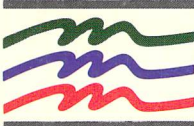


The LORDS OF MIDNIGHT

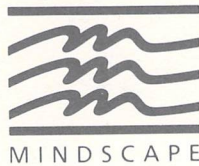


BEYOND


MINDSCAPE

The LORDS OF MIDNIGHT

by Mike Singleton



Mindscape, Inc.
3444 Dundee Rd.
Northbrook, Illinois 60062
An SFN Company

Copyright © 1985 Beyond.
Licensed in conjunction with International Computer Group.
All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America.



Contents

Introduction 5

Quick Start 6

Setting the Scene 8

- Your Role 8
- Victory for Luxor and the Free 8
- Victory for Doomdark and the Foul 9
- Special Powers 9
- The Free and the Foul 9

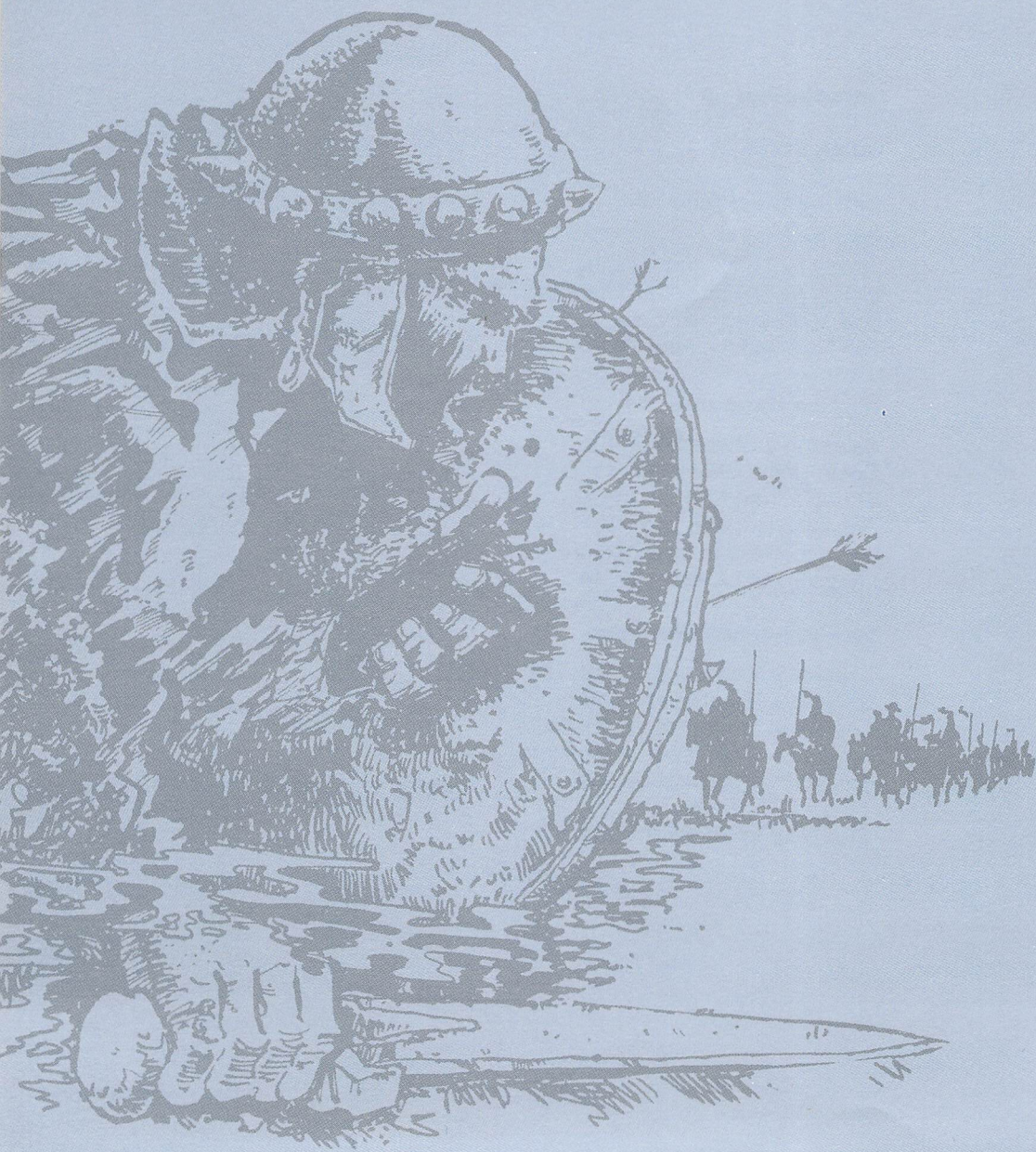
Playing the Game 11

- Selecting a Character 11
- Controlling a Character 11
- Taking a Turn 12
- Engaging in Battle 13
- Using the Map of Midnight 13
- Learning the Landscape 14

The Midnight Chronicles 17

- Chapter 1 Luxor and Morkin 18
- Chapter 2 The Skulkrin 21
- Chapter 3 Corleth the Fey 25
- Chapter 4 The Tower of the Moon 29
- Chapter 5 The Solstice 37

The Map of Midnight 39





Introduction

In the *Lords of Midnight*, you join Luxor the Moonprince in an attempt to free the Land of Midnight from Doomdark the Witchking and his forces. You control the forces of the Free: Luxor; Morkin, Luxor's son; Corleth the Fey; Rorthron the Wise; and other lords and armies that you recruit along the way. The computer controls the forces of the Foul: Doomdark and his allies.

You embark on a dangerous quest to find and destroy the hidden source of Doomdark's power. At the same time, you command armies that try to defeat Doomdark's forces in battle. These tasks are heroic but also difficult, sometimes nearly impossible. Doomdark is a worthy and crafty opponent, and the Land of Midnight holds many surprises, not all of them pleasant.

At every stage of the game, you see the Land of Midnight as the characters you control see it. As you move each of these characters, you will see only what he would see from his current position. If you change your character's direction and look again, you will see the land from a different perspective and find that the terrain has changed. This unique feature is called "landscaping" because the landscape changes just as it would if you were really walking or riding through the Land of Midnight. Looking into the distance, for example, you might see the mountains and forests of Midnight, armies camped on the plains, citadels rising in the distance, or the ruins of long-forgotten fortresses. To see what lies beyond the mountains or the forests or the citadels, you must move forward to look. To achieve this effect, the program can create 32,000 different panoramic views.

This guide provides instructions for playing the game. To win the game, however, you will need to rely on your own instincts and abilities. The next section of the guide, "Quick Start," gives you simple instructions for getting the game up and running. "Playing the Game" offers complete information on players' options and game strategy. "Setting the Scene" is a brief summary of conditions in the Land of Midnight as you start the game. For a more detailed history of the Land of Midnight, read the *Chronicles of Midnight* at the back of this guide. We recommend that you read it before embarking on your quest. Finally, get familiar with the Map of Midnight and read the section called "Learning the Landscape"; together they will be an invaluable guide as you travel through Midnight.

Fare thee well!

Quick Start

Loading the Program

1. Turn on the computer.
2. Turn on the disk drive and the monitor.
3. When the busy light goes off, insert the *Lords of Midnight* disk into the disk drive. Close the drive.
4. Type : LOAD "★", 8, 1. Press RETURN. The program will load into the computer.
5. When loading is complete, you will see a screen describing Luxor's situation. The game is now ready to play.

Starting a New Game

To begin a new game with Luxor the Moonprince, use the Look, Move, Think, or Choose commands. (See "Controlling a Character" on p. 11 for a complete explanation.) Before moving, it is usually a good idea to orient yourself using the map in this guide and the compass keys (the number keys 1-8) on your computer. The compass keys let you survey the entire landscape from your current position.

To begin a turn with one of the other characters, press F3 (for Morkin), F5 (for Corleth the Fey), or F7 (for Rorthron the Wise). Then use the Look, Move, Think, or Choose commands.

Saving a Game in Progress

You can save a game in progress onto a formatted data disk, but not onto the program disk itself. For your data disk, you can use a blank disk or any disk whose contents you are willing to erase.

To format a Commodore disk:

1. Make sure the computer, the disk drive, and monitor are on.
2. Insert the data disk (NOT the program disk) into the disk drive.
3. Type: OPEN 15, 8, 15 Press RETURN.
4. Type: PRINT#15,"NØ:Disk Name, ID" Press RETURN.

Note: Do not put any spaces into the print command above. "Disk name" stands for any name up to 16 characters long that you want to give the disk. "ID" stands for any two-character identification you want to give the disk. For example, for disk name you might type: LORDS. For ID, you might type Ø1. The command would look like this:

PRINT#"NØ:LORDS,Ø1"

5. When the disk drive light goes off, type: CLOSE 15. Press RETURN.

To save a game:

1. Type: S
Note: You can save at any time during one of your turns, but not during Doomdark's turn.
2. Remove the program disk from the drive and insert the data disk. Press RETURN. The program will now save your game.
3. When the game has been saved, this message will appear: "Do you want to verify?" If you want to verify that your game was in fact saved correctly, type: Y. In a moment, the screen you saved from will appear, confirming that the game was saved properly.

Continuing a Game in Progress

1. Load the program into the computer.
2. Type: L when you see the first game screen describing Luxor the Moonprince.
3. This message will appear: "Do you want to load an old game?" Type: Y (for Yes).
4. Insert your data disk—the disk you saved your game on—and press RETURN. When your saved game has been loaded, the last screen of the game you saved will appear, and you can resume playing.

If, after playing the same game again, you want to save your progress, simply save your game onto the same data disk again using the instructions listed above. Your updated game will be saved over the old game. The old game will be erased. If you want to save two or more separate games, you will need a separate data disk for each one.

Abandoning a Game

We hope that you will never need to abandon a game, but if your situation is hopeless, you can exit from the game by pressing the RUN/STOP and RESTORE keys at the same time.

Keyboard Controls at a Glance

Key	Function	Key	Function
<—	look	Restore	choose
1	look north	Return	think
2	look northeast	Space bar	move
3	look east	S	save
4	look southeast	L	load
5	look south	Y	yes
6	look southwest	N	no
7	look west	F1	control Luxor
8	look northwest	F3	control Morkin
Run/Stop plus		F5	control Corleth
Restore	restart	F7	control Rorthron
Inst/Del	select another character		



Setting the Scene

Your Role

You, the player, take the role of Luxor the Moonprince, Lord of the Free. At the start of the game, you control Morkin, Luxor's son; Corleth the Fey; and Rorthron the Wise. By virtue of the Moon Ring, which lends you the power of vision and command, you can also control other characters that are loyal to you, move them through the landscape of Midnight, and look through their eyes. Some of these characters are simply individuals; others are commanders who head whole armies. When you move a commander, his army moves with him.

The computer plays the part of Doomdark, the Witchking of Midnight, and controls the characters and armies loyal to him. In addition, the computer governs the actions of the independent characters and forces in the land of Midnight.

Victory for Luxor and the Free

There are two distinct ways of winning a victory over Doomdark. The first is by war, by sending armies north to the Plains of Despair and seizing the Citadel of Ushgarak from whence Doomdark commands his foul hordes. In such a strategy, Luxor himself will play a major role as a commander in the field.

The second way of winning is by quest, by guiding Morkin, Luxor's son, to the Tower of Doom to destroy the Ice Crown, the source of Doomdark's power. Morkin can have no army to help him on his journey, for the Ice Crown sends forth the ice-fear, which withers men's minds. Because he is half-human and half-fey, only Morkin can resist the utter coldness of the Ice Crown's power.

If you prefer a pure adventure, just concentrate on the quest of Morkin. The armies of Doomdark will still march south to conquer Midnight, but the armies of the Free will defend themselves without your guidance, even though they will not make any countermoves.

If you prefer a pure war game, ignore the quest of Morkin and concentrate on the assault of Ushgarak.

To play the complete epic, however, you should place equal importance on the war that Luxor directs and on Morkin's quest. Naturally enough, the complete epic takes the longest to play. Of the other options, you will find the quest the quicker game.

There are no keys to press to choose which sort of game you play—you simply choose, move by move, which characters you want to guide. At any stage you can alter the balance at will—abandon the quest and take up war or admit defeat on the battlefield and turn to seek the Ice Crown.

Victory for Doomdark and the Foul

If you want to play the Lords of Midnight with your family or friends, we suggest giving each player control over a particular character or group of characters and playing as a team against the evil Doomdark.

To win, Doomdark (or the computer, if you prefer) must achieve two objectives. First, he must eliminate Morkin; as long as Morkin is alive, the game will continue. Second, he must subdue the armies of the Free. This can be done in two ways, either by eliminating Luxor the Moonprince, who is their commander, or by taking the Citadel of Xajorkith in the land of Corelay, the home of all their hopes.

If Luxor is killed, you, the player, lose all control over the other characters in the game except for Morkin, his son. If, by any chance, Morkin manages to find the Moon Ring that Luxor wore and was the source of his powers of vision and command, he can put it on and you will regain control over those characters still loyal to the free. However, once he does this, Morkin will immediately become known to Doomdark, and his quest to seize the Ice Crown will become almost impossible.

If Xajorkith is taken by Doomdark but Morkin is still alive, Luxor can continue the armed struggle against the Witchking. For Doomdark to win, Xajorkith must be Doomdark's *and* Morkin must be dead, *or* both Luxor and Morkin must be dead.

Special Powers

The ice-fear is Doomdark's greatest weapon, sapping men's courage and reducing armies to rabble. If strong enough, it may even cause characters once loyal to Luxor and the Free to desert to Doomdark's control. He can use it either as a general effect, spread equally over the lands of Midnight, or concentrate it in particular places.

The only shield against it is the Moon Ring that Luxor wears; this radiates the strength and warmth of his mind. The closer a character or army is to Luxor, the less will be the demoralizing effect of the ice-fear. The same applies if Morkin is the wearer of the Moon Ring. There is one drawback: the Witchking can sense the warmth of the Moon Ring and so, at any stage of the game, he knows the precise whereabouts of its wearer.

The strength of the ice-fear also depends on Doomdark's confidence. As the Witchking takes citadel after citadel of the Free, the ice-fear grows, but where he suffers defeat or doubt, the ice-fear dwindles. The Ice Crown has a cold intelligence of its own, and as Morkin comes closer to it, it will feel the approaching danger and bend a greater and greater part of its force toward its own protection. So, as Morkin approaches the Ice Crown, more and more of the ice-fear will be directed at him alone, but it will not affect him. Instead, the burden of its terror will begin to lift from the armies and commanders of the Free.

The Free and the Foul

On the day of the Solstice, at the start of the game, Doomdark's forces hold the North while the Free hold the South. Few of Doomdark's armies will be found south of the Mountains of Ithril and the Plains of Valethor. Of the major citadels, Doomdark holds Ushgarak, Garg, Vorgath, and Kor. The only armies of the

Free to be found north of the Mountains of Ithril and the Plains of Valethor are in Ithorn and the Plains of Ithril. Of the major citadels, the Free still hold Ithorn, Kumar, Marakith, Shimeril, Gard, and Xajorkith. In the east, the barbarian tribes of the Targ remain independent of both Doomdark and the Moonprince. In the west, save for the Citadel of Gard, the lands lie mostly empty and under no one's sway.

The Fey are in loose alliance with the Free. They do not seek war, but they do not relish the thought of Doomdark overrunning Midnight. Their part in the War of the Solstice will be mostly passive. Their homes are the forests of Midnight; Doomdark's armies will not willingly be allowed passage through these. Corleth the Fey, however, should be able to rally enough of his people to his banner to form one army.

The Wise have isolated themselves from the world and live like hermits in their tall towers. Doomdark will not bother them so long as they remain withdrawn from the affairs of Men; most certainly the Wise will not aid him. In the right circumstances, it may be possible to seek their help and be granted it. Rorthron the Wise could prove a useful ally in this.

The Utarg of Utarg may be persuaded to bring the Targ into the war against Doomdark, especially if the armies of the Witchking are tempted or forced to trespass on his lands. If the ice-fear grows too strong, however, he may lend his loyalty to Doomdark.

Of the Free themselves, there are many Lords. Luxor should first set himself the task of seeking their loyalty, thus gaining control of many armies. Most powerful are the Lord Marshals of the great Citadels, but the Moonprince will find other Lords who will also bow to his command. He should not, however, waste too much time seeking out allies; there are others who will make fine ambassadors.

Playing the Game



Selecting a Character

At the beginning of the game, you have four characters under your control. These can all be selected by using the four Function keys. Luxor the Moon-prince is F1; Morkin is F3; Corleth the Fey is F5; and Rorthron the Wise is F7. When any of these is selected, the display will switch immediately to the LOOK option for that character.

To select other characters (which you must recruit to your cause during the course of the game), you must press the INST/DEL key. When you do this, a list of other characters you control will appear, together with a list of the keys to select them. Press one of these selection keys, and the display will switch immediately to the LOOK option for that character.

Once you have selected a character, your control will remain with that character until you select another. Selection can be undertaken at any stage of the LOOK, MOVE, THINK, and CHOOSE options.

Controlling a Character

Unlike standard adventure games, controlling the characters in *The Lords of Midnight* does not require you to guess at the right phrase of command. Instead, you have four basic options, each available at the press of a single key:

1. Look ← (Backspace arrow)

On screen will appear a landscape showing what the character sees in the direction he is looking at the time. There are some accompanying lines of text giving details of where he stands as well as a heraldic shield which identifies him. During the LOOK option, you can turn the character to look in another direction by pressing one of the compass keys. These correspond to the eight points of the compass and are numbers 1-8 on the keyboard: (1) North, (2) Northeast, (3) East, (4) Southeast, (5) South, (6) Southwest, (7) West, (8) Northwest.

2. Move (Space bar)

The character will move forward in the same direction he was last looking. When he reaches his next location, he will continue looking in that direction, and the LOOK option will reappear with a new landscape.

3. Think (RETURN key)

When the character is told to THINK, the screen becomes largely text and you are given more details regarding the character, any army he controls, and the place he is in, than could be included in the short text of the LOOK screen.

4. Choose (RESTORE key)

The CHOOSE screen presents you with a list of special options not covered by the basic LOOK and MOVE options. It also lists the key you must press for each of these options.

What special options are open will depend upon the situation the character finds himself in, but will include such choices as searching, hiding, attacking an enemy, and repairing defenses.

The CHOOSE screens will also reflect the personality of the particular character. The choices you are presented with are only those the character would be likely to choose by himself. So, the choices open to a cowardly character will seldom include brave deeds; the choices open to a greedy character will seldom include acts of generosity.

You can press the LOOK, MOVE, THINK, and CHOOSE keys at any stage during any of the four basic options. A new screen will appear at once.

Taking a Turn

Initially you control Luxor the Moonprince, Morkin, Corleth the Fey, and Rorthron the Wise. These characters all start the game on the day of the Winter Solstice at the Tower of the Moon in the Forest of Shadows. The game proceeds by day and night.

During the day, you can move any or all of the characters you control and any armies that are with them. The distance a character can move in one day depends on the difficulty of the terrain and whether he is walking or riding as well as on his state of health. You must learn by experience precisely how far you can travel under given circumstances. However, there is one important thing to remember: when you travel directly north, south, east, or west, you are moving just one league at a time; when you move northeast, northwest, southeast, or southwest, you are moving along the diagonal of a square one league by one league, a distance of approximately 1.4 leagues. Therefore, this will take you longer and leave less hours of daylight for the rest of your journey.

A character will see the sun when looking in the appropriate direction at the right time of day (east in the morning, west in the evening). This can be a useful aid to play in seeing how many hours remain to that character in a particular day.

When a character has exhausted his hours of daylight, night will fall for him, and unless there are exceptional circumstances (the THINK screen will tell you if there are), he will not be able to do any more until the following day. You can still, however, move other characters under your control.

Once you have moved all the characters you wish to you must press the NIGHT 0 (zero) key. This lets night fall everywhere and signals the start of activities for the forces of Doomdark. After you press the zero (0) key, a message appears, informing you of any developments during the night. When you see this message, "Do you seek dawn?" Doomdark's forces have finished moving. Type Y to bring on the dawn and start your turn.

DO NOT FORGET TO PRESS THE NIGHT (0) KEY WHEN YOU HAVE FINISHED YOUR DAY'S MOVEMENT. IF YOU DO NOT PRESS IT, NOTHING FURTHER WILL HAPPEN AT ALL.

Engaging in Battle

At various times during the game, you will have the option to engage in battle. To go into battle, select the "attack enemies" option from the CHOOSE screen. Before engaging in any major battles, however, it is a good idea to recruit forces in addition to the ones that some of the characters, like Luxor, already command. Do this by traveling to friendly citadels or neutral territory and recruiting the lords there, who control their own forces. Once you recruit a lord, you control his forces as well as your own.

Minor skirmishes involving individual characters and small war-bands are quick affairs and can take place at any stage throughout the day. Battles between armies, however, will not be decided until the day is over.

Because a battle between armies is such a major event, you will not be able to move an army to the same location as an enemy army by using the simple MOVE option. Such a move is always one of the special actions you can opt for during the CHOOSE option. Some of the commanders you control may be so afraid that the choice to move them into battle does not even appear as one of the possibilities.

During the course of the day, you can move as many armies into battle as you wish. If you move more than one army into the same battle, the program will keep track of their times of arrival (which may influence the outcome of the contest). However, once an army or a character has been moved into a battle, it will not be able to move again until the following day.

At dawn on the following day, the outcome will be known to your commanders. If the enemy has lost, his armies will have been destroyed in the night or have fled, leaving your armies and characters free to move. If the enemy has not lost, you have the choice of retreating with what is left of your armies or continuing the struggle for another day, possibly throwing in more forces. If, however, the enemy has won a decisive victory, when dawn breaks you will find your armies destroyed and your surviving commanders scattered; the enemy forces may have advanced far beyond the battlefield.

Many things will influence the outcome of a battle: the number of troops, the type of terrain, the quality of the commanders and, of course, the strength of the ice-fear. But, as any warrior must, you must learn by experience.

Using the Map of Midnight

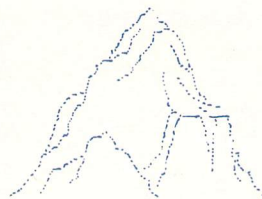
The map of Midnight in this booklet depicts the major features of the geography of Midnight, but, like any map, does not show every single detail. You will find surprises wherever you roam. It will serve well, however, as a guide to your journeys through Midnight and be valuable when you become lost. But do not forget that the landscape has its own secrets!

Learning the Landscape

During your travels through Midnight, you will see many different scenes. This is a traveler's guide to some of the things you will see. All of these features of Midnight's geography may offer cover to an army.

Mountain

Moving across a mountain will take many hours of travel and leave you exhausted at the end of your journey.



Citadel

A citadel is a strongly fortified city which may harbor enemy forces or offer shelter to a friendly army. Storming a citadel will be a hard task.



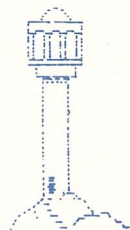
Forest

Movement through a forest will not be swift. The minions of Doomdark, however, will find it doubly difficult, for forests are the homes of the magical Fey, who hold no love for the foul creatures of the Witchking.



Tower

The refuges of the Wise, the Towers of Midnight are almost impregnable from attack, but help may be sought at one of these. It may not always be granted.



Henge

Built in the dawn of the world, these ancient temples have strange powers, not always benign.



Village

A village can offer warmth and shelter to the lonely traveler if its people prove friendly.



Downs

Gently rolling hills, the downs slow a traveler only slightly but they may hide unseen dangers.



Keep

The fortress of a minor Lord, a keep will offer protection against occasional raids, but will not withstand a determined assault for long.

**Snowhall**

Built by the wandering peoples of Midnight during the long winter, snowhalls are quite large structures which can offer shelter to many hundreds if need be.

**Lake**

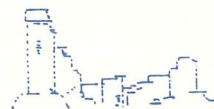
The remaining lakes of Midnight are fed by warm springs. They have powers to revive and heal those who oppose Doomdark and the forces of cold.

**Frozen Waste**

Surrounding the land of Midnight are the Frozen Wastes. They cannot be entered by anv, Free, Foul, or Fey.

**Ruin**

Abandoned fortresses of former wars, ruins may harbor dark and dangerous things but may, in times of need, offer some protection against attack.

**Lith**

These ancient standing stones often have magical powers.

**Cavern**

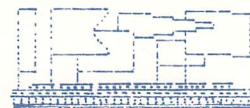
A cavern can provide shelter and a hiding place, but it may already have done so for fouler creatures.



You will also see the flat expanses of the Plains of Midnight. It is only on the plains that you will actually see the banners and ranks of the armies that march across the land.

Army

A friendly army offers no hindrance to the traveler, but an attempt to go through the midst of an enemy army offers the gravest of peril, by day or by night. Armies in mountains, forests, or any of the other places to be found will hide themselves well and not be seen.



As you look around during your travels, large figures may appear in the foreground of each panorama you see. These are the warriors, characters, or creatures that lie immediately ahead of you on the borders of the next domain. You do not always, however, see *all* that lies ahead. The wise travelers must be both bold and wary.

The Midnight Chronicles



Chapter One

Luxor and Morkin

Luxor stood at the doorway of the hut, gazing into the white gloom of the forest. A thin scatter of *ersh*, the fine powder snow of the new moon, was floating down onto the frozen ground. It was time, thought Luxor, it was time. An icicle of fear touched him and shivered through him. He drew his cloak tightly around himself, as though it would warm the chill in his heart, and turned from the forest.

"You are troubled, my Lord," said Morkin. The boy looked up at Luxor, his face a mirror of the man's sadness.

"The world is troubled," said the Forest Keeper. He threw another log onto the fire and sent a flock of sparks flying into the smoky darkness of his hut.

"Come and warm yourself by the fire, my Lord," said the boy. He stood up and offered the stool he was crouched on.

"No, Morkin, we must go. The Solstice is nearly upon us and Doomdark is already waking from his slumber. We must reach the Tower of the Moon by tomorrow yet our ride promises to be long and hazardous."

"The horses, my Lord?"

"Yes, fetch them and let's be on our journey."

The boy scurried out. Luxor turned to the Forest Keeper.

"Your fire and shelter have been a precious gift, Keeper; I thank you."

"If you and your young squire can keep Doomdark's scum from my trees, you're more than welcome," growled the Keeper. Then, grudgingly, he added, "My Lord," and spat into the fire.

Luxor turned and strode out of the hut into the crisp forest air. Morkin was already astride his horse, waiting. Luxor swung himself up onto the saddle of his white war stallion. Then, at a word to the horses, they rode off into the trees. Ersh was still falling and in an hour, there was no trace of their passing.

For many hours they rode in silence, Luxor lost in his thoughts, the boy watching the forest in a mixture of fear and fascination. He had heard the tales men told and couldn't quite believe they were only tales. Yet, the forest had its own vast and lonely beauty, its trees standing still as stones but each drinking a silent power from the earth that could thrust them, as tall as towers, toward the sky. Morkin felt smaller than he had ever felt.

As darkness neared, the boy grew tired of the forest and turned to speak to his Lord. Luxor was gazing into the distance as though in a dream.

"Why does the Solstice trouble you, my Lord?" asked the boy.

Luxor turned his head slowly toward Morkin. For a few moments he said nothing and then, as though he had suddenly remembered, he began to speak.

"Our world wasn't always white, Morkin. You've heard the legends of

Summer when the land was green and teeming with life. Ten thousand moons ago it was, so long that men barely believe such a time ever existed. Yet the Wise remember. They have scrolls that tell of the first snows falling and the first carpets of ice covering the land. Suddenly, all the lands of Midnight were plunged into this winter of ours. Then came famine, a great famine that ravaged our people, and with famine came war."

"But the Solstice, my Lord," insisted the boy.

"I am coming to it, Morkin, I am coming to it. The Wise shut themselves up in their towers and let war take its course. They had not foreseen this winter, yet they knew that war was the only way, for the lands that had teemed with people in the long moons of Summer could not feed such a throng any longer. Only one of the Wise, Gryfallon the Stargazer, stayed with his Lord and gave him much counsel concerning war and conquest. Gryfallon was astute, his advice was well-measured, and soon the Lord he served was powerful through the lands of Midnight, no longer a mere Lord but, by conquest, a King."

"Was that Doomdark, then?" asked the boy.

"No, the King was not Doomdark. Lord Ushgarak reigned for but twelve moons before Gryfallon had him murdered and took the crown for himself. The people and the Lords were not displeased, for they knew Gryfallon had advised wisely and they knew nothing of his crime. They told each other that Gryfallon the Wise would see them through. So he did, after a fashion, but he ruled not through wisdom but through fear and slaughter and sorcery. As the years passed, an icy chill spread through the hearts of those not already enslaved to him. No longer did people call him Gryfallon the Wise but instead Doomdark, Witchking of Midnight. Even this was his own doing, for it pleased him to know so many trembled in fear of him."

"So Doomdark is one of the Wise!" said Morkin, in surprise.

"Who else but they could wield such power?" asked Luxor.

"You could, my Lord," the boy replied, fiercely.

Luxor smiled.



"Your heart speaks louder than your head, Morkin. I would not seek such power, even if I could wield it."

"But, my Lord, what of the Solstice? Why is the Solstice so important?"

"The Solstice, Morkin, is the deepest, darkest day of winter. the Witchking, by his sorcery, draws his power from the very winter itself; he sucks from its heart the cold that fills his own and turns its icy force to his own will. For many moons now Midnight has known a false peace while Doomdark waits and prepares for the Solstice. Doomdark's last full assault on the Free was moons before you were born, Morkin, and even then we barely held him at bay. When the Solstice comes and winter is deepest, Doomdark will draw more power than he has ever known from its icy heart. Then he will unleash all the hellhounds of Midnight against us and I fear we may not withstand him."

A stricken look passed across Morkin's bright face.

"How so, my Lord?" We are the Free and you are the mightiest warrior in all of Midnight!" the boy exclaimed.

Luxor smiled wryly.

"Morkin, you do me more than justice, but even if I were as you say it will take more than swords and strong arms to defeat the Witchking. In the last war he made against us, I slew score upon score of his foul creatures, yet always there were more to take their place. But worst was the ice-fear, the coldest blast of terror he sent creeping over the land to stab at men's hearts and turn their blood to water. This time it will be as cold as the Frozen Wastes."

"Even they can be crossed, so the legends say."

"Perhaps, Morkin, perhaps."

Morkin was silent for a moment, as though lost in thought. Then, as gravely as one of the Wise, he said, "We'll win, my Lord."

"How so?" said Luxor.

The boy grinned, mischievously.

"This time you've got me to help you!"

Luxor looked at the youngster, smiled and then roared with laughter, not at Morkin's ludicrous reasoning but at the enormity of his innocent, affectionate conceit. Morkin, suddenly realizing how boastful his words had sounded, burst into laughter too.

"Morkin," said the Lord Luxor, still laughing. "I doubt the ice-fear could ever touch you. There's not a chink it could pierce."

"It couldn't catch me anyway!" said Morkin, suddenly galloping ahead.

Luxor shook his head in disbelief and galloped after his runaway squire.

Chapter Two

The Skulkrin

As darkness seeped through the trees, the skulkrin shivered and grunted. Still asleep in a nest of leaves and bracken, he cowered as he lay there, and his tiny hands quivered in supplication.

"O Great One," he whimpered, "Fawkrin would not fail you. Fawkrin is your faithfulest servant."

The skulkrin's long tongue lolled out to lick an absent hand. A cold, crackling voice rang out in the creature's dream.

"Wretch! I would not trust you farther than I could kick you!"

As if to demonstrate, Doomdark aimed the toe of his boot at the skulkrin's thin belly. Fawkrin, half-expecting such a response, darted away but not swiftly enough. The blow caught him on the backside and sent him sprawling. Doomdark sneered.

"Fool."

The skulkrin picked himself up and dusted the splinters of ice from his ragged tunic.

"You're too kind to Fawkrin, Great One. Fawkrin loves to be kicked around. Oh surely, Fawkrin loves a sore backside, or surely, too kind!" said the skulkrin, adding under his breath, "Great mound of flatulence."

In a withering voice, Doomdark whispered, "Go."

Fawkrin cringed as the Witchking's frozen breath rolled toward him, trailing a glittering cloud of ice as it clawed through the air. Fawkrin shrieked, shook, and woke.

"Must find Luxor," he muttered to himself, "Surely must."

Shaking himself as he stood up, the skulkrin pawed at all his bodily parts to make sure they were still there, then scuttled off into the murk of the forest.

Fawkrin moved swiftly, skipping over the crisp snow where the ground was even, dropping to all fours when fallen trees and stray boulders made a mountain range of the forest floor. For a few moments, he imagined he was a young skulkrin again, dancing alone and carefree through the white wilderness, but presently he remembered, stopped, and sniffed. The simmering breath of the trees steamed into his twitching nostrils, but then a different warmth mingled with the resinous gloam of the forest: man-warmth. The skulkrin shivered and sniffed again. There was another warmth there too—boy-warmth! His long tongue slavered out over his lips. A bite to eat would not go amiss.

Fawkrin found his quarry in a clearing. There was no fire, else he would have found them sooner, and the man and the boy were huddled under a makeshift roof of branches and ferns. Quiet as a snowfall, Fawkrin crept into the bivouac. He pawed around in his tunic and from the grubby depths he tugged out a small

pouch of matted fur. From it, the skulkrin poured a heap of glowing white dust into his palm which he quickly sprinkled over the sleeping faces of the humans. Even so, Fawkrin felt a frosty numbness gripping his fingers like a glove of ice.

He muttered to himself, "Rotten Doomdark magic. Could make magic that don't hurt Fawkrin, surely could." Then he shook his clawed little hand until he felt the blood trickle back, whimpering softly all the while.

It seemed that stars had fallen from the sky to settle on the faces of the man and the boy. One by one, each glinting speck faded and disappeared as the sleep-frost melted into their skin. Fawkrin waited until the last glimmer had died, then edged closer to the man. He sniffed at the man's tepid breath, his nose wrinkling and twitching as he tested its warmth and texture. Then he giggled in delight.

"Khlee-khlee-khlee! The great Lord Luxor! Khlee-khlee! Now He won't kick Fawkrin on his backside, surely not."

The skulkrin knelt down, brought his mouth close to Luxor's ear and in a mellow, soothing voice that seemed absurd from such a creature, he whispered. "Lord Luxor, great Lord Luxor, brave Lord Luxor, why have you come to the Forest of Shadows, tell me. Oh tell me where you are bound?"

Luxor stirred. Eyes still closed, his arm rose mechanically and his hand wavered toward the knife in his belt. The skulkrin scurried away with a squeak of terror but Luxor's arm fell back, lifeless, to the ground. Fawkrin crouched in the darkness a full minute before he found courage enough to crawl back to Luxor. In truth, even this was simply the courage of necessity, his fear of Doomdark reasserting itself over his fear of the warlord.

"Great Lord Luxor!" sang the skulkrin, "Tell me where you are bound!"

This time, Luxor did not stir. He spoke in a faint, weary murmur.

"I have been called by the Wise," he slurred, "I have been called to their Council at the Tower of the Moon, summoned."

"But why, tell me why?" crooned the skulkrin.

"The Solstice. Doomdark grows stronger yet. We must act. I know no more. The Wise keep their own counsel."

Fawkrin guessed this was the truth. Though a great warlord of the Free, even Luxor would not be privy to the secrets of the Wise.

"Bah! Great warlump. Might as well tell Doomdark the sun will rise tomorrow. Sore backside for Fawkrin."

Then a thought struck the skulkrin, and he grinned a jagged, twinkling grin.

"O great lord, how do you think of the Witchking? Is he not greater than you?" hissed the skulkrin.

"Doomdark is hag-spawn, a foul pestilence, a piece of scum adrift on the fair waters of Midnight. If he fought like a man, I would slay him in two breaths."

The skulkrin convulsed in tremendous giggles. Though he shivered at the thought of him, there was nothing more deliciously exciting than to hear him insulted. Suddenly a cold breath trickled down Fawkrin's neck. His laughter stopped just as suddenly and he clenched his hands together.

"I wasn't laughing, O Great One, oh no! Surely I wasn't."

Only silence and the gentle whisper of the trees was the reply. The skulkrin sighed and smiled crookedly.

"Silly skulkrin. Can't hurt you, can he?"

He swiveled round and turned to the sleeping boy. He sniffled at his face and shoulders and chest.

"Mmmm. Fresh! And so warm!" he declared.

Morkin was lying on his side, toward the skulkrin, with his bare forearm in front of his face. Fawkrin tugged another pouch from his tunic and poured some more white powder into his palm. Sparingly, he sprinkled it over the boy's arm. No melting glow could be seen for this time the white dust was more mundane; it was salt. Fawkrin opened his jaws wide and ducked eagerly forward.

Just as the skulkrin's fangs were about to sink into the morsel prepared, Morkin opened his eyes. Had the skulkrin been turned to ice, an event not unfamiliar to Doomdark's servants, he could not have stopped in mid-bite more swiftly. For half a moment, Fawkrin was at a loss and could only stare in amazement and terror. Then, a half moment more and his gaping bite had suddenly transformed itself into a broad grin.

"Hello, young sir!" the skulkrin gulped. He gulped again as a knife-point pressed sharply against his throat.

"If you so much as twitch, little furry one, you'll twitch no more. What's your business with us?" said Morkin.

"Nothing, young sir, nothing, surely. Fawkrin only seeks warmth and shelter. Gets fine hospitality too. Knife at his throat. Questioned like a criminal. Fine hospitality, surely."

"Oh!" said Morkin, mockingly, "Hospitality in your country stretches to becoming a meal for your guests. Fine hospitality that!"

"Oh no, young sir, oh no! Fawkrin is a good skulkrin. He would not eat such a fine, strong, handsome, *kind* boy."

"The salt, then, is for good luck, I suppose."

"So clever, young lord, surely. Yes, good luck. Course!"

"I ought to make your end now, but I fear you have worked some doomish spell on my Lord. He sleeps strangely and has not stirred. Wake him and I'll spare you your skin and bones."

"Only the light of day can do that, young sir," whimpered the skulkrin.

"You're lying, fur-thing!" said the boy angrily. He prodded the creature's throat with the knife-point. Fawkrin winced.

"It's dangerous, young sir, dangerous, surely."

"More so if you don't," said Morkin, prodding more firmly with the knife.

"I think, perhaps, I should try to wake him, young sir," squeaked the skulkrin.

With his knife hand, Morkin waved the creature toward Luxor. Fawkrin took yet another pouch from his tunic and waved it to and fro under Luxor's nose. Languidly, the man opened his eyes. For a moment, Morkin's gaze left the skulkrin. The skulkrin bit savagely at the boy and, instinctively, the boy lashed out with the skulkrin clamped to his hand. The creature crashed through the thin branches that sheltered them. His jaws dropped open at the shock of impact but his flight continued, out into the forest toward a particularly prickly clump of brambles. He scrambled to his feet and raced off northwards, plucking out thorns as he ran.

"Armor," he muttered glumly. "That's what Fawkrin needs, armor on his

bum. Rotten Doomdark magic. Don't even work on food. Fah!"

Morkin was gently shaking Luxor.

"Luxor, my Lord, are you hurt?"

"At peace, Morkin; I was only dreaming. What's amiss?"

"A furry creature was about to make a meal of my arm before I stopped it at knife-point. It had put you under a spell, my Lord."

"Did it speak?"

"Yes; it said it was a skulkrin."

"A skulkrin! Then Doomdark senses something. The skulkrin rarely comes so far south. Did you tell it anything, Morkin?"

"No my Lord, but it was speaking to you when I woke."

Luxor sat up and peered at the folds of the cloak where his head had lain. A few specks of glimmering dust lingered on the dark fabric.

"Sleep-frost! Morkin, did you kill it?"

Morkin shook his head.

"No, my Lord, it escaped."

"Come, we must ride! You did well enough to wake, though how you did that after sleep-frost I cannot fathom."

Luxor grasped Morkin's hand firmly. Morkin winced and Luxor felt the warm slick of blood.

"You're hurt, Morkin."

"It's only a bite, my Lord."

"A skulkrin bite turns foul in hours," said the man.

"Then must I cut it open and suck out the poison?"

Luxor laughed. "You listen to too many aletales, Morkin. No, a few leaves of sweetflame will clean the wound. We will ride now and gather some on the way, but we must find the skulkrin. If we do not, I fear Doomdark may get untimely warning that the Wise are awake."



Chapter Three

Corleth the Fey



Upon the forest hung a sparkling frost. The air was cold and thick. If a twig snapped it would crackle for miles around, but only the muted whisper of the trees could be heard. Above, the Moonstar hovered bright and clear in a deep dark sky. The Moon itself was not even a sliver, just a deeper darkness blotting out the glistening haze of the Roads of Light.

Near the forest's tangled heart lay a glade where the darkness moved strangely, dancing over the pale snow like mist in a squall. The skulkrin paused at the clearing's edge; though darkness was his daylight, this was beyond his ken. Nameless fears urged him to turn and run but his muscles would not move nor his eyes unfix themselves from the dancing shadows.

As he watched, his fears seemed to drift away as though they were just brief clouds that had enshrouded him and were now passing into the far, far distance. The skulkrin edged forward into the glade. He felt a beautiful, glowing glory shiver through him. He was completely bewildered; never, not even as a young skulkrin, had he been happy like this. Unaccountably, he felt good and kind and gentle.

The feeling gnawed at him like an aching tooth. In a daze, he wandered to the center of the glade, and as the shadows danced around him he peered up at the Moonstar. Its bright needles of light pierced him with wonder. His mind had never before grasped what beauty was and now the strange, intoxicating experience overwhelmed him. In a gentle, lilting voice, he began to sing a song he had never heard.

The forest filled with the skulkrin's fleeting song. The smaller creatures of the night, hearing only the deadly burr of a skulkrin, however well-disguised, fled to the burrows and nests. The larger creatures paused, as bewildered as the skulkrin itself, and then quickly passed on their way, suspecting some devious skulkrin trap.

Yet there was one who heard and understood. Waking himself easily from his walking sleep, Corleth the Fey turned and made his way toward the strange singer. His long, flowing strides carried him swiftly to the glade. There, at the edge of the clearing, Corleth stood and watched the tiny man-thing as it sang from the bottom of its ill-used heart.

In a soft, deep whisper, Corleth added his own voice to the refrain. Then, as if prompted, a breath of wind murmured through the trees, and the whole forest seemed to hum with joy.

Gradually the skulkrin's song shriveled to silence. The creature stirred from his dream and looked around himself. The dancing shadows had gone, but across the clearing he spotted a tall, dark figure clad in a cloak that seemed to

shimmer with stars. Corleth stepped foward, laughing gently.

"Now, little skulkrin, you know what it is to be a child of the earth, not just a spawn of the Ice Lord."

Fawkrin smiled foolishly. Not knowing what to say in reply, he scampered up to Corleth and stroked his cloak of midnight blue, gazing in wonder as tiny pinpricks of light glinted in the gaps between his fingers.

"Come, little skulkrin, tell me on what mischief you are bound!"

"None, my Lord," lied the skulkrin automatically. Then, having said so, he suddenly regretted it. A longing to be truthful stabbed so fiercely at him that he cried out with a squeal of pain. Even so, his skulkrin ways were not so easily abandoned, and the most he could bring himself to say was, "None of my own, Fey Lord."

"I need not ask whose," smiled Corleth.

The skulkrin shook his head slowly from side to side.

"I have been bad, my Lord, I sprinkled sleep-frost on the Lord Luxor and found out where he was bound. And the boy who served him . . . well, I was hungry . . . even skulkrin have to eat, my Lord. He was a nasty boy anyway. He prodded my throat with his knife."

Corleth's eyes lit with sudden anger. The skulkrin realized his mistake and babbled away in fearful haste.

"I only gave him a nip on the hand. I didn't eat him. He was a kind boy, a nice boy, surely he was," whined the skulkrin.

"Be at peace, little skulkrin," said Corleth, "To each his own way. I know, in truth, you are but a tool in the hand that made you."

The skulkrin began to fidget nervously.

"The Cold One will frostify me for sure. He sees thoughts, you know, sees thoughts. Can't escape him. Make me forget, Fey Lord, surely you can make me forget!"

The skulkrin looked up at Corleth with wide, pleading eyes. Corleth shook his head.

"I cannot save you from the beauty of the world. I can make you forget this forest, this glade, but you have tasted the sweetness of life, and that is beyond my powers to dispel. Besides, how could I bring myself to steal such a remembrance from you? Better kill you than cripple you again."

"Very kind of you, surely, but I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble," said the skulkrin.

Corleth laughed.

"You have a wry tongue, skulkrin. It may save you yet. Here, a small gift for you before I leave."

Into the skulkrin's hand, Corleth dropped a small amber crystal. The sphere lay in Fawkrin's palm like a tiny sun, glowing with its own soft and soothing light. The skulkrin gazed on it and smiled; he felt it was very precious. A single tear trickled down his cheek. No one had ever given him a gift before, and Fawkrin was sure this was peerless amongst all gifts that had ever been given.

"Thank you, my Lord!" he gasped and tore his gaze from the jewel to look at Corleth. Corleth was already disappearing into the dark of the forest.

"Wait, my Lord, wait!" cried the skulkrin.

A deep and distant voice called in reply, "Farewell little skulkrin, and begone swiftly; I suspect the wrath of the Lord Luxor will not be far behind you."

The skulkrin looked nervously around the glade, as if Luxor might burst out of the darkness at any moment. Then he clenched his fist tightly around the glowing heartstone and scurried to cover. Though he was fearful of his return to Ushgarak, return he must. This time, he had a glimmer of hope to comfort him, the marvelous discovery that there was another being in the world who cared about his fate.

Corleth did not resume his own journey but instead followed the skulkrin's old trail southward. It was a difficult path to follow if you were not a skulkrin, and Corleth made slow progress. At length, he emerged onto a forest road. His eyes quickly scoured the width of the pathway for hoofprints and finding none, he smiled to himself, seated himself on a nearby tree trunk and waited.

It was not long before the riders he expected appeared. Luxor slowed his horse to a trot and approached Corleth with his sword drawn. Corleth stood and smiled.

"What's your business, tall one?" said Luxor.

"I know a skulkrin who shows me more courtesy than that," laughed Corleth.

Morkin reined in beside Luxor and drew his sword swiftly from its scabbard.

"He must be one of Doomdark's, my Lord," hissed the boy, in what he imagined was a whisper, "Let *me* slay him."

Corleth laughed again, a long langorous laugh that rolled through the night air like a gentle mist.

"You may try, Morkin, if you wish," said Corleth. He tugged a cord at his neck and the cloak of midnight blue fell away from him, revealing a shirt of mail so finely woven it seemed like a skin of silver. Corleth rested his hand on the hilt of his sword and waited. Morkin looked astonished, but nevertheless he frowned and bared his teeth in an attempt to look grim and fearsome, and urged his horse toward Corleth.

As Morkin's sword scythed down, Corleth stepped lightly aside and caught the boy's wrist in his hand. Both Morkin and his sword tumbled into the snow. At once, Morkin scrambled toward his dropped weapon, but Corleth was quicker. He took up the sword and held its point against the boy's chest.

"I will not yield," blurted out Morkin, red and angry, "You must kill me first!"

"Then it seems I must yield, for I would not kill you," said Corleth. Then he reversed the sword and handed it, hilt first, to the boy.

Morkin jumped to his feet and held the sword uncertainly against Corleth's shining shirt of mail.

"Will you give quarter, young knight?" asked Corleth with only a hint of a smile breaking on his lips.

"Only if you give your word that you will not try to escape," answered Morkin.

"Luxor, my friend, you have a bold squire!" laughed Corleth.

"Friend?" said Morkin.

"Friend, indeed," said Luxor, striding up beside Morkin. "We fought side by side on the Plains of Blood in the last war against Doomdark. I did not recognize him at first, but this is Corleth the Fey. This prisoner of yours will fetch a hefty ransom, Morkin!"

Morkin dropped the point of his sword to the ground and turned toward Luxor, his face burning.

"How was I to know that? You let me make a fool of myself."

Luxor placed his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"No, Morkin, Corleth was testing your spirit; it is better to know your comrade's mettle before the real battle begins, is it not?"

"And you made no fool of yourself," added Corleth. "You did what any true warrior would."

Morkin frowned and sheathed his sword. "Truly?" he asked.

"Truly," said Luxor. Morkin beamed with pleasure. He turned to Corleth.

"You fought quite well too, my Lord," he said, magnanimously. Then the man and the boy and the Fey all laughed together.

Morkin lent his horse to Corleth and sat afore Luxor as they rode north along the forest road. Luxor did not wish to lose more time than necessary and didn't mention the matter of the skulkrin until they were on their way. When he did relate the tale, Corleth remained silent until Luxor had finished. Then, at last, he spoke.

"I met this skulkrin but an hour past," said Corleth.

"Why did you not say?" asked Luxor incredulously. "We must find it and silence it."

"At peace, my friend; you must give some quarter even to skulkrin. Are they not creatures of flesh and blood? His only crime is knowledge, and you cannot slay him for that alone. Who knows? Perhaps he will not tell Doomdark of his knowledge."

"Perhaps snow is not cold," said Luxor bitterly.

"Perhaps it is not," said Corleth. "Would you believe that I found this skulkrin in a glade of shadows, singing his heart out to the Moonstar? Would you believe that he told me truly of his deeds this night? Would you believe that when I made him a gift of a heartstone, a tear rolled down his cheek?"

"If any but you had told me, I would not," said Luxor.

"Then believe me when I say we must let him live and find his own destiny. If we do not, why are we fighting Doomdark?"

"Yes, you are right, my friend," said Luxor wearily. Then he added darkly, "The cold wears me down."

"Your heart is strong enough. Believe that too," smiled Corleth.

Luxor fell silent, remembering earlier days when they had ridden together across the lands of Midnight with cares that seemed as light as falling snow. He hoped his heart was strong enough. Then hearing the gentle snoring of Morkin asleep before him, Luxor seemed to hear all the peoples of the Free slumbering innocently while incomprehensible dangers gathered about them and knew he *must* be strong. He shrugged the coldness from him and rode on toward the Tower of the Moon a little more gladly.

Chapter Four

The Tower of the Moon

Dawn approached stealthily, running swift fingers of light over the Lands of Midnight. Far to the east, it touched the grim Keep of Utarg with a brief golden haze; the Targ sentries yawned and looked around only to see if the next watch approached to relieve them. The dawn moved on, trembling over the Downs of Athoril, cloaking them in scarlet and saffron. The hills which had seemed hunched herds of vast menacing creatures in the absence of light, seemed now to draw apart and unfold.

The daylight spread farther westward, painting the Plains of Dawn first crimson, then amber, then a deep glowing yellow so that they looked, for a fleeting moment, as they did at any noon of the Long Summer, clad in wheaten gold. In lonely hamlets scattered across the broad plains, villagers stirred and smiled to see the warmth of daylight return, then bent themselves to their daily tasks.

Over the Forest of Thrall sped the hand of the Sun, shooting bright arrows of light into the sepulchral darkness of the trees, and then farther west to caress the sheer walls and tall towers of the Citadel of Shimeril. As the first blaze of sunlight fell into the Courtyard of the Kings, the great horn sang out over the city. Twelve times the great horn bellowed its simple fanfare, a short, deep boom followed by a longer, more strident note. A-wake, a-wake, it sang and then fell silent. The city roused itself dreamily, with creakings of shutters, rattling of doors, and the growing murmur of feet on its cobbled streets.

The dawn did not linger but hurried on its endless journey, ever westward, ever westward till the world ceased to spin. Across the Plains of Blood it shed its own, brighter blood. What men moved there shivered in reluctant remembrance and did not pause to gaze upon the colors of the sunrise. Then, at last, the light grazed the edges of the Forest of Shadows, rose up and flew over a sea of mist-wrapped trees to touch the high stones of the Tower of the Moon.

From its crowning dome of Looking-Crystal, Rorthron was watching. Through the mists of the forest, he saw a wind of light blow away the darkness and speed toward him over the leagues and leagues of trees. And though he would not have cared to count how many dawns he had watched from his solitary post, he smiled as he always did when the sun rose in full glory over the green rim of the forest.

Rorthron turned and looked to the west where the light still advanced inexorably upon the dark army of trees. He sighed. Such a brief summer this starved Sun brought each day. He had been not much more than a boy at the height of the Long Summer. Then, the great disk of the Sun seemed to fill the sky; a day seemed to stretch forever as the languid hours glided by; and people

sought cool shade, not crackling fires. It did not seem ten thousand moons ago.

Rorthron shook his head as if to deny that the Long Summer had ever existed. He roused himself from his memories and set his gaze beyond the horizon. He looked first to the north, to Ushgarak, the eye of his mind not seeing pictures but instead absorbing a crowd of thoughts that clamored in the far, far distance.

There was much commotion in the great Citadel. Men, and fouler creatures, were preparing themselves for war. The captains of Doomdark were tallying supplies, marshaling their war-bands, bustling to and fro in the Winter Palace with last-minute orders and requisitions. Their thoughts were only of victory; already they were exultant at the havoc they would wreak, the vast slaughter that lay at their command.

The lesser minions of the Witchking were less sanguine. Though they too had no doubt of the final victory, they knew equally that they might not be granted the privilege of enjoying it, knew that their lives were the coinage of war to be spent wantonly as their cold master decreed. Some were filled with disgust at themselves that their weakness and abject fear had brought them to this fighting in the service of the Loathsome Doomdark. Others, more pragmatic, simply counted themselves lucky that they, at least, had a chance to survive while the enemies of the Cold One most certainly did not. And there were some, of course, who despite their fears for their own wretched lives took comfort in the knowledge that soon they would be reaping a rich harvest of death and pain across the battlefields of Midnight and nourished their uncertain courage with lurid visions of rape and pillage.

Rorthron turned away. He had seen nothing he had not expected to see, yet still it filled him with infinite sadness to see the people and creatures of Midnight used thus. The Wise had failed. So long ago, in the very dawn of the world, his race had been charged with its guardianship. Now, their complacent folly had allowed this to happen, and all they could bring themselves to do was to lock themselves securely in their towers and choose to forget that the world still existed beyond the high stones.

At length, Rorthron turned his mind gaze southeast to Corelay and the Citadel of Xajorkith. There was a different commotion; children laying in the streets, wagoners foddering their horses, market-sellers calling out to early customers, inn-keepers pouring the first ale of the morning into great jugs, blacksmiths stoking their forges. The city was at peace, its people content. And if there were vague fears for the future itching in the depths of men's minds, they were forgotten in the brightness of morning, each dawn a new hope, a new beginning.

One day from the Solstice, Corelay still had an air of summer about it. The sadness lifted a little from Rorthron's thoughts. While Corelay was free, there was still hope and goodness in the world, and he must bend all his powers to preserve it. Rorthron walked briskly to the stairway and descended from his eyrie to greet the riders approaching out of the Forest of Shadows.

Luxor, Corleth, and Morkin were greeted warmly by Rorthron. They bathed first after their long journey and then joined Rorthron for breakfast in the High Hall. A blazing fire was burning the the great stone fireplace, and they sat

before it with Rorthron to eat and drink. There were many tales to be told, but as the day grew older, Luxor turned to more serious matters.

"When does the Council begin, Rorthron? Surely, there is much to discuss."

"My friend, it has already begun. I am guilty of a little deceit; no others of the Wise will stir themselves. They think I am a foolish old man with a hopeless dream and will have no part in the coming war against Doomdark. They wait for better times, as if better times will appear by magic out of nowhere," said Rorthron.

"This cannot be so!" cried Luxor, aghast.

"It *is* so, my friend. I *am* the Last Council of the Wise."

Corleth laughed. "Then at least we can hope for unanimous decisions. Besides, one of you, Rorthron, is worth a score of the rest. We should not be troubled when the hopeless desert us."

Rorthron smiled gratefully, Luxor nodded his reluctant acceptance of the truth, and their talk turned to Midnight and the realms of the Free. In the east, the Targ still preserved a fiery independence. The Utarg of Utarg would suffer none to cross his lands, Free or Fey or Foul, and though the Witchking was known to have sent embassies to him, only one ambassador had been returned, flayed alive. To the north of the Plains of Targ, Kumar had not been invaded for many moons. On its northern borders, the Forest of Whispers had swallowed many a doomish war band and to the west the Marshal of Kumar kept a strong watch on the Mountains of Thrall.

West of the Targ, Marakith remained free, though war bands had been spotted on the western plains scurrying for the cover of the Forest of Thrall. Further west, the Plains of Blood had become a dangerous place for the lonely traveler, though still passable by a strong troop. The Marshal of Shimeril sent frequent raiding parties north into the plains. Many of the Foul had been slain, but with each passing day their strength grew and the Gap of Valethor could no longer be reached without an army to clear the way.

Around the Forest of Shadows itself, there was little to be seen of Men, Foul or Free, yet further south on the Plains of Gard, Doomdark kept a strong raiding band that had even ventured to the walls of the Citadel of Gard. Of all the lands of Midnight, only Corelay remained untouched by Doomdark's cold hand.

None of them doubted that Doomdark would deploy his main strength on the plains of Valethor and once again attempt to force a passage south across the Plains of Blood. To the east, the Mountains of Ithril were too formidable a barrier for the numberless armies of the Witchking to be supplied across, let alone to march across. To the west, the bleak passage between the Mountains of Ashimar and Dodrak was too narrow a road for him to risk.

But could they hold Doomdark this time on the Plains of Blood, as they had done so many times before? If not, Doomdark could choose from many roads after gaining the Plains; he could strike out at his leisure in any direction, and the armies of the Free would be caught running to one breach after another. Luxor was not hopeful.

"Doomdark is too strong. How can we hope to hold him now on the Plains of Blood when we so barely succeeded the last time?"

"Perhaps we should not try," said Corleth. "If we let him move his hordes onto

the Plains of Blood and further south if necessary, that would leave the way open for us to strike at Ushgarak itself."

"To do that, we would need to pass through the Gap of Valethor ourselves," said Luxor. "We could not do that with Doomdark camped on the Plains."

Have you forgotten Ithron, my friend? Is not the citadel of Ithron still free?" asked Corleth.

"Tenuously so," said Rorthron. "The Marshal of Ithron is sorely pressed."

"From Ithron we could strike north without the Mountains of Ithril to block our way, then turn west at Droonhenge and approach Ushgarak by its back door."

"And what of the Marakith and Shimeril and Corelay? Are we to leave them defenseless in the face of Doomdark while we ride off on a hopeless sortie? No, Corleth, I will not do that," shouted Luxor.

"Is it any less hopeful than defending the Plains of Blood? Either way, all may be lost, but if we should take Ushgarak, Doomdark would be finished."

"At what price?" asked Luxor, angrily.

Rorthron got to his feet and stood before them.

"At peace, my friends. All ways are perilous but we must not exclude any if we are to defeat Doomdark. His greatest weapon is fear and confusion. We must not think that any task is hopeless—and it is not! Even Doomdark was once flesh and blood. Now he is more ice and water, how much easier should it be to defeat him?" said Rorthron, smiling benignly.

Luxor was still bitter. "I know you are not senile yet, Rorthron. If your words are meant to comfort us, they are ill-chosen."

"Perhaps you need more than words," said Rorthron calmly. He reached out his hand toward Luxor and opened it out, palm upwards. "Perhaps you need this."

There, in the palm of the Wise, lay a ring of red gold into which was set a single jewel, as round and smooth as a pearl but of a clear, sparkling blue that flashed and flickered like lightning.

"I have rings already, Rorthron."

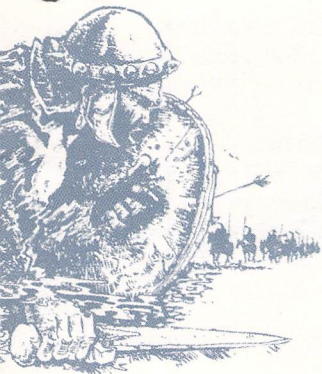
"Not one like this, my friend," laughed Corleth. Luxor looked curiously at Corleth, wondering what joke this could possibly be.

"I never thought to see it. I'll wager no Man or Fey has seen it in our lifetimes. Luxor, this is the Moon Ring, the last of the Great war Rings of Midnight!"

Luxor turned his gaze again to Rorthron's palm and looked in wonder at the legendary ring that lay there. The mists of despair that had clung to his thoughts for many moons seemed to clear and fade away as he watched. Beside him, Morkin was craning his neck so far forward to get a better view that he almost fell off his seat. Luxor looked up at Rorthron.

"You know I cannot take this, Rorthron, it is not my right."

"Forgive me, Luxor," said Rorthron, "I have kept this from you too long, but with good reason. You are not simply Lord Luxor the Free, you are the last heir of the House of the Moon. You, my Lord Luxor, are the Moonprince and this ring is yours by right, to be worn only in circumstances of gravest peril. Once slipped on your finger, it cannot be removed until you are dead or the peril has passed. It will give you the Power of Command and the Power of Vision over those lords and subjects loyal to you, even at great distances. With the Power of Vision you



will be able to see through their eyes what they see. With the Power of Command you will be able to urge them to undertake any task they would willingly perform for you. And more than this, it will echo the warmth and strength of your mind and send forth a tide of hope across the cold lands of Midnight. It is yours. Take it, and use it with care."

Rorthron the Wise stepped forward and dropped the Moon Ring into Luxor's hand. Luxor was quite speechless for a while. Then, at length, he spoke.

"Thank you, Rorthron the Wise; this is a gift beyond gifts. Yet I do not understand why you have kept all this from me so long. Surely, in the last war against Doomdark, this ring would have been a help beyond price?"

"Yes, Luxor, it surely would, but the Wise have their reasons. The Solstice is the peak of Doomdark's power. Defeat him before that, and he will return as surely as the snow will fall. Defeat him at the pinnacle of his power, and he will never return, never blight the lands of Midnight again with his foul schemes. Nor could I tell any of your true ancestry for fear that Doomdark would gain the knowledge too and hunt you down like vermin. Even now, he suspects nothing and when the morrow comes, the Solstice itself, he will expect all its glory for himself. From Ushgarak will issue forth an ice-fear the like of which has never been seen, rolling its terror across Midnight like a plague. Tomorrow, at dawn, you must don the Moon Ring and send a blaze of hope winging across the land, melting his ice-fear, stabbing him with a shock that a warmth still exists that can resist him and filling him with doubt. Then you must ride swiftly to Corelay and rally all the peoples of the Free to your banner. You must challenge Doomdark everywhere; leave one pathway unguarded, one chink open, and a flood will pour through. The Moon Ring itself will lend you the power to guide the forces of the Free, and under your guidance they will march against Doomdark as one. "The Captains of Cold will be blind compared to those whose way is lit by the War Ring of the House of the Moon."

"And a plan?" asked Luxor, "Are we not to have a battle plan?"

Corleth grasped Luxor's arm firmly.

"Of course, Luxor," he said, "But don't you see? This time, this war, the Moon Ring lends us the power to change our plans at a moment's notice. No longer must we stake all upon a single throw."

"Yes, of course," mused Luxor, still dazed at his new-found inheritance.

"There is one matter we have not yet considered," said Rorthron, a note of warning thrumming in his voice.

"What is that, Wise One?" prompted Corleth.

"The Ice Crown."

Even Corleth seemed to pale at its mention. Morkin tugged gently at Luxor's sleeve and whispered a question to him. Rorthron smiled and turned to the boy.

"Fashioned of the purest, coldest crystals of ice, forged in the Frozen Wastes on the bleakest of nights by Doomdark himself, the Ice Crown is the source of all his power, for it enables him to suck from the heart of the Winter all the bitter forces of cold and bend them to his will. He keeps it in the Tower of Doom, north of Ushgarak across the Plains of Despair. Few have seen it and lived, yet all have felt its bitter touch."

"Do you think we could seize it?" asked Luxor. New hope had dawned in him now, and he could almost begin to believe that even such a desperate folly as this might succeed.

"I think we must try," said Rorthron. "If we succeed and destroy it, Doomdark's power will be shattered. Even if we fail, the attempt will distract him and thus help our armies to prevail."

"We cannot spare more than a few for such a perilous task," said Luxor.

"No, indeed. And no more than one for the final journey to the Tower of Doom, one who can resist the ice-fear that streams from it as sunlight streams from the sun. It is your choice, Moonprince.

"I cannot lay such a task on another's shoulders. I must go myself."

"Bravely said," said Rorthron. "But that cannot be; the Moon Ring throws forth mindwarmth—that is its boon and its bane. Doomdark would sense your presence before you got within fifty leagues of the Ice Crown. You must choose another. I would go *myself*, but the Wise have too much knowledge of each other; I could not hide myself from Doomdark any more than he can hide himself from me.

"Then there is only Corleth," said Luxor reluctantly. "No other than he can resist the ice-fear at its coldest, no other that I know of."

Luxor turned to Corleth. The Fey looked troubled. He turned his eyes away from Luxor, then rose silently and wandered toward the colonade that circled the High Hall. He stopped by a slender column and gazed out through the Looking-Crystal over the Forest of Shadows. The others remained silent, waiting for him to decide. After a long while, Corleth returned and stood before them all in front of the great fire. His eyes were heavy and his face drawn.

"There is another," he said. "One stronger than I could ever be in the face of the ice-fear."

"Then who?" asked Luxor, puzzled and frustrated by the riddles of the Fey.

"If I could keep this from you, my friend Luxor, I would, but in truth I cannot. The old songs say that one will be born, half-fey, half-human, whom the ice-fear cannot touch; armoured with the laughter and lightness of the Fey and the wild fire of Men, the ice-fear will roll from him like drops of rain in a summer shower."

Corleth paused, and his eyes glazed over as he tried to imagine what such a summer, what such a shower would be like. Then he blinked and forced himself to continue.

"My Lord, my friend, Luxor, Moonprince—he sits beside you!"

The fey bent his head and gazed at the floor; he could not bring himself to look Luxor in the eye. The silence was profound.

"Me?" whispered Morkin. "How can it be me?"

Corleth lifted his head and turned his deep eyes toward the boy.

"Tell me what you know of your father and mother, Morkin," said the Fey gently. The boy looked startled.

"I know nothing, my Lord. I was only a babe when my Lord Luxor found me, while hunting boar in the Forest of Thimrath. He gathered me up and took me home and cared for me, as he has cared for me ever since; he has been like a father to me all my life."

Corleth smiled and looked up toward the distant ceiling of the High Hall.

"It was many moons ago," he said. "We had prevailed over the foul hordes of Doomdark on the Plains of Blood, but the price was heavy. Many were slain, more were shattered in mind by the last tide of ice-fear he sent against us. After the battle, a host of our faithful warriors wandered lost and demented across the bloody fields, their hearts empty, their minds full of horror. There were so many that those who had survived unscathed could not hope to find them all before they took their own path to peace or simply wasted away in the cold, bitter nights."

"Such a man, wounded to the quick in body and mind, found his way into the depths of the Forest of Thrall. It was there, exhausted and close to death, that one of the Fey, the fair Aleisha, found him. She dragged him on a trestle of branches to her tree-home and there she nursed him to health again. As his strength grew, so did his enchantment with Aleisha and so did her enchantment with him."

"When he was fully strong again, his mind healed by her comfort and words of peace, his body mended by her subtle, feyish skills, they made their love complete. Yet Aleisha was troubled. She knew their love, however strong, could not last, for he was a mortal Man and she a Fey. She said nothing to him but let the days and nights of their love linger on until she could bear it no longer. Then, gathering all her courage, she freed his mind of every memory of her, not wishing him to bear the pain of their impossible love. She led him to the southern edge of the Forest of Thrall and watched him dwindle into the distance as he walked out across the Plains of Iserath toward the Mountains of Morning and his distant home."

"Some moons later Aleisha bore a child, a rare child, his child as well as hers. Her delight almost overwhelmed the pain of parting, but even in this moment of joy she thought only of him. Out of love had she made him forget, yet she knew she would not forego her own memories, however painful. She was determined that he, too, should keep something of the harvest of their love. And so, barely a moon later, she journeyed south with her babe across Iserath and Rorath to the borders of Corelay."

"How many times had he told her of hunts he rode in the Forest of Timrath, how many times had he pictured in her mind its winding paths and gentle glades. She *knew* where he would be. As dawn approached, she listened for the hoofbeats of his horse and when she was sure, she bundled the babe in warm furs and laid him by the path. She dared not linger for fear that she would cry out as he approached and run to his arms. So, with a parting kiss for her child, she turned back to the north, never to see her son or her lover again."

"That son was you, Morkin. Your father is my friend, Luxor."

Rorthron the Wise sniffed loudly and dabbed at his eyes with the long sleeves of his gown. Luxor, for the second time that morning, was dumbfounded. But Morkin, brimming with joy, leapt to his feet and flung his arms around the Moonprince.

"You always have been and now it's true," he said. In some confusion, Luxor smiled and returned his son's embrace.

"It is all I could wish, Morkin," he said, then added, "Save that all secrets were as happy as this when revealed—and revealed sooner."

Suddenly, Morkin whirled round on Corleth.

"Yes! Why did you keep this secret from . . . from my father? You are his friend."

"And yours, too, Morkin. The Fey have long suspected that the House of the Moon still survived. The Wise are not the only guardians of knowledge. I could not be sure until today when Rorthron held forth the Moon Ring, but since I have known him, I have harbored a secret hope that your father was the Moonprince. I did know, as Rorthron did, that Doomdark suspected nothing. To have revealed your kinship would have placed you both in double jeopardy as it does even now. My words may yet be your death, Morkin, I pray you will forgive me. These are dark times."

Morkin looked subdued.

"I suppose you did right, my Lord Corleth. It is I who should be sorry, not you," he said grudgingly. "I *hate* Doomdark. He spoils everything."

"He does indeed, Morkin, my well-named son," said Luxor. "Corleth the Fey, you have given me a hard choice. How can I send a boy, even if he is my own son, on such a perilous quest? He may be able to scorn the ice-fear—that I can well believe—but there are many other dangers on the road to the Tower of Doom."

It was Morkin who answered first.

"You *must* send me, Father. If you do not, Midnight might be lost anyway and then what would become of me?"

"The boy is right," said Rorthron. "We must take every chance. It has come to that."

Luxor nodded slowly. He clasped Morkin's hand.

"If *you* will it Morkin, seek the Ice Crown and attempt its destruction. I will not send you, but you may go if you wish."

There was fire in the boy's voice and a gladness shining in his eyes.

"Of course I will go, Father! Don't wish me luck; it's Doomdark who will need it!"



Chapter Five The Solstice

It was a strange dawn. The Sun seemed reluctant to shake off the shackles of night and soar over the rim of the world. When it did, the rays it sent spinning across Midnight seemed cold and pallid. From the north a frozen mist was seeping over the hills and forests and plains, and the dawn was silent, the air empty of birds, the earth untrodden by the chattering creatures of day. Even to Corelay the coldness spread, and a nameless chill gripped men's hearts as they rose to greet the new day. Old warriors, in dread, whispered of Doomdark, for they had been touched like this before, but the rest simply shivered and tried, with small success, to shrug off their unreasoning fear.

This was only the vanguard of the ice-fear that gathered in the north. Around Ushgarak, the mist was so thick and high that the city still lay in darkness, though the rest of Midnight was bathed in light. Then, like a storm driven by the winds of the tall sky, the great mist began to roll south over the Plains of Despair. Even Doomdark's creatures quailed and shivered as it passed. The mist fanned out as it moved ever southward, but it did not seem to thin or diminish; rather, it grew thicker and taller as it devoured the waking landscape.

From the Tower of the Moon, Luxor the Moonprince rode out to meet the dawn. At one side of him rode Morkin, his face eager and shining with the fire the dawn seemed to lack. At the other side rode Corleth the Fey, a hint of unbidden laughter playing round his lips. Luxor turned first to Corleth.

"My friend, we must part now, but I will be with you. I know your people are loathe to fight but this is more than a war of Men. Ride north to the forests of the Fey and gather those you can to our banner; we will have need of you and all your kin before this war is done."

"The Fey will fight, my Lord Moonprince, though at times you may not notice how. I will raise more than a war-band. I promise you. Fare thee well, my friend."

Then the Moonprince turned to his son. He placed his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"This parting has come too soon, I fear your task may be the hardest of all, Morkin; take no risk without need. You risk enough already."

"Have no fear, Father. I will return. You risk more than I, and it is you who should take care; do not orphan me again."

Luxor smiled.

"I will try not to! Farewell, my son."

The Moonprince turned to the southeast toward Corelay. He took the Moon Ring and slipped it on his finger. In his mind, the distant murmur of battle seemed to grow, and a warm fire burned in his blood. Suddenly, the horizon seemed to expand and fly away into the distance as into his mind flooded all the

hopes and fears of the peoples of the Free. He drew his sword from its scabbard and held it aloft, then spurred his white stallion toward the Forest of Shadows and distant Corelay.

"Arise, Midnight!" he called as he rode, "Arise the Free! Peril and doom lie at our gates. Waken your valor, arm yourselves with courage! We ride to conquer Doomdark forever! Arise Midnight, arise!"

His war cry rang out across the still dawn, flying over forests and hills, whispering over the plains. In the distant citadels of the free, in Ithorn, in Marakith, in Shimeril, in Kumar and in Gard and in Xajorkith, men paused and looked about themselves, imagining they heard a faint echo whose words they couldn't quite catch yet which quickened their hearts and made their blood race.

Then, as if swept away by a sudden wind, though the air stayed as still as the mountains, the dour mist that lay over Midnight vanished northward, shrinking back toward Ushgarak. The full dawn broke suddenly over the land, showering in a blaze of warmth and light. A wave of hope rippled outward from the Forest of Shadows across the country of the Free to far Corelay to the Plains of Dawn, to the Mountains of Morning, warming chill hearts and bringing a glimmer of gladness to Midnight that had too long been absent.

In the Winter Palace of Ushgarak, the frozen mist that should have been flowing out in an endless stream was rushing back in. Doomdark flailed his arms through it as it thickened about him.

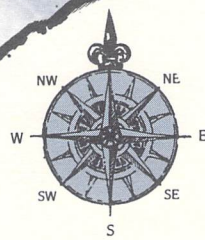
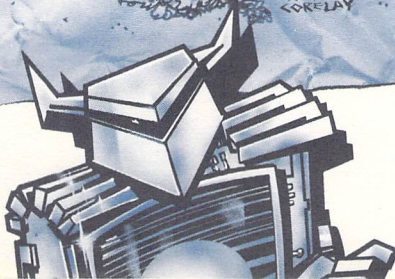
"Back!" he cried. "Back! Fly out, *out!*"

It was to no avail. The ice-fear rushed homeward and sank back into his cold flesh. When all had returned and the air cleared, there was worse; a warmth, an inexplicable warmth seemed to touch his mind. The Witchking grimaced. He had almost forgotten what pain was like. A spore of doubt buried itself in his thoughts and like a canker, began to grow.

"A Moonprince?" he mused. "No! It cannot be."

But far to the south, already Luxor the Moonprince sped through the Forest of Shadows to rally Corelay and the Free. The War of the Solstice had begun.

ap of M



BEYOND



Mindscape, Inc.
3444 Dundee Road
Northbrook, IL 60062

00938