

Celestial Warrior:  
The Spiritual Quest of a Skunk Named Fenther

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## Preface

The skunk was dressed in military leathers, and wore no metal armor. The patch on his left shoulder was a simple one: a square with a small star centered at the bottom. He wore no rank and he was doing what few of his race ever did: he was running as fast as he could away from an enemy.

Thousands of years ago, it was rumored that some of his race could release a stinging poison on their enemies, one that smelled terrible, even to his own kind. This defense made them intent on standing their ground. Now that the race no longer had that to help them, it was instinct alone that caused them to not run no matter what the danger.

But the scout was not running to save himself alone. He stopped briefly and grabbed hold of a tree branch while he caught his breath. A few fast heartbeats later, he was running again, bursting from the forest into an open plain.

The outpost was close to him now. He could see its stone walls looking a dull yellow-red from the dusk that was coming. Soldiers stationed on the walls spotted him as soon as he came into sight and he knew that archers would be alerted.

“At least they will have something to wake them a little before the flood comes,” the scout thought gruesomely.

A sergeant and corporal were standing at the gate. Their clean and tight uniforms and fur making the scout look like he’s been out in the wild for months rather than weeks. They crossed their pikes as he approached. “Stand your ground, or show your cowardice,” the sergeant yelled.

“I need to just keep running please, sergeant,” the scout said, not sure what the answering password to the challenge was.

Apparently their god was smiling on him that day, because one word must have been the right one. The pikes uncrossed and he was allowed to enter. The sergeant of the guard met him on the other side of the gate.

“Halsiph!” he barked. “You slacker. You know you were supposed to be out for another two days.”

Without even trying to catch his breath Halsiph gasped out. “S.A.L.U.T.E. report for the general. Urgent.”

“You came off the line just give a report a little early...” the sergeant began, but the scout continued.

“A group of wolves, roughly the size of a corp is marching directly towards the outpost and are about a half day’s march from here now. I was able to identify at least three different divisions present: their second, twelfth, and fourteenth

divisions. Also a command section I’m not familiar with. I sighted them last night at about half to nine. They have armor.” With that said Halsiph collapsed to the ground, his feet no longer able to support him.

The sergeant knew then that the new recruit wasn’t shamming. “I must have heard you wrong, Haliph.” he said as lifted the scout from off the ground and started taking him towards in the infirmary. “A corp, with armor?”

His head swinging back and forth and barely able to continue to speak, Halsiph’s training took over and allowed him to give the report again, the words flowing from him because his body and mind were conditioned to respond. Conscious actions were no longer possible. “Size: Corp. Activity: Marching. Location: half a day’s march by now. Units: second, twelfth, fourteenth divisions, plus higher support. Time: last night. Equipment: longbows, spears, primitive swords, and armor.

The sergeant’s face looked pale, despite the exertion he was under. “Rest Halsiph.” He said calmly. “The general will get your message.”

The scout stopped struggling as the sergeant entered infirmary and set Halsiph down on a nearby empty bed. “Lieutenant.” he barked at a nearby officer. He meant no disrespect, but he was in a hurry. The lieutenant came over by the bed and saw the scout laying there unconscious. She immediately began checking his pulse and breathing, not even asking the sergeant a single question.

The sergeant didn’t wait to find out if she’d eventually have one. He walked quickly from the infirmary and crossed to the command center. A younger captain wearing glasses sat behind a desk just inside. “Can I help you sergeant?” he asked with an almost nasal voice.

Training kicked back in smoothly and the sergeant stood straight to address the officer. “Sir, I have important news from one of our scouts. I must get it to the general as quickly as possible.”

The captain looked down at his calendar. It was almost time to go home, and this looked like a serious delay in his quitting time. “You can come in tomorrow at 1.” he said.

The sergeant was much too well trained to roll his eyes. “Sir, a corp of wolves in armor is about a half day’s march from this outpost.”

The captain’s jaw dropped and he stood and motioned for the sergeant to follow him.

The general’s office wasn’t very large. There wasn’t room at the outpost for any officer to have much space, even the commanding officer. The older skunk with immaculate leather’s stopped reading the file in front of him as soon as the two

other skunks entered.

He listened carefully to everything the sergeant said and asked now questions. The information was concise enough. As soon as he'd heard the report, he began speaking rapidly, in the tense and clipped language of the military.

"Move Brigade one to positions on our east flank and brigade two to the west flank. Have them span the range and dig in for archers. Raise the alert in the town and get those civilians out of there. Use the support battalion to escort them back."

The sergeant saluted and turned crisply, intent on following the orders he'd just received. From behind him the voice of the captain asked, "Sir, don't we stand a better chance staying in the fortress?"

"You're fooling yourself captain. If the wolves are moving a force that large, they aren't going to waste it on this outpost if they can avoid it. We must slow them down."

## Chapter One

To a child, lightning at night is one extreme or the other. Most often it's a terror, but some rare children find it beautiful rather than terrifying. Fenthall was a rare child. He often stood at the window to watch the night-time storms that frequently and harmlessly passed through the mountain village where he lived. The displays of light fascinated him deeply and the noise seemed like added bass to the music of the wind.

Lightning flashed far away. Fenthall knew it would be awhile before he heard the thunder, if at all, because the lightning had illuminated the mountain peak that normally framed their window. It was unusual to see the mountain that way: framed with a glowing light instead of with the blue sky. The peak stood north of their village, and as the youngster understood it was the furthest north that any of his people lived.

Having watch storms before, the seeing the mountain afire as it seemed, was not a new experience. Yet, something about seeing it on this particular night made it different to Fenthall. Something inside his mind sparked as though it had been struck rather than the mountain and questions began pouring into the child's mind.

He started to turn toward's his mother who was readying supper, a mash of vegetables and meat that the little one had, up until this singular moment, been anxiously awaiting. Before he'd even finished facing her, the question was out of his mouth, “Mama, what's past those mountains?”

Lightning flashed it's brief and pleasant light over the house, making the oil lamp on the dinner table seem too dim to see by. All three of the skunks in the household stood frozen for a moment: Fenthall, his father, Malek, and his mother, Faemar. The light flickered briefly from the lamp and time seemed to resume.

Fenthall's mother made an odd swish with her tail and continued to move towards the table as though time had been going normally for her always. “Nothing Fenthall,” she responded pleasantly. “Bring chairs for supper.”

The small cabin where the family lived had limited chairs, although Fenthall was never sure why. If they could own as many books as they did, why couldn't they own more than three chairs? He turned to his task obediently, but again time seemed to freeze. This time it wasn't the lightning, but rather the voice of Malek that seemed to make it happen.

Fenthall felt a small amount of fear deep within him. There was something different about tonight, something that weighed heavily on each action the family took. Malak's deep voice complemented the distant rolling thunder. “Don't lie to

him, Ma. He needs to know sometime.”

His mother’s voice seemed again to ignore the jolts in time as she replied quickly, more quickly and harshly than she usually did to Malek. “He’s too young.”

Again to the young skunkling, it appeared as though time was stopped and he looked back and forth between his parents. His mother had a soft face, framed entirely by a long flow of white hair, that allowed her facial fur to fall as though there was no other way for it to fall. Fenthall, like most children think of their mothers, thought that she was the most beautiful person in the world.

Malek was a tower of black and white strength and power. He had just arrived home for the evening and still wore his blackened iron breastplate, the only metal armor Fenthall had ever seen his father wear. He had large eyebrows and harsh lines to his face that made his facial fur look like it was at odds with itself at certain points. Normally as he gathered the chairs, his mother would help Malek out of the breastplate.

Tonight though was different. Everything about it was suddenly different. Fenthall always obeyed his parents. There had never been a choice on who to obey like there was tonight. Even when they argued they were in agreement on what their only son should do.

The lightning seemed to start time again, running faster than it ever had before, and his father said softly, “Too young not to know.”

While he loved his mother deeply, Fenthall idolized his father. Whatever was frightening his mother was not frightening his father and Fenthall wanted to be brave, just like his father was. He walked up to where his father was sitting and asked, “What’s beyond the mountain’s then father.” The house clock began to chime the ninth hour (6pm) but either the chime went much faster than usual, or Fenthall was unable to hear it.

“Malek, no!” his mother’s voice nearly boomed like the thunder outside. He’d never heard her frightened at all, but tonight was the exception to so many things. Her next comment, he didn’t understand at all. “What if he gives the answer? He’s still young!”

The two male skunks had never broken eye contact. “Do you really want to know Fenthall?” his father’s voice asked calmly.

“Malek!” The name was barely out of her mouth when Fenthall saw his father’s gaze move to meet his mother’s eyes. There was a fire in his eyes, not of anger or anything else that Fenthall had ever seen.

His voice almost a whisper, Malek answered her, “I will not dishonor my family by silence when asked.” This of course did nothing to explain to the child

what was going on, but as his father's gaze returned to him, he could feel a fire start burning within himself. Looking down with an expression of pride and love, Malek gently asked again, "Do you really want to know?"

Fenthall felt warm inside and the fear that had started with this odd disagreement left him. He crossed his arms and looked up at his father. "Yes father," he said in what he thought sounded like a brave and dutiful voice. "I want to know."

Malek didn't wait for Faemar to interrupt him. "Fear lies over the mountain," he said watching his sons eyes get larger. "And death is beyond."

Perhaps in the stillness of that moment, hearing a knock at their door would have caused all of them to jump, had there not been so much turbulence already in the room. Malek jumped up, not wanting to leave anyone outside too long with a storm approaching. There was another skunk outside, wearing the brown military leathers that all soldiers wore. He saluted Malek crisply and said in a brisk non-nonsense manner, "Good evening, General Black." With how dark it was Fenthall at first didn't recognize the man, but the voice was familiar: Colonel Masin.

Malek quickly returned the salute and motioned for Colonel Masin to enter. "Come in before the rain starts Dan." It sounded funny hearing his father call the colonel that. He'd always had to address him as Colonel Danusk Masin, or at least Colonel Masin.

"I'll only be a moment, sir." Danusk said quickly as he pulled an oiled leather case from his uniform pocket and removed a piece of parchment from it. "Just got the message and brought it straight here."

There was no hiding the look of bemused concern that passed over Fenthall's father's face. "South outpost message was the only one that hadn't come in as of when I left. I didn't expect it until tomorrow."

Danusk shook his head, "No sir, this isn't from South. It's from Waymark."

Malek's eyebrows creased. "I already read the Waymark report Dan..."

The colonel risked an interruption, "Sir, this is not the Waymark report. It's an urgent message sent after their report."

"So sent three days ago then?"

The matter was more than Fenthall could understand. He went over to where his box of toys lay and started pulling out the little spearmen and lining them up.

"No, sir. It was sent yesterday."

Malek snatched the paper from Danusk and began to read while the colonel summarized, "South has been burned. Refugees from there started arriving at Waymark. The messenger is back at camp now. I don't know how he got here so

fast, but if you saw him sir, you'd believe he got here in a day."

"South was half a division and Waymark only has a brigade. Send word to have divisions three and four moved to Midcouncil and have Waymark's troops fall back to Midcouncil. If we move fast enough we can beat them out before they get very far north."

By this point Fenthall's soft griffon toy had managed to pick up and drop several of the spearmen from varying heights.

"General Fitz in Waymark has already started moving his troops back to Midcouncil."

"Excellent," Malek responded. "They'll easily be stopped at Midcouncil. The Waymark troops then are escorting the refugees?"

"Yes, sir."

"Don't worry, Dan" Malek said calmly. "We knew they were massing in the area. They are just a little more co-ordinated this time." Malek opened the door for the colonel just as it started to rain.

"Yes, sir." Danusk said quickly as he saluted. "There will be more to do tomorrow." He started out the door, but Malek caught him.

"Take good care of that messenger, Dan."

"Sir, he's almost dead." the colonel said while standing in the rain.

"Colonel Masin." Malek said in a clipped voice. "I will be speaking with that messenger as soon as I come in at four before (5am)." He then closed the door as the colonel started to say something and muttered, "Take a little more care of those beneath you Dan, if you really want to impress those above you." He then sat back down in his chair deep in thought.

Fenthall's mother had gone to another room at some point and dinner was on the table getting cold. It was just the two male skunks for the moment. Fenthall knew that his father was very concerned about the news he'd just received and normally would have left him alone with his own thoughts, but the fire that was in him now would not stop burning.

He rose quietly, leaving his toys for a moment even though he knew that he'd be in trouble later for leaving them. Silently he walked up to his father and gently placed his hand on his father's knee.

"Why father?" he asked. Assuming that the disjointed question would make sense after all that had happened.

His father shock his head briefly. "Nothing for you to worry about, Fenthall. You're safe where we are."

The skunking was quick enough to realize that his father had misunderstood.

“No, sir.” he said respectfully. “The mountain. You were telling me about the mountain.”

Malek was silent for a moment. “What do you want to know about the mountain?”

Fenthall was confused for a moment, not really understanding what had driven him to ask for more information, but a question came quietly to his mind. “Why are people afraid of the mountain, father? And if death is trapped on the other side, why do our people still die?”

Malek waited before answering his son. Mother had re-entered the room and Fenthall noticed that her skin seemed grey beneath her fur, but she quietly took up a chair and sat close to her husband. Malek’s deep voice gave music to the raindrops hitting the roof and seemed to blend with the occasional thunder. “Our people did not always live here in the mountains. Many centuries ago, so long ago that my great grandfather passed away not knowing anyone who remembers that time and had been told the same by his great grandfather and his great grandfather before him...”

At one point, the Klotam, or “skunk people” lived north of the mountains, at a lower elevation and a nicer climate, but they were ill treated there. No Klotam was able to have more than a certain amount of wealth, or participate in the government. Klotam children were not allowed to go to school at all, or even learn how to read and write.

But the Klotam population continued to grow and eventually they realized that in numbers, they were close to the same as the Other Races. One brave young skunk named Famoer taught herself to read and lead the other Klotam in rebellion against the Other Races.

The Great War that followed lasted for many years and forced all the Klotam out of the society of the Other Races. Eventually they were driven to the base of the mountains, men, women and children. Famoer’s mate, Chatar, went forward to negotiate for the lives of the people while the rest waited in silence.

Some claim that it was the combined power of clerics and magi of the Klotam people that caused the great fissure in the earth to open suddenly, with Chatar trapped on the other side. Others say that it was only a chance miracle, brought about by the land’s rebellion against the years of war. Fenthall’s parents and most clerics felt though, that it was the very hand of their god that had come down from out of the heavens and opened the earth

But no sooner had Chatar entered the enemy camp than a great earthquake

shook the mountains and knocked both armies off their feet. The shaking continued unabated for nearly a day and when at last the people were able to rise again among the smoke a river of bright red magma flowed between the two groups of people.

There was no where to go but across the mountains for the Klotam. Many started immediately and the rest followed. But Famoar stayed and pleaded across the river of fire for the life of her husband. How she endured the heat and avoided the arrows for three straight days, no one can say. But she didn't leave until late in the third day. The Other Races brought Chatar forward to where she could see her husband and then executed him.

Her shout of grief it was said, was heard by all races. She watched as they buried her husband and placed a monument to their victory over his grave.

“She lived through the passage of the mountains though, and taught our people many things before she died. It's not our fear then that lies over the mountain, Fenthall. It is the hatred bred of fear of our people that hangs over the mountain. It's not our death that is beyond, but the death of Chatar.”

Fenthall had stood close to motionless through the whole story and when he spoke the rain and thunder suddenly stopped. “Then it is time father,” he heard himself saying but didn't know where the words came from. “For us to return.”

The skunkling heard a gasp escape his mother's lips, but she was silenced with a glance from his father.

“Our clerics tell us that we will not return in war, but that one will come eventually who'll go before us and make peace with the other races and return to lead us onto a new and better life.”

Fenthall weighed all that he'd been told and slowly walked up to his mother and looked into her eyes. He was beginning to understand what his mother had feared. “Mother. Don't be afraid,” he said softly, again not quite sure where the words were coming from.

He then turned to his father and said: “I am that one.” Mother broke into tears and Malek stood rigid in his chair.

All his father could say was, “The holy books said that the Liberator would know who he was. And that the nearest village stone would mark him speaking those words.”

Again there was a knock at the door. The cabin was silent, except for the sound of water still dripping slowly from the roof. The storm had been unusually brief. No one moved or breathed for at least a couple of heartbeats and then Malek slowly rose from his chair and opened the door.

He smiled a forced military smile at the old skunk that was waiting on the other side of the threshold. “Father Rams,” he said almost in monotone. “What a surprise.”

Father Rams was by at least 20 years the oldest person in the village, if not in the nation. For over one hundred years he had been the village cleric. He no longer had the usual markings of his people, all his fur having turned a uniform shade of grey ages ago, except for a small patch on the back of his head behind his right ear, where he was bald. He stepped slowly, but without aid over the threshold as Malek motioned him in. His eyes looked about him and he summed up quickly what was happening.

“I’d say no surprise at all, young general.” the cleric said in a wheezy voice, followed by a chuckle that might have been also a gasp for breath.

Malek could only nod. Father Rams turned towards Fenthall and suddenly church bells were ringing in the distance. Calling everyone to the stone at the center of the village. Father Rams seemed surprised at this. He should have been, since he was usually the one to ring the bells. “How often I prayed that I would live to see this day.” the old churchman said and then looking over at Fenthall’s mother, he shuffled to where she sat by the table.

“My child,” he said softly placing his hand on her sobbing shoulder. “He will not go as a lamb to the slaughter. If the stone proves his statement, you will first finish raising him.” He then offered a prayer for peace to the soul and Faemar seemed slightly calmer and rose to cry on the old cleric’s shoulder. “We must go. I think the stone has given me answer enough.”

He then shuffled them from their own house as though they were his guests and he was taking them out somewhere. Dinner sat on the table, cold and forgotten.

Each village had a large crystal placed at the center of it. It was the site of many religious functions and served as a communication link between the Klotam clerics and their god. Magi were also able to channel powers from the stone and work magic. The closer to the stone, the more powerful the magic. The further from the stone, the more powerful the mage, as the saying went.

Father Rams walked slowly and it was quite a ways to the center of the village from Fenthall’s home. As he shuffled along he explained to Malek how he’d come to be at the door at the time he did. “I was taking my evening drink of mint tea to help settle my stomach. A stout person like yourself, young general, probably can’t imagine what a comfort such a small thing is as a peaceful stomach before supper.

“The kettle had just begun to whistle when I could see a light coming from the stone outside my window. In the first instant I thought it was lightning, but the when

the light persisted I knew where it must be coming from. As I was walking out my door, the young priest, Kalek mentioned that he needed to speak with me, but then he too noticed the stone.”

Malek nearly laughed at Father Rams referring to Father Kalek as “young,” since Kalek was over seventy and could easily have been his own true father. A small snort was all that came from the general, quickly disguised as though he were clearing his throat.

Father Rams continued, “We went and stood together beside the stone, offering our prayers and asking that our minds be opened to the will of our god and writing appeared on the stone.”

“I’ve heard stories of that happening,” Malek began.

“Yes, but not in my lifetime,” the priest continued as though referring to perhaps a decade or so. “All it said was Malek Black.”

The general stopped and blushed profusely.

Father Rams looked back at him. “What’s the matter young general?”

Malek began walking again. “I am ashamed.” he said gravely.

“Ashamed that yours is the first name uttered by a village stone in over a century? Posh!”

“I’m a military man, Father. My life is not one to be so honored.”

Father Rams pantomimed Malek’s last words. “Can’t tell you young general, how many military people have said such a thing to me.”

“We lead the lives we have to for the safety of the...”

“...nation. Yes, I know youngster. I know. And Foemar was a passivist to you I suppose, and Chatar a conscientious objector? You think god looks down on you for your sacrifice? You think that he believes because you endured hell on earth today for the good of your people, that you should be denied the heaven of tomorrow.”

Malek looked down at his hands. “There is blood on these hands...”

Father Rams turned suddenly and slapped Malek on his right hand. “If I had a switch I’d use it on you. Sacrifice for the nation? Yes, seems like most sacrifice their brains, rather than their lives.”

Malek looked over at his wife to see Faemar smiling slightly. They had a similar discussion many times before and after their wedding. Poor Fenthall couldn’t even comprehend how his father could be anything less than perfect, so the whole conversation was beyond him.

“Soldiers everywhere suffer from the same problem often enough that I wonder if it’s something you put in the camp food. Our faith is all about sacrifice, and the

one's willing to give the most are the ones always that feel the least worthy."

"Now where was I? It was after the mint tea but before... Oh yes. I remember," the old man droned. "When we saw the name on the stone, Father Kalek said that we had just received word that South had fallen. You'd probably be at the camp."

"How did Kalek.." Malek began.

"...know that you'd received that message?" Father Rams finished again for him. "You think we just sit around all day and drink mint tea at the church don't you?" Malek didn't know what to say, "Of course you do. So does everyone else. Young Kalek, well you know how those young one's are. He heard it from one of the soldiers who helps out at the church in the evenings after he gets off shift. But... wait..." he stopped a moment and all three of the others in his group stopped and waited as though something momentous were about to happen.

"See you made me lose my train of thought yet again..." he started forward not even noticing that the others were waiting for him to say something much more profound. "Oh yes, way past the mint tea now aren't we? Well I beat young Kalek soundly over the head once for saying something so stupid. 'Of course he's at home,' says I. 'You think the stone is looking for the general himself? More than likely we are to see little Fenthall.' He tried to say otherwise again, but I leaned down to pick up a switch and by the time I looked up he was gone.

"Needless to say, I moved straight over to your place."

"In the rain?" the general said, glancing down at the priest's dry robes.

"In the rain?" Father Rams repeated with a small measure of contempt. "Like I said, we do more at the church than just sit around and drink mint tea all day. Keep trying to talk your commanders into letting me come over and teach your soldiers some basic prayers to help them stay dry in the rain, but no..." he emphasized the last word for a long moment, "...rain is good for soldiers. Hardens them. Bah! Makes 'em cold and wet is all. Now see, you did it to me again," he said accusingly.

"What?" Malek asked. He'd had short conversations with the priest before, generally about things like weather and his last sermon. Nothing this extended.

"Lose my train of thought," he said sharply. "Now where was I again? Long after the mint, but before I got... oh no... I guess I'd finished what I was saying after all."

With that they entered the crowded village square where the stone stood. It was strange rock, that it was said only the magi and clerics together could create. Standing about twelve feet from base to peak, it was only about two feet wide uniformly and shaped like a crystal. Normally the stone was a dull grey, but tonight

it was shining a brilliant blue.

Its base was shaped a little like an oversized candle holder, made of amethyst and bound at it's thinnest portion by a ring of gold. There were many people crowded around the stone by the time Fenthall and his family had arrived. They gave way for Father Rams, but many shouted questions at the passing priest, causing him to stop occasionally and rap his knuckles against someone's ears, much to the joy of the crowd.

He never stopped talking as he approached the stone. "Frithal, you weasel. I saw you put that wooden coin in the offering tray last week. I might be old, but I'm not blind...Away with 'ya you pompous coot!" The last was directed squarely at the mayor, who laughed jovially at the comment. "Mrs. Faith...took the time to get your daughter all nicely decked out did you? Well, there's no one here who'll marry her until she learns to curb her temper better, or until the general here is widowed. He alone'd have the gumption to keep her quiet." Malek looked to his wife and laughed lightly. Mrs. Faith, took it all in stride and patted the priest lightly on his shoulder when he passed.

And so it went as they came closer and closer to the glowing stone. Just before they reached their destination, Father Rams turned to Malek and whispered confidentially, "I pray that you will live as long as I, young general." Malek looked confused, but the priest continued, "You can say what you want when you're the general, and when you're over 100. In the former case they don't dare gainsay you and in the later case, they figure you're just old and senile anyway."

He then looked down and winked at Fenthall. "Are you ready, child?" he said plainly.

Again the words came to Fenthall's mouth unbidden. He kneeled before the stone and said, "I am ready to accept the task appointed me." And without prompting, he rose, reached forward and touched the stone.

There was a brilliant flash of crimson light and part of the stone broke away in the child's hands. As the eyes of the villagers cleared they saw young Fenthall standing before the stone, with a necklace in his hand and the imprint of where it had been still clearly upon the stone. It was formed of square chain links and held an amulet at it's center. Amulet and chain were both gray all over, just like the stone. Father Rams gently took the necklace from the stunned youngster and placed it around Fenthall's neck.

No sooner did the necklace come close to Fenthall's heart, than it began to glow a soft blue at the center of the amulet. He turned and faced the village, as they all slowly kneeled before him. Neither priest needed to say what the events that had

taken place meant, all but the youngest knew.

And then the fire that had burned inside Fenthall was gone and he became a child again and was afraid and cried and ran to his mother. She picked him up and stroked his white hair gently, pleased to know that she still had her child.

Slowly the people of the village turned around and went back to their homes to discuss passionately the events they had witnessed, but none could find words in the shadow of the Liberator crying on his mother's shoulder.

When few were left, Father Rams turned toward Faemar and her son. He spoke quietly and carefully, as though what he was saying was the last he would ever say, "As surely as I lived to see your son today, you will live to see him return in triumph or defeat." And then somehow, absorbed in a world only with her son, the priest was gone and the family returned home to a cold, but somehow delicious dinner.

Sometime during the night, Father Rams passed on. His funeral services were held a couple of days later. Father Kalek did the service, although there were few who heard it. The tears and the sobs drowned out most of what was said, and the old priest knew that there was little he could say or do to fill the void in the villager's hearts.

Buried on the same day was the messenger who had carried word from Waymark. He was also deeply mourned, for the great sacrifice that he'd made. General Black asked a few questions regarding the care of the messenger during the funeral. The day after that Colonel Duskin Masin was given an option from General Black, resign his commission and retire, or suffer a court martial for gross dereliction of duty in the care of the messenger. Duskin resigned his commission and began working for Father Kalek as a grounds keeper.

Two weeks after that, a messenger arrived from Midcouncil, saying that General Fitz had retaken the south outpost, which was now in the process of being expanded to house a full division.

All of these happenings Fenthall was gravely aware of. The child that could leave the world to the adults while he played with his toys was gone. There was too much to learn, in too little time, if he was to conquer fear and death.