

PREFACE

Zorn, Hunter and Warrior, is the story of a fantastic, fictional character inextricably linked to my first series titled 'The Tales of the Magic Piano'. In the second book of the series, 'In Search of the Ruby Rainbow', Zorn is depicted as the mature, Medulkhan hunter and warrior, a courageous and fearless soldier who is hired by the Grand Wizard of Balthazar to capture the time-travelling humans. That story is set in the future whilst this novel concentrates on the genesis of Zorn's birth and emergence over time into his fantasy world.

I have tried to think of what has influenced me in my writing this novel, and I think my mixed Irish and Danish heritage has a lot to with it. The Vikings were an incredible race of fearless warriors, determined in nature and natural explorers and conquerors of their world. I can draw similarities between Zorn and my ancient ancestors. Fearlessness, savagery, barbarianism and clan culture are almost inseparable between to two, yet conversely, tenderness, kindness, understanding and appreciation of the family unit are also strongly desired and upheld. It is through this yin/yang evolution that the highs and lows of the story unfolds with its good versus evil mentality, characters of scurrilous intent and those of the pure-blood goodness who seek the truth.

I often ask the question – Is the story I am writing about, even though completely fictional, a reflection of what's happening in my life and in our world generally? Well, the answer in short is yes. We all face challenges, we all hurt at some time or another and we all hope for a better future. So it is with Zorn. He faces challenges. He has hopes and dreams. He faces evil and he pursues the goodness in life. He is a reflection of what we all hope to be. We can't all be superheroes, but we can aspire to be better versions of ourselves. In reading this novel, I hope that is the case. That you find inspiration and you can escape from whatever realities surround you. I hope you enjoy 'Zorn, Hunter and Warrior'.

CHAPTER ONE

Birth of a Legend

Mighty warriors aren't born. They're made. So it was with Zorn – hunter and warrior. Born of noble disposition into the powerful tribe of the ancient Medulkh, he inherited a life of immediate privilege and protection. Yet life wasn't always so comfortable for Zorn. He arrived into the world of the fractured planet of Sharquill Jeron in the relatively poor, Medulkhan village of Sharitar approximately thirteen thousand years into the future from the time of the Christ-Lord. A different compass of evolution resulted in a time fragmentation on this remarkable planet as it spun on its axis in the Vertis Pelago constellation. Although immensely beautiful by any measure, its geographical extremities encompassed vast sweeps of rainforest in the northern Okapi Forests to the inland plains of Caragill with its hot, arid center to the Everglade Swamps of Jardhoul to the south and beyond; all the way to the relatively unexplored polar regions where the evil Blizzard Wizards dwelled.

Zorn was a beautiful baby whose appearance was perfectly Medulkhan in every fine feature, with a chiselled chin, tufts of beach-blond hair and blue, sparkling eyes that marked his warrior heritage. In fact, he was the envy of the clan and talk of the village when his adoring mother, Nerina, showed him off proudly to her friends.

“He has Skoll's chin and his eyes. Let's hope he doesn't have his temper as well.”

“Judging by the look of him, I should think that's a forgone conclusion, Nerina,” said Sheba.

“Ha, ha, ha. I thought you'd say that. He is beautiful though, isn't he?”

“Yes – adorable. You should be so lucky.”

A small pause ensued as Nerina thought of her friend's suffering.

“I'm sorry. How insensitive of me.”

Sheba smiled. She was content with her four children, but the loss of her son three years ago still pulled at her heartstrings.

“Khor has granted me a fine family, Nerina. I have wept tears for my son, but I have come to accept that he dwells in the afterlife. Khor is good. In *that*, I have faith.”

“Yes, Khor favours those that believe in him, Sheba. Skoll's faith is just as strong as mine.”

“Skoll's head is full of adventure. Despite his faith, he cannot see the gods for what they truly are.”

“And what or who exactly are they?” asked Zelda.

“*You* should not doubt them, Zelda. To do so you shall bring disaster to our lives.”

“Disaster? Do we not suffer the curse of their ire and the neglect of their promises? Do the crops not yield, but an ounce of goodness in the fruit we harvest? Where is the love that you so diligently espouse, Nerina?”

“You talk with a slippery tongue, Zelda. What has become of you?”

Zelda was near to tears.

“I talk the truth. Why do the gods not shine down upon us? Why have they forsaken us?”

“Hush your lips! If your husband were to hear of your faithless words, he would banish you. I beg of you. Speak no more ill of the gods.”

“Then I shall talk in silence and curse their every desire.”

It was not what Nerina wanted to hear as she hurriedly bundled up her baby and left the negative talk of the rumormongers to themselves. Medulkhan society was a very strict, hierarchical organization. Humanoid women were to be seen and not heard, and to doubt the will of the gods was punishable by death. Even to associate with others that expressed fear and doubt for their sovereign deities was a serious crime. It was little wonder that Nerina couldn't get away fast enough. Still, despite her faith, she remained faithful to her friends and stayed silent at the very thought of betrayal. After a short walk through the village of Sharitar, she found her way home where her husband, Skoll, was waiting.

“Where have *you* been?”

“Showing off our son to Sheba and Zelda.”

“Hmpf! You have to watch *that* one. She speaks with venom in her words.”

“You know what her husband did to her.”

“Yes, I know, but it's a husband's right to decide a wife's fate.”

“Should *you* decide mine?”

“I decided that a long time ago, Nerina. Now, let me embrace the both of you.”

Nerina's life was full of joy, laughter and love. Fortunately, the clans bestowed upon her a husband whose intellect and emotional connections to the female persuasion extended beyond the cultural norm. Although Skoll could be a fearless warrior when required, he had a gentle, paternal side to his character, and his love for his wife and children was enduring. Suddenly, Zorn began to cry.

“I must feed and change him, Skoll. It has been two hours.”

Skoll wasn't interested in the maternal duties of his wife when he just huffed a disinterested response.

“Hmpf! I have a meeting with Korg. There have been sightings of the wizards from the south.”

“You're not considering another expedition, are you?”

“I must do what the clans instruct me to do, Nerina. Ultimately, the gods will decide.”

“The gods have stayed silent for *so* long. Why should they speak now?”

Suddenly, Skoll became very angry when his hulking image towered over his wife.

“It is not for *you* to understand their motives, but to serve them.”

Nerina loved Skoll unreservedly, but every now and then his Medulkhan genetics surfaced with his booming voice and his moody temperament. She knew when to retract from a conversation and let him glow in his faith unimpeded by words of doubt. It was a wise withdrawal as she attended to the feeding of her son whose need for suckling a breast was a sure-fixed solution for his wailing cries.

“His stomach is like yours. It never fills.”

“Ha! A warrior's gut should never be filled, but pine for the blood and flesh of our enemies.”

“After all the enemies you've put in their graves, I'm surprised you can eat another thing.”

“Why do you taunt me so? You know the rules of the Ancient Scrolls.”

“I don’t doubt the scrolls, Skoll, nor do I doubt you. I just hoped that you could live free from expectation for a while.”

Skoll reached down and stroked the head of his infant son tenderly with his massive hand. That tenderness then showed as he whispered softly into his wife’s ear.

“*You* must never speak of doubt or fear when our son is present. He must no neither if he is to be a clan leader. Do you understand, Nerina?”

“I understand death and misfortune when the clans wage war. Do you want *that* life for our son?”

“No, of course not, but what I want is irrelevant. A warrior must do what is expected of him.”

“Then bang your drums and shoot your arrows for all I care.”

“Don’t be like that. By the way, I forbid you from seeing that witch. Her words are poison, Nerina.”

“She grieves, Skoll. Surely you can understand that?”

“She grieves not for her husband, but for herself. She has witch’s blood flowing in her veins. Please, keep my son away from her.”

Nerina dared not argue with Skoll as she lowered her eyes and stayed silent. It was a sign of obedience. Having imposed his male, chauvinistic point-of-view, Skoll departed the mud-soaked hut, leaving Nerina to feed Zorn by the warmth of a glowing fire.

Her eyes remained fixed, white and wild. By default, she was the village witchdoctor. A certain madness gripped her mind as she violently shook her writhing body around the small campfire. It was dark. So dark that the ink-soaked skies presented as an omnipresent blanket of black.

“Sa-di-do-re-ma, co-na-masu-se-re-ta-kor-tu-sa-mi,” chanted Makuna.

Over and over again she chanted incessantly as she became more and more mesmerized by the calling of the gods until her entire being appeared to be trapped in a state of hypnotic animation. It was a hopeful chant full of spiritual awareness and supernatural expectation when Volk, one of the clan leaders, arrived.

“Have the gods spoken?”

Shaking uncontrollably, Makuna’s body gradually came to a stop as the whites of her eyes faded and her true, connective spirit was awakened. Slowly and deliberately, she delivered her satanic message.

“They seek the blood of the Medulkh, my lord.”

Volk baulked backwards as he tried to come to terms with the reading.

“Why? What have *we* done to anger them?”

Now, in her zombie-like state, she appeared to be under the influence of the gods when she gave her terse reply.

“War shall be upon the clans, Volk. The wizards seek to destroy us.”

“The wizards?! No one’s seen or heard from them in over two hundred years. Why should they seek to destroy us now?”

“Heh, heh, heh, heh, heh. Humans from the planet Earth of the future shall visit this ungodly place. They possess a substance so pure that life shall be eternal.”

“Ha, ha, ha. Now, I know you’re speaking to a demon.”

Volk splayed his arms out theatrically as he gazed towards the heavens.

“Be gone, Jozar, spirit of the undead!”

Expecting some sort of a divine reaction, he waited patiently. However, a response never came.

“Demons reside within your soul, witch. Why should I trust you anymore?”

Makuna’s stare was unremitting.

“Did I not prophecize the day for your victory over Ogar? Have I not forecast the days and months when the vines would bear fruit in your village and the soils’ harvest would be plentiful? Why do you doubt the power of my sorcery?”

“You play a strange game, witch. If it were not for your brother, I should have banished you years ago.”

Makuna lurched forward like a serpent when it strikes its prey. Her words were full of spite and rage uttered in a long, painful whisper.

“He has forsaken me. I did nothing to deserve his wrath. He abandoned me in my time of need as will you all.”

Volk grunted his disapproval as he walked towards the faint glimmer of moonlight in the trees before he turned around.

“Mark your days well, witch, for by the summer’s end I shall seek your banishment.”

He grunted again before he strode off with his accompanying warriors in tow.

Makuna looked a broken woman, a shred of the innocent person she once was. She had tried so hard to fit in to the lives of the Medulkh who valued servitude to a husband and children more than any other calling. Disgraced by her husband and ostracized by her children, her existence hung by a thread until she realized an opportunity in a spiritual calling to the gods. ‘Better to be a witch than dead’ became her holy mantra when she first shook violently around the central village fire. A few lucky predictions later and a bountiful harvest reaped in joy, she was designated as the village witch whose powers were imaginary, but nevertheless feared. However, after five failed harvests in a row, Makuna had fallen from favour. Volk was not an enemy cared to oppose. He was a powerful village jarl in his own right, respected by friend and foe and certainly a warrior to be feared. Yet, despite his massive frame and above average intellect, strangely, she did not fear him. She pitied him. He was a servant just like any other. Expectation has its rewards, but also has its failings. And the Medulkh *were* failing. Recent hunts had yielded very little as the Chekawi, their main, proteinaceous food supply, had retreated far to the south to greener pastures. In a dry season bereft of the usual spring rains, conditions had worsened literally putting the fear of the gods into every living soul.

They still need me. Without my forecasts and spiritual interventions, they are left with no option. Volk may be strong and liked by the clans, but he is not immune from judgement. His day shall come.....

The snows came and they went. Seasons of bountiful harvest then followed as the Chekawi returned to the northern grasslands. As the years drifted by, Zorn grew into a strapping, humanoid hunter.

Whoooooosh! The arrow zipped-by the magnificent beast before it bucked its head, reared up and roared its disapproval. Zorn felt disappointment while the creature scurried off into the dust of the plains.

“No! Not another one. Why does my arrow not make its mark, Father?”

“Ha, ha, ha. It takes time to be a master hunter, Zorn. Just be thankful the beast decided not to charge. Then you would know you’re alive.”

“I’d slay him like you taught me.”

“Zorn, the Chekawi are to be revered. They’re souls are strong, sent to us by the gods themselves. You must always respect them.”

“I do respect them, Father, but they always elude me.”

Skoll knew that it was time to re-educate his son about the circle of life.

“What are the five elements of life, Zorn?”

Zorn didn’t need time to answer.

“Water, fire, wind, ground and air.”

“You’ve listened well, Zorn. Now, how do we benefit from all of those elements?”

Zorn looked puzzled for a moment, but he was determined to give his father the right answer as he looked skyward.

“The wind nurtures the rain which drenches the ground. Flowers and grasses then grow that set fruit and seeds which small animals eat. The Chekawi then feed on the animals and grasses which makes it strong. We hunt the Chekawi and feed on its flesh. When we die, the spirit of its flesh resides within us and feeds the ground. The waters then wash our spirits everywhere which the wind senses. Life then begins anew.”

Skoll listened intently. He felt great pride in his son’s ability to listen, learn and understand his teachings.

“Someday you’ll be a great hunter, Zorn. Now, as for your aim, you need to keep your head still and your eye focused,” he said as he rubbed Zorn’s mop of unkempt hair

“But I keep missing, Father. Does Garth miss when he hunts with you?”

“Garth tries hard, but he still has a long way to go. Just concentrate, and your arrows shall find their mark.”

Zorn loved his father, and he loved his teachings. They had been handed down from father to son for countless generations. And there was so much to learn. Being a hunter was not for the faint-hearted, nor was it for the weak of mind. The Medulkh were a fearless people and would not tolerate weakness. This was a land where survival depended upon the instincts and education that each generation taught the other. Zorn listened well. He was a model student and a fine example of Medulkhan superiority. Blessed with a developing physique of rippling muscles, perfect coordination and an acute sense of hearing, his Medulkhan survival mechanisms were developing at an alarming rate. Yet, he was still only a boy, with all the wonderful vulnerabilities, fears and doubts that boys of his age possessed.

“Please don’t tell Garth. I don’t want him laughing at me again, Father.”

Garth was six years older than Zorn. Typical of an elder sibling, he always made his presence known. Feeling Zorn’s anxiety, Skoll leaned down to have a conversation with his son face to face.

“Garth has no reason to doubt you, Zorn, and he certainly doesn’t have your spirit. What does a warrior need more than anything else? Hmmm?”

“Courage, Father.”

“Yes – courage. Remember *that* when you fear something or someone the most.”

Zorn nodded his head who knew that the teachings of his father were extremely valuable. Having succeeded in educating his son and paradoxically failed in their hunting expedition, they departed the dry, desolate plains and made for the greener pastures of home. Sharitar was a fine, Medulkhan village by any measure. Rudimentary in its construction, it encompassed approximately five square miles of randomly built homes of mud-soaked wattle and daub whose interiors bore rock-enslaved firepits, basic timber shelving, beds made from stretched animal hides and pottery lovingly crafted by the hands of the local master pottery maker. Such fundamental necessities served them well from a harsh reality of existence that required the Medulkh to hunt and gather as previous generations had done for eons of time. Despite the rough exterior and paupers' appearance of their domain, Zorn and his family lived well and prospered.

"Where is the little mouse?" boomed Skoll as he arrived home.

Nerina moved in close towards Skoll to whisper into his ear.

"He's hiding, Skoll. Go on! Play along!"

Skoll took the hint who pretended to not know of his son's whereabouts.

"Where are you, Kye? Is that you I can see hiding behind the veil?"

The hushed sounds of laughter could be heard coming from the corner of the room as Skoll whooshed the veil aside, but Kye was nowhere to be seen. Another trickle of laughter sounded before Skoll zeroed-in.

"Ah, there you are."

Without further ado, he proceeded to grab his son and toss him into the air before Kye burst-out into a furious giggle.

"Did you catch a Chekawi, Father?"

"No. They're as smart as they are cautious, but don't worry, my beautiful son, we shall eat of the plentiful harvest."

Skoll was a devout believer in the gods. He practised his religion faithfully. Every day he gave thanks, and every day his faith grew stronger. However, his faith was being tested far beyond the bounds it had ever been tested before. Despite the huge stockpiles of food that the Medulkh had maintained in times aplenty, the latest failure of the crops was cause for great consternation. Still, as a father should, he smiled at his son's enduring love for him, although inwardly he felt nothing, but pain, frustration and fear for the immediate future.

"Zorn tells me that he missed his mark again. Perhaps you should speak to him, Skoll," said Nerina.

"I don't want to mollycoddle the boy, Nerina. He must stand on his own two feet."

"He loves you, Skoll. He listens to your every word."

"Stop worrying, Nerina. I praise him when he deserves it. A warrior must never rest on his laurels, but must be prepared for any eventuality."

"He's only a boy. Surely *that* can wait."

Skoll sat down at the table and placed his massive hands upon the tabletop.

"No. It can't. Children, go outside! I want to talk to your mother."

The children knew when to obey their father as they hurriedly departed.

"Nerina, tribal council is sitting tonight. There has been a sighting of a wizard from the south."

"Are you sure? They're always saying that the wizards have been seen, but no one ever proves it. It's just another lie, Skoll."

A moment of silence ensued as Skoll became tense.

“No, it’s not. I saw them myself. I...I...I’ve never seen anything like them before. They’re huge and look like the devil incarnate. They breathe frosty breaths that can kill from fifty paces. They’re not ordinary beings, Nerina.”

“Why should they come north? If they live in the ice fields, then what have they to gain here?”

“The mountains to the north and west may be a temptation for them. Perhaps they have outgrown their home.”

“What do you intend to do?”

“You know I can’t discuss the clans’ plans, but I suspect that I’ll be sent south.”

“To do what?”

“To spy on them, to evaluate who they are and what they’re doing.”

“Skoll, I don’t want you to go. They sound very dangerous and your children need you. I need you.”

“Don’t worry! I’m not going to get myself killed. I have the the golden orb eagles to protect me.”

“Your faith in them is misplaced. They serve their own.”

“Nerina, I know you fear the unknown, but I have a responsibility to the clans. If these wizards venture further north, then all of our lives may be put at risk. Better to cut off the head of a serpent than be bitten by its poison. Don’t you think?”

“What if you can’t? What if you never return? What should become of us?”

“I shall speak to Bronsk. He shall make provisions if that happens.”

Nerina placed her arms around Skoll’s neck and drew him near.

“I can’t let you go. I won’t. I...I...”

Skoll tenderly kissed his wife on the lips before he quietly whispered to her.

“Hush! You know who I am and what I must do. There is no point in getting upset. What will be will be.”

A tear escaped from the corner of Nerina’s eye. She really did love him.

Tribal council was a serious affair. Only the most senior elders were permitted to participate. Skoll was certainly a senior member, but he was outranked by six or seven older warriors of vastly more experience in life and learning. Barthuza, the most senior of the collective clans’ leaders, stepped forward as the gathering quietened.

“A zuma eh co na ma ti da te so ver tu za kondu,” he chanted.

It was a calling to the gods to receive a blessing for the meeting. He hoped that the wisdom, experience and will of the gods would shine down upon them and bring good fortune.

“Please, take your places. You know why we have summoned you here. It’s true. The wizards have been seen as far north as Jezermaine.”

“That’s Cercyllian territory. Who should make such a claim?” asked Jovar, one of the mighty clan leaders.

“I make *that* claim,” said Skoll.

You could have heard a pin drop as all eyes focused on him.

“You? The son of a merchant? You have no powers against the wizards.”

“True, but I have eyes and ears, Jovar, and not the wind that whistles from *your* backside when *you* talk.”

All the warriors grinned and broke into fits of laughter as Jovar's anger increased.

"Perhaps I should wipe *that* smile off your face with a strike of my club, Skoll."

"Strike if you must, but you will miss your mark."

The challenge had been received and played down when Barthuza intervened.

"Stand back – both of you! I have neither the time, nor the energy to deal with your empty threats. We have much more important matters to discuss. Jovar, it is true. I sent Skoll, Korg and a party of warriors south before the spring's thaw. Everyone reported to me that the wizards had been sighted."

"Why are you only telling me this now?"

"Their existence was sealed in a bond of legend and myth, but they are no longer silent. If every jarl were to learn of this, we could be faced with annihilation. You must swear on the Ancient Scrolls that what we discuss shall stay silent and for our ears only."

"But everyone deserves to know if this is true, don't they?"

"Jovar, we don't know what they want. We don't know if they'll be friendly or not, but we do know that they possess unimaginable power. No one can know of them until we have established *why* they have suddenly appeared. Do you understand?"

"I understand that no one is going to attack my village."

"Good. Then let us not provoke them into doing anything. Hmmm. As it is, I have decided to send you, Krone, Korg and Skoll back south. Take with you some warriors of your choice and report back to me your findings. Let us hope that they shall return back to their home and peace shall prevail."

Jovar grunted his ambivalence to his duty whereas Skoll just accepted it with good grace. The supreme jarl had spoken and to that end there was very little that they could do about it. Despite their personal differences, the clans of Sharitar, Kharzam, Jaloom and Gretchensfeldt were united as one when things turned ugly. And turn ugly, they would.

Deep in the south of Sharquill Jeron amongst the vast fields of ice and snow, the dreaded Blizzard Wizards emerged from their temporary hibernation. Cousins of the ancient Shakrel, a feared alien race who ruled the universe for countless eons, these frost-breathing wizards were a race to be feared.

"My lord, the time has come to populate the Northern Mountains. We must obey the calling of Zol and elect a new emperor," said Colonel Arzu.

Zol was an ancient Shakrelian general whose name and reputation had metamorphosed from myth to legend to deity status. Although the Blizzard Wizards were only half-blood cousins to the Shakrel, they possessed similar powers of mind manipulation and frost-breathing powers of death.

"So be it. Has the league decided upon the nominees?" asked Lord Vizar.

"Yes, my lord. Your brother is amongst them."

The seizure of power was not an easy task within the Blizzard Wizard brotherhood. Only by the elimination of opponents did the nominees fulfil the criteria for emperor succession. Such was their brutality that death became the only option for those that dared to seek the throne.

"Then we shall see if he has the strength and wisdom to succeed. Bring forth the combatants!"

What a magnificent arena it was. Almost indescribable in its beauty and construction, its sparkling, tapered walls of stalagmitic, mineralized composition towered into the sky as if God himself had wished it. Filling the stadium, thousands upon thousands of excited, alien warriors shouted their support for their favourite warrior as horns blared and the royal family made their way to their seats. After a theatrical welcome from Lord Vizar, a dozen or so alien warriors emerged from the icy pits to engage in their gladiatorial conquests. All around, in a panoramic vision of wonder, the roars of the collective gathering drowned the frozen arena in screams of frustration and fury. This was the first step in attaining the glorious crown that would rule over these tempestuous beasts; an undertaking of a battle to the death.

After saluting Lord Vizar with their wizard spears, two of the nominated wizards prepared themselves with alien weaponry and protective, magical shields. Gradually, the noise died down as the crowd awaited the warhorn's cry. Everyone watched with bated breath.

Blaaaaaar! The crowd roared their approval before silence ensued as the two circling wizards each cast a critical eye towards the other. Slowly and deliberately, they edged forward as they awaited the first strike. Jarbanuch, a young, but fearless wizard, struck the first blow as a powerful strike from his wizard's spear crashed into his opponent's ray shield. A glitter of electrical lightning flashed amid the silence as all eyes watched in horror and awe. Then the skies filled with the zapping and crashing sounds of a furious exchange as lightning bolts fizzed and shields deflected. Still, the wary warriors crept forward, each fully understanding that one mistake could cost his life. Suddenly, Jarbanuch charged in a random, haphazard attack as he zig-zagged from side to side. Despite his age, he was a seasoned warrior and fit for the task. However, Muzar, an older wizard fearing nothing and proven in battle, spewed forth his icy, cold flames of frosty freeze. The power of the freeze scorched the young wizard's flesh, but he remained undeterred. Strike after strike ensued as the lustful cries of the crowd called for death. Finally, after a pulverizing barrage of strikes from Jarbanuch's spear, did the older wizard fall down to await his death. Without fear or favour, he thrust his spear into Muzar's side which penetrated his armour and into his flesh. Gradually, his eyes grew dark and wide as the pain of the strike sent electrical impulses throughout all of his writhing body. Death was swift as the crowd arose as one and voiced their approval.

"Hmmm. We have a contender. Who is he?" asked Lord Vizar.

"The son of Lord Kronyen, my lord."

"A worthy adversary. See to it that he is honoured with a maiden of his choice."

"Yes, my lord."

How vulgar, yet powerfully efficient their system was. Anchored in tradition, the life of a Blizzard Wizard was measured in the kills one made and the aggression one showed. It was a bizarre and barbaric system of recognition, but it had its rewards. Strangely, everyone knew their place. Insubordination was rare and punishable by death. That alone was enough to keep their society from fragmenting. Crime was minimal, yet death was common place. A twisted way of thinking perhaps, but it served the population well. After the blood-bath of the gladiators, Lord Vizar returned to his frozen lair where earnest conversations for conquest ensued.

"Tell me of the northern peoples. Should we fear them?"

Colonel Arzu was ambivalent to the cause as his arrogance shone through.

"Simpletons, my lord. They are merely natives who have not evolved. They pose no threat whatsoever."

“Hmmm. Then the mountains’ passes should not be a difficult challenge. Now, tell me of these Medulkhan warriors. Should I be concerned?”

“Half-breeds. They have mixed blood, my lord. Brute force is their mantra, but they do possess impressive fighting skills. I should not worry about them. They are a nomadic people and have no use for the mountains in the west or east.”

“Perhaps not, but I wish to proceed unhindered, Colonel. You must understand that the evolution of our species is dependent upon us overtaking this planet. We cannot have interference in our plans. Once we were all-powerful. The Shakrel ruled the universe. Our bloodlines are inextricably linked to them. It is *our* calling that we shall succeed again.”

“But we are *not* of the full-blooded Shakrelian race, my lord. Why should we honour *their* history?”

“Have you learned nothing in hibernation, Colonel? Our ancestral cousins believed that their evolution would supercede their banishment from the universe. We are their only hope.”

“What of Lord Salzaquoy?”

“They’re Akoomian and not deserved of Shakrelian status. No. Our bloodlines are the *only* bloodlines that can succeed. When will your warriors be ready?”

“They are approaching final assimilation, my lord. Despite the small pockets of resistance, we shall be ready in a few weeks.”

“Good. I shall not tolerate insurrection. Our mission is clear, Colonel – to populate this planet and reinstate the Shakrelian bloodline. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Lord Vizar .”

So it was that a superior Blizzard Wizard lord set about preparing his race of wizard warriors on a quest to dominate the planet. All the while, Lord Salzaquoy, the fire-breathing, Akoomian aristocrat from the east, was making preparations of his own.

“What news do you bear of our brothers-in-arms, Kazuul?”

Kazuul was a fearless warrior of the eastern tribal, Akoomian clan. Although Shakrelian blood flowed in their veins, they were not considered worthy of Shakrelian status.

“My spies inform me that they plan a northern assault, my lord.”

“That they should so arrogantly proceed without consultation reeks of treachery. Why are we not deserved of their allegiance?”

“The teachings of the ancients forbade our union, my lord.”

“Why? Are we so very different? Fire and ice were elements bound in sorcerous perpetuity. That the Shakrel sought to differentiate us was a curse we’ve had to endure through the ages. Our blood is just as royal as those frost-breathing paladins.”

“I do not doubt our heritage, my lord, but it doesn’t change the fact that the Blizzard Wizards feel repulsed by us.”

“I have tried to mend the fences between us, but they refuse to comply. Whilst they are not our enemy, I am left with no alternative, but to alienate them from our lives. Until they recognize our place amongst Shakrelian folklore we are destined to be apart.”

“There are whispers, my lord, that the Medulkhan warriors are preparing for an attack.”

“Why should they care? They have no need of the mountains.”

“No, but they fear the wizards’ wrath. Lord Vizar is unpredictable at best.”

Suddenly, Lord Salzaquoy had an idea.

Hmmm. Perhaps it’s time we showed the Medulkh the ferocity of our flames. A glorious victory could sway the mind of Lord Vizar. We could be whole again.

“Gather together the tribal leaders. We haven’t a moment to lose.”

“Yes, my lord.”

How the muddied waters of wizard loyalty swished and swashed in the violent waters of genetic breeding. History had separated them, but Lord Salzaquoy was determined that the bloodlines of the ancient Shakrel would rise again. Pity those that should oppose him....

“Oh, please, Father. Can’t we keep him?” asked Zorn.

Skoll looked at his son with understanding showing in his eyes. He knew that Zorn treasured the wild animals that inhabited the surrounding hills and plains of Caragill. For once, he relented.

“All right, Zorn, but he’s *your* responsibility, and he’s not coming inside. Bears belong in the woods.”

“Thank you. Thank you, Father. Please, don’t tell mother.”

“Ha, ha, ha. Your secret’s safe with me. Now, you had better find a place for him to live.”

Zorn was beside himself with joy. Ever since he was a small child he wanted a pet, and it seemed such an appropriate adoption. Lost and looking for food, the young bear wandered into Sharitar in a search for an easy meal when Zorn stumbled across him. Those great, big, brown eyes just melted Zorn’s heart as the bear took refuge in his presence.

“What are you going to call him?” asked Garth.

“I don’t know, Garth. Something will come to me.”

“Just don’t let mother see him. He’ll be whooshed away before you know it. You know how she detests wild animals. Perhaps you should release him, Zorn.”

“He’ll be killed. His mother was probably slaughtered for her skin. I’d be willing to bet that’s why he came looking for food.”

“Well, what are you going to do with him?”

“I’ll raise him in our storage silo. No one goes there, and I can build him a special pen. Will you help me?”

As much as Garth annoyed Zorn, he was a caring, big brother at heart. Immediately, the boys took the bear cub down to the grain silo and began constructing a pen of sorts. After a half day’s construction, a rudimentary structure had been built out of collected timbers and hempen rope. It was nothing fancy, but it would suffice for the first few months of the bear’s life.

“He’s a fiesty, little fellow, isn’t he?” asked Garth.

“You would be too if your mother had been slaughtered.”

“Perhaps he’s just lost, Zorn. Maybe his mother searches for him as we speak. Don’t get too attached. You might have to give him back.”

“I’m keeping him, Garth. His mother would have shown up by now, and if I release him he won’t last the night. Not with all the wolves on the prowl.”

“What is it with this bear? You’ve never shown an interest in having a pet bear before.”

“I don’t know. There’s just something about him.”

After securing the bear cub into his makeshift cage, Zorn sat down beside him.

Don’t worry, little one. I won’t let anything happen to you. I promise.

“Come, Zorn. We have chores to do before father comes home,” said Garth.

Reluctantly, Zorn bid his pet goodbye before he set off with Garth back home. It was short walk of only a hundred yards or so. Nerina was not in an understanding mood.

“Where have you been? I’ve been looking for you two for over an hour.”

“Ergh....we’ve been trying to master our fire lighting skills. Father says that we must pass the test, or he won’t take us hunting.”

“You’re too young for that, Zorn. Now, go and chop the wood. Garth, the chickens need feeding.”

They knew better than to argue with their mother. Despite the paternal influences that ravaged Medulkhan life, mothers had to be respected by their sons. It was only through the matrimonial bond that a Medulkhan warrior held sway over a Medulkhan woman. An hour later, the chores were completed and night had settled over the land. A happy feast was enjoyed by all as a warming fire burned brightly in the fire pit. After Kye was settled down to sleep, Zorn and Garth were sent off to bed. Soon they were asleep when whispers could be heard from the adjoining room.

“You worry too much. I’m sure the rumours are false, Skoll. If the wizards had intended to harm us, they would have done so already,” said Nerina.

Skoll felt a great burden of worry when the furrow lines in his brow creased with unforgiving memories of history’s teachings.

“The scrolls don’t lie, Nerina. There is something stirring. I feel it. I smell it like a foul breeze from the marshes. It stays silent, but it moves like a snake that slithers through the grass.”

“Then let it slither away from us, or set the mongoose upon it.”

“Ha, ha, ha. You women just simply don’t understand. The day approaches when we will have to fight the wizards. We don’t have the power to defeat them.”

“Who does?”

“According to the Ancient Scrolls, a group of humans visit in the future. Somehow they hold the key to our survival.”

“Humans?! They’re ancient peoples from a planet known for its wars and unrest. I fail to see how *that* lowly species could change the course of things to come. Lie down with me and rest your weary head. We have lived through storm, wind and rain. The skies have battered our village for longer than I care to remember. Why should we fear the myth of the wizards from the south?”

“It’s no myth, Nerina. I told you that I saw one for myself.”

“Perhaps you saw an illusion – a fabrication of the truth.”

“No. He was real. His eyes shone like burning stars in the night. I sensed his power like I sense the horizon through the eyes of the eagle.”

“Try to sleep, Skoll. The answers will be clearer in the morning.”

Nerina moved closer to her husband and tucked her head inside his chin.

Slowly, Skoll closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Zorn blinked his eyes. It was early in the morning as the cockerel crowed its rousing call. Immediately, he jumped out of his animal hide bed and headed out the door bound for his makeshift cage. At first glance nothing appeared to be out of the ordinary when he made his advance. However, appearances can be deceptive when Zorn approached. The silo door was wide open and there was no sign of his animal friend. Consumed by grief and a profound sense of loss, he began searching the surrounding grasses and woodlands. To his very great

relief, he spotted the young bear foraging for food in their neighbour's garden plot when he heard cries of anguish.

"Go away, you troublesome bear. Go away before I club you," screeched Ulfgrim, Zorn's neighbour.

"Don't hurt him! He was only looking for food," shouted Zorn.

"Is this animal *yours*, Zorn?"

"Yes, he's mine. I'm sorry, Ulfgrim. I don't know how he got out."

"He's a troublesome cub. I can see it in his eyes. Bolshkar, bolshkar, bolshkar! (Trouble, trouble, trouble)," repeated Ulfgrim.

Zorn quickly picked the bear cub up and carried him back to the silo where he hurriedly shut the door. He was feeling quite frustrated with him.

"You could have got yourself hurt or worse – dead. What am I going to do with you?"

Of course, the young bear cub didn't understand a word of Medulkhan as he sniffed Zorn's scent and looked for affection. Soon they were cradled in one another's arms.

You're lucky Ulfgrim didn't hurt you. He's a cranky, old warrior at the best of times. You are Bolshkar. Hmmm. That's what I'm going to call you – Bolshkar.

Now, the bear cub had a name and an appropriate one at that. It just seemed to suit him.

"Zorn! Zorn, are you in there?" asked Nerina.

"Coming, Mother."

Zorn quickly tied the bear cub up before he ran outside.

"What are doing in there? I've never known you to fetch the grain before."

"Oh, I saw a fox, so I was checking to see if it had entered the silo."

Nerina was no fool who sensed that Zorn was lying.

"A fox, eh? Well, I haven't seen any foxes for months, so what else is in there? Hmmm?"

Zorn spread his arms out wide. "Nothing. Nothing at all."

Nerina was having none of it when she pushed Zorn aside and entered the silo. A few moments later, he heard a shriek before Nerina came out with the beautiful bear cub cradled in her arms.

"Mother...I...I..."

"It's all right, Zorn. Your father told me."

"But he promised."

"You know he can't hide things from me. Have you named him yet?"

"Does that mean we can keep him?"

"Yes. As long as he stays here. I'll not have him near my garden or the neighbour's for that matter."

"I promise. His name is Bolshkar."

"Ha, ha, ha. I can see why. He'll be no end of trouble I'm sure. Well, come and have your breakfast, and then I want you to tidy up this mess and secure his cage. Ulfgrim has already told me that, if he catches him again in his garden, he won't hesitate to kill him."

"Just let him try."

"Come now."

Nerina then stared at the bear in her arms.

"You are a beautiful creature, aren't you?"

Zorn was lost for words. Perhaps the universe was speaking to all of them, but for now Zorn had a pet and Bolshkar had a home. Some things are just meant to be.

Damien M Casey