehow maintains control and continues his charge towards the make shift camp his eyes searching for his prey Brief. Ivan's horse, on the other hand, begins to stumble and prance to avoid the cantaloupe size stones that were like a small avalanche cause by Toucan's horse. Both rider and horse barely manage to keep their balance but once they reach the flat firm ground at the end of rock pile they take off after Tolcan who now is only a few meters from reaching the camp.

On the other side of the pasture of tall grass Tolcan and his horse continue their charge on what seems to be a figure sitting on a large stone amongst the thick trees, but to get there horse and rider must cross the dead and rotting debris of downed trees. As the two begin to cross this twenty five to thirty meter expanse, Tolcan raises his axe high into the air and poises himself to deal its blow of death. The powerful hooves of the

horse start crashing down on the numerous dead and rotting branches and begins throwing up debris until it fills the air around them.

Ivan wanting a clearer view jogs to the left of Tolcan and in doing this he is afforded a clear view of the figure in the woods, and can now see that it is no man at all but in reality only a pile of snow covered with a bearskin. There really was no time to warn Tolcan that it was a trap but nevertheless, Ivan begins shouting to him. "Stop you fool, it's a trap." Ivan screams this out several times with no avail until the inevitable happens. Hidden in the dead and rotting branches, Brief had pounded several sharpened spikes. These spikes also secured the crude leather rope that he had fashioned from animal pelts that were attached to a very wide and long branch of one of the pushed over fir trees which was pull completely back in the opposite direction. Suddenly Toucans' horse suffers excruciating pain as one of spikes penetrates the soft fleshy meat beneath its hoof. The animal begins to buck and thrash widely and Tolcan does all he can to remain upon the beast. The more the horse bucks and kicks the more spikes it lands upon until the ones that were holding back the tree branch are released.

As the last tether breaks the huge branch is released with gale force speed sweeping out and upward directly at Tolcan and his horse. Tolcan sees the huge branch coming towards him and lodged in the center of the branch is what appears to be an immense fire ball. With only seconds to react Tolcan dives from his horse for the safety of the ground, but is too late as the huge branch crashes into both man and horse impaling them with sharpen off smaller branches within the tree size one. The horse not only impaled by tree limbs is smashed to the ground into several more of the sharpened spikes that were implanted there thus killing the animal. Tolcan suffers horrendous injuries as well, as the sweeping tree limb collides with him it drives one limb threw the upper part of his right leg and another threw his left shoulder before breaking off and remaining imbedded within. Toucans' broken body is then swept several feet away slamming him head first into a pile of large stones rendering him unconscious. The lifeless body of his horse slides along with him and comes to rest only arm's length beside him.

Awe struck Ivan watches as the tree branch makes contact with Tolcan and his horse. Reacting like the arm of a catapult the branch launches its' fiery missiles and other projectiles that were hidden within. Ivan's eyes begin to play tricks on him as the immense tree branch gives off the illusion of a huge pit of fire opening up in the earth around Tolcan and his horse. With all this death and destruction unfolding in front of him he is temporarily paralyzed. The shrill sound the branch made as it is freed from its moorings sends Ivan's adrenaline soaring and the seconds seem to pass like minutes before his eyes. Like a fiery hand reaching up from the pits of hell the flaming helmet heads directly at Ivan. Just in a nick of time Ivan instinctively reacts to the approaching doom and dives head long from his horse only to impale himself on a sharpened branch embedding it deep into his side.

Ivan looks up and covers his eyes just in time before the flammable liquid that is spewing out from the helmet rains down over himself and the horse. As the helmet passes it leaves everything in its wake scorched or burning. A splash of oil lands directly onto the face of Ivans horse burning its face and eyes causing such excruciating pain the animal bucks and kicks until it crashes to the ground next to Ivan also impaling itself on more of the sharpened branches that were placed there by Brief. Not quite dead the horse makes several attempts at standing before finally rising to its feet. The animal stumbles off into the clearing slowly dying from its injuries and as the horse suffers its fate Ivan too had to deal with injuries of his own.

Some of the fiery oil from the helmet splashed down over Ivan's left leg as it passed over head setting him on fire. The hot burning liquid quickly penetrates the animal skin hide covering his leg and begins burning the flesh beneath. He begins screaming out in pain as large cantaloupe size rocks begin crashing into him. The first stone strikes him in the chest nearly taking all of the wind out of him. The next one smashes the elbow of his right arm shattering the bone while the last stone strikes the side of his head ripping off his left ear giving him a concussion that makes everything around him to go into a slow spin. In a semi-conscious state Ivan begins slapping at the flames rising from his leg. His hand begins to blister from contact with the oily flames before he thinks to take off the thick animal skin hide he wore as a cape. He tosses it over his

burning leg hoping that it will smother the flame. The smell of his own burnt flesh begins to sicken him, this along with all the other injuries he suffered overwhelms his mind with pain and he passes out.

Mounted on Barnicle and expertly camouflaged in the woods behind the make shift camp he watches as the trap is sprung. The awesome speed and power of the large tree branch creates a high shrill sound as it slices through the air, this sound momentarily startles Brief and Barnicle. Brief draws his long sword and slaps it firmly against the hind quarters of Barnicle and the two of charge head long into the carnage unfolding in front of them. The two quickly dash through the camp and into the clearing heading to the mouth of the pass ready to confront any more attackers that may be on the other side. Two thirds of the way across the clearing Brief spots Ivan's horse limping badly, as he draws nearer to the animal he gets his first preview of the pain and destruction his little trap created. Noticing that the animal was suffering great pain from its injuries he sheathes his sword and draws and feathers his bow. As he releases the bow string he whispers to himself, "farewell brave soul," the arrow lodges deep into the horses' chest finishing the animal off and ending its suffering.

As Brief proceeds to the mouth of the pass he passes the bodies of Tolcan and Ivan but pays little attention to them as he sees no movement from either of them. He quickly reaches the top of the stone mound in the center of the pass and concludes that these two are the only ones he had to contend with. He turns Barnicle and slowly rides back to the camp he again passes the bodies of his two attackers and notices that there is no movement from either one of them. Galloping into camp he passes by the rock and stone figure he place his bearskin coat over and reaches down and snatches it up and troughs it around his shoulders. As the two of them arrive at the edge of the woods Brief dismounts Barnicle and ties him to a tree limb.

Brief begins gathering dead timber and stacks it into a large pile in the center of the camp. For over an hour he does this until the pile is over five feet in height. He grabs another bladder of the oily mixture he created and splashes it over the timbers before igniting it. Within minutes the

mound of wood becomes a roaring bonfire. Completely satisfied with the size of the fire he walks over to Barnicle, takes hold of his reins and heads out to collect the bodies of Ivan and Tolcan all the time thinking to himself everyone deserves a decent burial.

As Brief heads out he can hear the muffled sound of someone moaning in pain in the distance. He heads in the direction of the sound passing by the bodies of Tolcan and his horse. Slowing his pace Brief stares and listens carefully for any sound or movement coming from them. Tolcan who is also conscious now sees the approaching Brief and lays perfectly still careful not to even breathe as man and horse pass by him. Seeing no movement from Tolcan Brief continues towards the sounds made by Ivan. The semi-conscious Ivan struggles frantically trying to release himself from the sharpened tree branch protruding from his side which is pinning him to the ground. It is not until he hears the approaching footsteps of man and horse that he gives up this endeavor and turns his head to see who it is that is approaching him.

With man and beast standing over him Ivan musters all the strength he can to confront his enemy. Holding back the pain in his voice Ivan spouts off to Brief. "You bastard, you use trickery to fight your battles rather than to face them head on like a true warrior. I am ashamed to die at the hands of a man like you. I suppose like the coward you are that you will strike me down as I lay here unarmed. Or is it your intention to sit here and watch as I slowly die from your handy work." Without saying a word Brief reaches down and grabs ahold of the branch protruding from Ivan's side and rips it free. This action causes Ivan such great pain that he cannot help but to scream out in agony cursing his attacker to rot in hell, before he passes out from the pain.

Brief, stares down at Ivan's unconscious body for a moment then tosses the branch away and removes a coil of rope from the horn on Barnicle's saddle. He fashions a slip knot to one end of the rope and loops it around Ivan's ankles and cinches it down. He then ties the other end to the horn of the saddle making sure it is tight and secure. Next as if to show compassion for the injured man he removes a bladder of water from his

saddle bag a pours some onto the man's face until it revives the man. Ivan shakes his head trying to clear his mind as Brief returns to his horse. Ivan watches as Brief places the bladder of water back into his saddle bag and then remove a larger bladder from around the horse's neck. Brief once again standing over the man looks down and can see the fear and terror building in Ivan's eyes. For a moment the two men stare at each other. Then Ivan trying to control the fear in his voice asks. "Well you bastard are you going to kill me now or are you going to leave me here for the vultures and wolves to finish me off?"

Brief just stares down at the man not saying a word. Ivan begins to grow very angry by Brief's silence and begins shouting at Brief, cursing and spitting at him telling Brief to do his worse. Finally to Ivan's surprise Brief starts talking to him in a low and calm voice. "You my friend are a true warrior and like any warrior you deserve to be buried properly, thus the reason for the fire." Brief then points to the large bonfire over Ivan's shoulder. Ivan turns his head to look and only then does he realize what his fate is. When he turns back to look at Brief he sees him pull the plug on the bladder he was holding and no longer able to control the terror in his voice he begins pleading for his life screaming "I'm not dead yet you bastard please don't do this I'm begging you please I'm not dead yet."

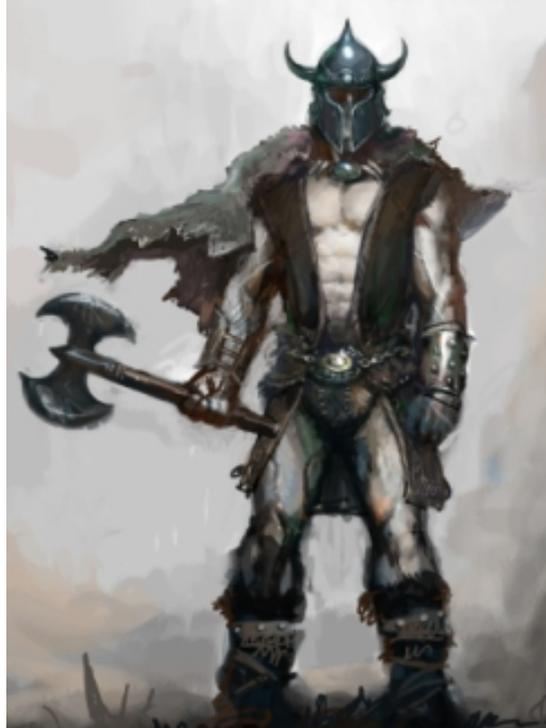
Brief ignoring the man's pleas begins dousing Ivan with flammable oil he made emptying all that was left in the bladder. While Brief is doing this Ivan grabs anything within his reach and troughs it at Brief. The debris strikes Brief in several places but he ignores the pain even when Ivan mentions how his actions are that of a sick demented individual who takes pleasure in torturing his prey. Hearing those words made Brief angry but did little to stop him. Brief walks away and mounts Barnicle trying now to ignore the ranting and raving of Ivan. Suddenly the screaming stops and he hears the man bawling now begging for the Gods to save him from this devil who pretends to be a man.

Brief sits atop of Barnicle for several minutes listening to Ivan as he goes from cursing and threatening Briefs life to finally begging and pleading for Brief to spare his life. All of this sickens Brief to his stomach,

so much, that any respect he once had for the man is all but gone. He turns back and stares at Ivan as he continues flail about on the ground trying desperately to free himself. Briefs thoughts now turn sinister as he thinks to himself what this man had planned for him. Now with no more compassion left in his soul, Brief kicks Barnicle firmly in the ribs and the horse takes off with a leaping start towards the camp and the large bonfire burning in the middle.

Ivan watches as the horse takes off, the coil of rope around his ankles is quickly running out as the rope finally becomes taut and begins to drag the man's body along the last words Brief hears the man scream out are "I will see you in hell BushGod." Hearing those words shock and anger the man we only know as Brief Encounter and he can only wonder if this man who is about to die is the only one to know. Lost in thought for a moment Brief has little time to react as he is but a few meters away from the burning pit. He quickly draws his long sword turns and cuts the rope free of the horse. Barnicle instinctively saving his own life leaps over the burning mass of timber and Brief has to do all he can to remain in the saddle, but both man and beast land safely on the other side.

As the two of them land the crash of Ivan's broken oil soaked body sends several of the timbers flying out striking Brief and knocking him from the horses' back. Hitting the ground knocks the wind out of Brief, but he could still hear Ivan's screams come from the opposite side of the burning mass as he slowly is burning to death. The screams last several seconds before there is silence. Brief rises to his feet and remembers Ivan's last words and as if a response was required of him he screams into the flames "BushGod has only one hell and it exist right here on this earth and in this life, so no, you poor bastard, you will never see the Almighty BushGod ever again."



A Dead Man's Tale.

Tolcan watches and listens while Brief amuses himself by torturing and tormenting Ivan. Tolcan quickly and silently tends to his wounds, he takes a firm hold of the stick that impaled his upper thigh and after several attempts he manages to yank it free. Removing the stick causes excruciating pain for the man, but by some miracle he manages to keep from screaming out. Without a second thought he then takes hold of the smaller stick protruding from his shoulder and with one quick pull it comes free. Tolcan is surprised how easily and painless the stick comes out, it was like removing a splinter from a finger. Blood is now pouring freely from the man's wounds and he must find something to slow the bleeding, he tears a swatch of material from the raw hide cape he wore and plunges it into the gaping hole in his shoulder plugging it like a cork in the mouth of a bottle.

However, the wound on his leg is one that went completely through, he quickly tears a longer and wider strip from the cape and tries to tie it around his leg but finds it is not enough to slow the bleeding. He looks around for something he can use as a tunicate, and sees the large wide strap that secures the saddle to his horse. The minutes seem to pass like hours as he struggles to free the belt from beneath the dead animal. As the belt slips free of the animals carcass, Tolcan falls back and lands hard upon the stones and gravel covering the ground causing him to briefly scream out in pain. He quickly bites his tongue and freezes in place, after several seconds pass he slowly turns his head in Briefs direction to see if he was heard.

Feeling confident that he was not heard he quickly sits up and lashes the strap around his leg cinching it tightly over his wound. Unable to stand on his own Tolcan looks for something to use as a crutch. Off in the distance near the edge of the woods he sees his axe, slowly and as quietly can he makes his way to the weapon hoping that his movements are not detected. Now with the weapon within arm's length he looks back one more time to see if it is safe to get up. With all the strength he can muster he grabs the axe and rises to his feet and moves as quickly as he can to the relative safety and concealment of the woods. Knowing that there is no way he can run from his attacker he looks for a place to hide. Like a gift from the Gods he finds a large hollowed out tree.

Knowing he will have to conceal the opening from prying eyes he uses his axe to cut down a few saplings and drags them to the opening of the log. After backing into the hollow log he begins pulling the saplings in tightly around the mouth of the opening doing his best to make it look like they grew there naturally, as he does this he hears the thundering sound of hooves passing in full gallop followed by the frantic screams of Ivan. The screams of pain seem to go on forever, it is not until the fatigue and pain from his own wounds cause him to pass out that they are silenced.

Brief stares silently at the burning figure within the flames until the sickening stench of burning human flesh reaches his nostrils, he turns his head and glances over in the direction where the other man's body had

fallen. It is only at that moment does he realize that the other man is gone. Quickly he mounts Barnicle and charges to the spot where the other man's body previously laid. As man and beast arrive to where the downed horse and man should be he pulls hard on the reins bringing Barnicle to a stop so as not to injure the horse on the protruding stakes in the ground around the area. Brief looks intently over the spot where the fallen man once laid and sees a blood trail leading to edge of the woods.

He slowly dismounts Barnicle and with sword in hand follows the blood trail to the edge of the woods. It is here he notices that the man is no longer crawling but has managed to make it to his feet and is only limping now as the trail of blood disappears into the dense underbrush of the woods. For the first time in his life fear and anger begins to sweep over him, somehow he knows that this man who has escaped his grasp knows who he really is now and feels that there are others just waiting now to attack him. Knowing he has no place to run Brief plunges his sword into the ground next to him and rips off the bearskin hide that covered his upper body revealing the twin dragons that are tattooed on his chest, a brand his father put there when he was given the warrior name BushGod.

Then in the ceremonial act that is only executed by members of his clan he indicates he is ready to compete in battle. He draws his sword from the ground and with a blood curdling scream he swings it in a circular motion left to right before bring it to a stop straight out in front of him. He now stands silently poised in this position staring into the woods waiting for his unknown attackers. Down below Tolcan is awakened by the scream let out by the man he only knew as Brief Encounter. Here peers through the saplings that conceal his hiding place and sees the man standing silently for battle.

Fear rushes over him as he sees the Dragon Tattoos on the man's chest. He whispers to himself, "Only a fool would tattoo himself that way knowing that emperor Kang has vowed to kill all the Dragon warriors, as well as, their descendants. It can't be, it just can't be, I must live long enough to warn my brother Wreckless that this man is worth a king's ransom and will be harder to capture, let alone kill, than we once thought."

He watches as the man on the edge of woods again swings his sword in the ancient ritual of the Dragon clan, before letting out a scream loud enough for the Gods to fear. Silence sweeps over the woods and not even the sound of an insect can be heard. Several seconds pass before the man on the edge of woods screams out in anger. "I know you can hear me, you came to kill me, well here I am come face me. Why do you hid like cowards?" After a long pause the man sheathes his sword and picks up his bearskin vest then turns and slowly walks away.

From his hiding place within the log Tolcan breathes a sigh of relief, but he knows that he must keep vigilant. There is no telling what this man might do next and the thought that he may come looking for him is terrifying. Tolcan knows that he is in no shape to face him and to do so would be suicide. His only chance for survival is to pray that this man will just leave and forget that he ever existed.

At the edge of the woods Brief stands waiting for an answer to his challenge. The woods are silent, not a sound can be heard, and the only thing that is heard is the wind as it rushes through the trees. Soon the rage that Brief felt subsides, and his only thought is that the man he seeks is either dead or long gone. Confident that there are no others he no longer concerns himself with the man who managed to get away. Sheathing his sword he picks up his bearskin vest and walks back to Barnicle. On his way back he stops and strips Tolcans dead horse of its blankets and saddle bags. He tosses the goods over the back of Barnicle and secures them before mounting him and riding over to where he downed Ivan's horse. Once there he does the same stripping anything that could be of use to him and securing it to the back of Barnicle before returning to camp.

It takes a little over an hour for Brief to gather anything that is still of use to him, and by that time all that remains of Ivan's body is his bones that are clearly visible within the burning flames of the bon fire. After Brief finishes securing the goods to Barnicle's back he takes a large piece of sugar cane from a saddle bag and offers it to the horse. As the animal snaps off bite after bite of the sugar cane Briefs mind begins to wonder. Soon the need to unburden himself of the thoughts racing through his

mind Brief begins talking to the animal. "I guess you are wondering why I am not out there hunting for the man that escaped." The horse suddenly snorts and shakes its head up and down as if to understand what Brief is saying to him. But in reality these actions are most likely because there is no more sugar cane left in his hand. However, the need to have his thoughts heard Brief continues talking to the animal truly believing that somehow the animal does understand what he is saying. "You my friend have not been with me long enough to know the answer to that question, so I will try to explain it to you."

Brief pauses for a moment as he climbs into the saddle. He then strokes Barnicles' neck before giving him a slight kick in the ribs sending the two on their way down the other side of the mountain. As the pair begin their journey Brief picks up where he left off still believing the animal understands what it is being told. "Like I was saying you have not been with me long and you do not know who I am. So I will start from the beginning, I was born the son of a great King named Carne who's clan was known as the Dragon Clan. From birth every male born into the clan were trained in the art of combat and before they could bare the tattoo of the twin dragons on their chest they had to prove that they had mastered the art of killing. To do this you had to enter the camp of our adversary alone, naked and unarmed and challenge their best warrior to a fight to the death.

The enemy is allowed to choose his best armor and weapons while you bare nothing. To insure the contest was fair our King and the rest of the clans' best warriors would stand watch over the contest. At a young age I watched as many of my fellow clansman got slaughtered, while only a very few became victorious. As I grew older I despised this way of proving my manhood, but as the son of the King I was bound by tradition to carry out our ways. Soon the day came when I had to prove to my father and the rest of the Clan that I was worthy of becoming King one day and the test of the Dragon was force upon me.

However, since I was a prince and my training was more intense I was not allowed to choose my adversary that choice was made for me by the elders of my Clan. Some of whose sons had already passed the test of

the Dragon and each of them believe that their son deserves the honor of becoming the next King of the Clan. I was only sixteen at that time, just barely a man in my own mind and I feared losing my life more than becoming the next King. The elders argued amongst themselves for several weeks sending out messengers with challenge after challenge and then one night my father returned and announced to my mother the challenge has been accepted and a site has been chosen we leave in the morning. Hearing that my mother began weeping and was still weeping the next morning when my father and I, along with a hundred of our greatest warriors rode out, most of whom would never to be heard from again.

For thirteen days and nights we rode only stopping long enough to rest the horses and to feed and rest ourselves. On the morning of the fourteenth day we made camp on the top of a hill side overlooking a great valley. It was a beautiful sight, and seemed just right for farming with a rich thick grass over a deep black earth it looked to be at the least a kilometer wide before it rose to another hill side across the way. I remember my father and me standing there together in silence staring at what would be the place I would fight for my families honor and my life.

As night was falling on the Valley I began seeing camp fires lighting up the hill side across the way, at first just a few but within a few hours there were hundreds. My father and the other Dragon warriors began talking amongst themselves as they meticulously dawned their armor and sharpened their weapons they talked of being betrayed on the challenge, and should attack now while the advantage was still on their side. My father told them over and over that night not to fear what is still unknown. That the emperor's son has a right to fear us, and that if and when he wishes to back out of the challenge we will grant him that right in exchange for a warrior of his choosing. Many of the elders balk at hearing that claiming that should he choose not to fight that a new challenger must be chosen by them. Stating that would be the only fair way to choose the next King for the Clan.

The men were still arguing when I became so exhausted I could no longer stay awake. The next morning my father and two of the other elder clansmen prepare me for battle. For over an hour I bore the pain as the two men tattooed the mark of the twin dragons on my chest. Once this was done I was given time alone to speak to the Gods and ask them to make me victorious on the battle field. All I could think of was my mother and the girl I grown to love miles away not knowing what will become of me. I thought about this for hours but it only seemed like a few minutes back then.

All I really remember from sitting alone in that tent, was hearing my father's voice calling to me, it is time to go my son. When I emerged naked from the tent I saw my father before me holding the reins to my horse with the rest of the warriors aligned on the top of the hillside behind him. As I climb upon my horse I remember doing all I could to hold back the fear welling up inside me. Off in the distance I could hear the blaring of horns the type of sound made by blowing into a ram's horn. I quickly glanced left and right at my fellow warriors they were a very fearsome sight, each one armed to the hilt with weapons of all types. I then set my gaze on my foe across the way. There had to be at the least a thousand imperial soldiers on the ridge, yet my father and the other dragon warriors seemed to take no notice of this. It was then my father spoke. My fellow Clansmen as you can see the emperors' son must truly fear us, for he has already broken one part of our challenge and that was to only bring one hundred of your best warriors to oversee the contest.

I tell you now that should he not abide by the rest of the rules to this contest and fight my son alone on the field of honor then I deem it an act of war and beg you to all fight by my side till we are all dead or they are. All the men then screamed out their warriors yell and the sound was deafening, so loud were their screams that it silenced the horns from across the way. At that time my father drew his sword and swung it in a circular motion from left to right before bring to a stop straight out in front of him indicating to the emperor's son that the challenge has been accepted and to proceed alone to the center of meadow below. I watched as a single rider

began making his way down the hillside. Even from this distance you could see that he was heavily armored and carrying weapons of various types. As soon as the lone rider was half way down the hillside the rest of the army began to follow. I felt a hard nudge on my shoulder and heard my father say once again it's time my son, do not fail me, but most of all do not fail your fellow Clansmen.

As I started down that hill I can remember thinking to myself why did he not mention failing myself. By the time I was half way down the hill I could see my competitor was already headed for the center of the meadow for some reason I remember this enraged me and I kicked my horse hard in the ribs bringing the beast to a full gallop. It was this sudden act of bravery that excited my fellow Clansmen and I could hear their screams of approval ringing out behind me."

Suddenly Brief is startled back to reality because the screams and cat calls he was hearing was not from ghost sounds from his past but were actually ringing from the woods behind him. Without another thought he kicks Barnicle firmly in the ribs the jolt enrages the beast and all most troughs Brief out of the saddle, somehow Brief manages to control the animal and the two charge the rest of the way down the mountain side. It is only now that Brief realizes that it is not a setting sun but a rising one and cannot believe that he rode all night lost in his memories.

Several hours pass before Tolcan feels it is safe to leave his hiding place. To his surprise there is no feeling in his leg and the color below the wound has turned very dark purple almost black in appearance. He has seen this before on other men and knows that to survive you must cut off this now dead flesh at the point where the wound begins. Something he cannot do alone.

Realizing now that he is already a dead man his only conviction is that he live long enough to warn his brother Wreckless and Warlock that the man they have been hunting is a Dragon Warrior worth more than a thousand gold talons if taken alive and delivered to Emperor Kang.

Besides being a Dragon Warrior it is believed that only Prince BushGod is the only remaining Dragon Warrior in existence, meaning he would be worth tens of thousands to the Emperor if taken alive. Even dead the Almighty BushGod would be worth thousands.

As he reaches the edge of the woods he overlooks the carnage left behind by the man he only knows as Brief Encounter, his mind still reeling with the thought that he can be the Almighty BushGod that Emperor Kang has been looking for. From where he is standing he can see the charred bones of Ivan on top of a pile of smoldering embers. Night fall will come soon and he knows that he will need the warmth of that fire if he is to survive the night. He looks around for a while for anything that will be of use to him but sees that Brief did a very thorough job of stripping the horses of anything useful. He then concentrates on keeping the fire going gathering as much dead wood as he can find. Soon his body demands nourishment.

Unable to hunt, he is forced to eat the only game available, so he returns to his fallen horse and strips a large strip of flesh from off the horse's back then returns to the safety of the fire. He takes a seat on the pile of dead wood he gathered that is needed to keep the fire going throughout the night and strips the hair and skin off the meat before skewering it with his sword. As he sits there silently roasting the hunk of meat he prays to the Gods to let him live long enough to see his brother one last time. He knows now that his brother must know that the man known to them as Brief Encounter bears the mark of the Dragon Clan.

The horse meat he put on the fire was beginning to char on the outside and Tolcan's belly panged with hunger. He began stripping small pieces from the hunk of flesh and devoured it greedily while thinking to himself how good that horse was in life and now in death. Tolcan eats until he cannot endure another bite and then throws the remaining hunk of meat into the fire. Fatigue starts to overwhelm him but he knows that the fire is the only thing that will keep the wolves away so he stacks a generous amount of wood onto the fire before he slowly drifts off to sleep.

With a harsh tone to his voice Warlock asks, "It's been over three days since we last heard from Ivan and your brother Tolcan, you told me that they were our best trackers and that I would have my prized stallion back by now?" With a very calm reply Wreckless says' "I know my brother and Ivan very well Sire and they will find this man and kill him, you must be patient. Besides the bar keep at the Inn said that they were there last night this means that they are only a day's ride ahead of us."