
What Price a Demon?

by Tony Marker

Part of the "Short Stories from Greater Breminor" Collection

Copyright 2001, by Anthony Marker, All Rights Reserved

What Price a Demon?

by Anthony Marker

Gilkur Alaan reached up with a gloved hand, adjusted the heavy suit of chainmail that hung from his aging shoulders, and wearily stood in his stirrups. The well-oiled leather tack creaked softly and Gilkur momentarily attributed the sound to his aching joints. Behind and above him lay the mountain pass he had just traversed. He guessed the first real snows would close it in another two weeks. Below him, to the left of his stallion's head and a mere three leagues away, stood the crenellated walls of Alaan Keep. The arms of this early winter evening were already folding the familiar features of the yawning valley into its murky embrace. In the gathering gloom the keep was a shadowy outline against the sheer purple walls of the great mountain at whose feet it sat, balanced like a pugnacious dog at the foot of some immense giant, guarding the passes exit.

"Well, Shadowrun," he said, scratching the great stallion's mane, "we're finally home." As the words reached his ears he was surprised to learn that he had held that question in serious doubt these past two weeks. The white-tipped ears before him twitched and the great horse rocked as it gave vent to several deep explosive coughs.

"Ah, my friend, you have carried me farther, I think, than was good for you. We are both too old for this sort of thing."

Gilkur shook his head sadly. His companion would be lucky to see the end of tomorrow's sunset before rejoining the great circle. It was a cruel irony this close to home. He swung down out of the saddle with a grunt. He would walk the remaining distance and return home on his own two feet. He would do so partly out of deference for this wondrous animal who had carried him unflinchingly into so many battles, but also out of caution. It made no sense to get within site of home only to spend a frigid night outdoors with a leg trapped beneath one's own mount just for the vanity of wanting to ride through the gate on horseback. Perhaps it was better this way, he thought, not without some bitterness. He had left home with four score men under his command to help with the war in Toroth just as first green of spring had been running its slender fingers through the valley's orchards. Now, at winter's first chill touch, he returned alone.

Two hours later, he led his wheezing horse up the road that led into the small town of Oxwell below the keep. A sense of unease that had been gnawing at the edge of his consciousness was quickly growing to one of alarm. It was a cold night to be sure, and one would expect most of the residents to be indoors enjoying the warmth of a fire. But as he approached, the familiar smell of wood smoke was absent. No lights shone in windows of any of the small houses that lined the street on either side of him. The only sound was a low moan as the cold wind chased itself around the rough-hewn timber eaves.

Shadowrun managed a weak, uneasy whicker.

"Easy, old fella," he said. "Something's wrong here, no mistake, but we can't very well go running off into the night just because things seem a bit out of sorts." He wondered, briefly, whom he was trying to comfort with this obvious lie, himself or horse; from the look of it, things were a long way past being "a bit out of sorts."

The horse's head drooped next to Gilkur's left knee. Gilkur dropped his hand and gave the stallion a brief scratch between the ears. Then he rearranged his scabbards so that the hilt of his broken ancestral sword was out of his way and his dagger was more accessible. Finally, with a sigh, he gave a gentle pull on Shadowrun's reins and continued forward past the outlying houses and into the town.

It took only a few strides to reach Oxwell's center. On his left, the three-storied façade of the Tinker and Sage, Oxwell's inn and the local watering hole, cast long fingers of moonlit shadows into the town's common. On any normal night, light would have splashed warmly out into the street and the muffled laughter of locals and travelers alike would have pushed past the frost-laden windows to greet him. On this night, however, the windows that overlooked Oxwell's main street, like those of the rest of the town, were dark and silent. The inn's heavy wooden door stood partially open, and from somewhere he could hear the irregular *reek, reek* of the wind teasing a loose storm shutter.

"On Odan's grave," he whispered, somehow afraid to break the unnatural silence, "they've been attacked. The whole town must have been wiped out to a man!" But even as these words left his mouth he knew that wasn't the answer. There were no signs of fighting; no burned or burning buildings, no debris scattered in the streets, no bodies, nothing that his practiced eye might use to shore up the conclusion that a battle had been fought here. He thought he might almost find such signs preferable to the empty sense of anticipation that hung ominously over the town. He was beginning to wonder if it hadn't been a serious mistake not to have replaced the sword broken in the final battle against Amulon's minions. In the back of his mind he couldn't help but wonder if perhaps this was some terrible price Odan, goddess of judgment and justice, was exacting on him for losing his men in battle and then daring to return home alone.

He raised his eyes toward the familiar outline of the keep. The outer wall seemed much higher than its thirty feet. It seemed to jut outward from a huge outcropping of rock that overlooked the town like a immense bear guarding a kill. Behind the outer wall, darkness blurred the hexagonal outline of the ancient seventy-foot keep so that even to Gilkur's familiar eyes it appeared round. He stared hard at the keep's shadowy outline for several seconds. Was there a faint glow from one of the lower windows?

Like as not, that light's just your mind playing tricks on you, you old fool, he thought. *After nearly a full day in the saddle, your eyes will see whatever you want them to see.* Yes, that was a possibility, perhaps even a probability. But light or no light, the keep seemed the most likely place to find answers to the night's mysteries.

Ten nerve-stretching minutes later found him at the portcullis to the keep. Shadowrun was gasping for breath after the climb up the path to the keep's main entrance. It had been a terrifying walk. Twice he had whirled, his dagger rasping from its sheath in an arthritic hand, to examine the way he'd come, half expecting to find some monstrous apparition creeping stealthily upon on him from behind. Each time he had confronted only the abandoned moonlit road and his growing sense of terror.

It came as no surprise that he passed through the gate unchallenged. Whatever fate had befallen the townspeople of Oxwell had apparently also claimed the twenty-two men at arms he had left to defend the keep.

Little of the moon's illumination reached the courtyard. If he had not had an internal image of the keep's grounds he would have been helpless to do anything but grope around bumping into the walls and who knew what else before injuring himself.

A faint orange glow escaped from around the edges of the door to the main tower and he had to resist the nearly overwhelming temptation to rush inside. Instead, he took the time to stable Shadowrun. The time remaining in which the loyal stallion could receive such kindness was quickly coming to a close.

Though Gilkur could hear nothing in the pitch-black stalls, the stable still held the familiar comforting smells of hay and leather and horse dung. He paused in the process of sliding Shadowrun's saddle and blanket from the animal's sweaty back. *If there's danger here, Gil, and fleeing is the order of the day, what then?* The horse's rasping breath made the answer to that quandary obvious enough; if there was danger here that required flight, leaving the horse saddled would give him no advantage. Shadowrun's traveling days were at an end. Gilkur stumbled around in the complete darkness of the stable's interior, praying that some foolish stable boy hadn't left a pitchfork lying about, and managed by feel to find

some reasonably fresh hay. He tossed it on the ground near where the horse wheezed quietly on the floor of the stall. Only then did he let his feet carry him across the empty courtyard to the entrance to the keep's main tower.

The trek across the black expanse was painfully slow. Gilkur shuffled forward, hands stretched out in front of him the entire way to avoid crashing into an unseen obstacle. At last, he stood before the twin oaken doors to the keep. Here he found that perhaps his eyes had not been playing tricks on him after all; a dull orange glow filtered out from around the doors' edges.

Gilkur stood there, one hand on the door, another on dagger hilt, for a long moment. Now that he had stopped moving, the cold night air was rapidly chilling the sweat on the back of his neck and under his arms. He shivered. Ignoring the cold, he somehow managed to rein in the whirl of questions and fear clouding his mind and gradually bring his breathing under control. Taking a final deliberate, deep breath, Gilkur swung back the heavy door and stepped inside.

To his surprise and relief, a fire glowed in the large fireplace at the far end of the main hall some forty feet away. It sent shadows cavorting malevolently across the red and gold tapestries that hung against each of the stone walls and into dark spaces between the huge timber beams overhead. The tables and chairs that dominated the room were arranged neatly as if in preparation for a ceremonial dinner. *Odd that a fire so clearly tended should be warming the hearth of an empty hall*, he thought. Gilkur pulled the heavy wooden door closed behind him and took another step into the room.

"Norisse?" His wife's name seemed unnaturally loud to his own ears and rolled around the hall before being swallowed up in the darkness among the eaves. The sound made him cringe but there was no response. "Ladoll?" he tried, "Martin?" Each time his voice bounced up the stairs and became lost in the dark recesses of the keep. But he was not alone in the keep. That much was becoming clear. A prickling sensation raised the hairs at the base of his neck. This was not the superstitious fear that had threatened to overcome him in the deserted town below. This was the niggling sense of being watched, and it rubbed at his old warrior's intuition like the beginning of a blister.

Gilkur walked cautiously forward, letting his eyes relax and take in the softer images at the edge of his vision. At the center of the huge rug that dominated the area in front of the hearth, he stopped, closed his eyes, and opened the rest of his senses.

The first thing that came to him was the hissing and popping of the sap-laden wood as the fire consumed it. He pushed this sound away; it was not the obvious background patter of sensations he was feeling for. Rather it was for the trace of something hidden, something stealthy, that he reached with his ears and nose and skin and mind.

Gradually, as his breathing slowed and his heart rate settled into a subdued pace, the surface sensations faded. He stretched his mind out and reached into the darkened recesses of the keep.

He became aware of the faintest of scents, reminiscent of sulfur. It was almost there, almost not. He pulled the lightest breath in through his nose, slowly, delicately, as if rolling the first sip of a fine wine around in his mouth. There it was, so distant as to be nearly invisible. He could feel his small hairs at the base of his skull rise even before he made a conscious connection. The smell of sulfur was still there but now he could also detect a hint of something decaying in that scent. It was a hint, almost a shadow, of something long dead and moldering.

Gilkur had smelled this combination before, on the battlefield just weeks before when he and his warriors had been flung in to reinforce a defensive position crumbling before Amulon's hordes. At that place, the enemy had torn open a door to the ether. From it the demon they had summoned had been mowing down strong men like ripe wheat before a harvesting scythe. Again and again the demon's smoky transparent tentacles had shot out through the shimmering green tear in reality, peeling away whatever flesh they encountered from the skeletons of his men in ragged hunks and strips. He had managed – only just – to

break the key that kept the gate open while his men strove futilely to keep the demon's attention off him. Before the gate had been sealed, Gilkur's entire contingent of eighty-four warriors had fallen, as had another forty from another company. Still, it had been that victory that had turned the tide of battle to Toroth's favor. While the sight of that creature had been horrific, the stench had carved its profile into his brain with a permanence that threatened sanity; it had been the same nauseating stench as that which wafted to him now from somewhere in the keep.

In his mind, Gilkur could still clearly see the screaming faces of his men. He felt his breathing and heart trying to break into a gallop and bit down hard on the inside of his cheek. Pain jutted sharply into his mind from his cheek. A moment later the taste of blood returned Gilkur to the present.

He became aware of an irregular scraping sound coming from beyond the archway on his left.

Scratch, scratch. Scratch, scratch, scratch.

He angled his body slightly, but whatever was causing the noise was too far back in the shadows for Gilkur to make out its source. The harsh scraping brought to mind images of a large rodent scurrying restlessly around inside the walls. It came from the set of stairs that led into the gloomy recesses honeycombing the solid rock of the mountain below the keep.

"Norisse?" he called, "Is that you?"

At his voice, the scraping stopped. He listened intently for several seconds but could only make out the subdued crackling of the fire in the hearth before him and the soft moaning of the winter wind through the crenellations of the keep's towers.

Well, he thought, you may not be able to hear it, Gil, but ten to one odds whatever was making that noise is still there, and another twenty to one it's not Norisse. But if it is Norisse, you'll not be doing her any good dawdling around here like an old man with his finger up his bum. And if it's not her... He felt himself shrug. If it wasn't his wife, he thought, then he'd just as soon get this over with sooner than later.

As if to confirm his suspicions, the scuttling and scraping started up again. Gilkur crossed to one of the walls and pulled an unlit torch from one of the sconces. He returned to the fireplace to ignite the pitch at the torch's end. Then, with the torch in his left hand and his dagger clutched tightly in his right, he moved to the top of the stairs leading down into the almost palpable darkness below the keep. If answers were to be found, they were almost certainly there.

Gilkur followed the sound for nearly ten minutes, stopping now and again to make sure of the sound's direction. He had no doubt that whatever it was; it was clearly leading him downward toward tunnels under the keep that had been sealed long before his family had taken possession of this place. Twice he tried to overtake whatever creature was making the scraping – for a creature was what he knew it was, not a man, or even one of the keep's many dogs, but something hideously foreign and low to the ground – and twice he failed to get any closer. Once he caught the glint of torchlight shining off a pair of malevolent red eyes at the end of a corridor before their owner had dashed down another set of stairs. It seemed no matter how quickly he moved, it stayed just ahead of the flickering illumination of his torch.

Before long, he came to a place where the lower tunnels had been sealed off long before his father had taken over as Guardian of the Pass. This descent into darkness brought back other memories as well. Gilkur recalled the time when he and his older brother, Cathan, had come down here to see which of them was brave enough to find the dungeon's deepest point. They had both made it this far, a place where decades before, unknown masons had sealed off the lower sections of the tunnels presumably to keep young boys (and men as well, likely) from going too deep and getting lost. The heavy stones which had been so carefully mortared to create a wall, now lay strewn about the floor like the blocks of some Herculean child prone to temper tantrums.

The smell of subterranean dampness mingled with the increasingly fetid smell he had associated with his previous battle with the demon in Toroth; his gorge rose. Had he not feared losing sight of the creature, he would have stopped to tie a cloth over his face. Beneath him, Gilkur's tired feet shuffled relentlessly forward.

The creature, sometimes slowing to let him catch up, sometimes hurrying forward, led him down several twisting corridors. At each intersection he rasped his dagger across the wet stone leaving a mark to guide him out of this maze. However he was beginning to suspect that a return trip to the keep was not part of this dangerous encounter.

A part of him, the part that had been fighting back despair since his return, suggested that perhaps that was best. With his family lost and the keep and town deserted, perhaps this is where he should stay. But that voice was not alone. The voice of vengeance, normally tethered in the deeper recesses of his mind, was pulling at its bonds and becoming more insistent. It was this voice, the voice of his feral ancestry, no doubt, that kept his feet moving toward the sounds of his infernal guide.

In each corridor rows of rotting wooden doors hung askew on corroded hinges leaving the storage rooms behind them partially visible. Into each of these his torch threw more shadow than light. As he passed, the animated shadows leaped across piles of rotting crates and jumped between stacks of decaying supplies.

Gasping for breath, Gilkur came to another set of stairs. He could no longer hear the creature ahead of him. He found it was no longer necessary; he could make out a dim light pulsing up the spiral stair from whatever room lay at the bottom of these steps. The stench of decayed flesh emanating from below was overwhelming. With each faint pulse of illumination came the low sounds of wind moaning through the tunnels.

Gilkur felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up straight and wished once more for something more substantial than the glaringly inadequate dagger he clutched in his right hand. There was something inconceivably wrong about that sound. He could feel no wind against his skin. Even had there been he could think of no reason that the sound wind made should rise and fall in cadence with the sickly pulses of light. The light and moaning eddied and now he thought he could make out another familiar sound. He cocked his head to the side and listened. There, just audible below the sound of moaning and condensation dripping from the ceiling, was the unmistakable sobbing of a child. A quick search of his memory told him that there had been at least six children at the keep when he had departed. If this was one of those then perhaps there was yet hope to find the others.

Well, he thought, soonest begun, soonest done, and almost laughed at the ill-timed intrusion of one of his father's many inane bits of wisdom.

His eyes had begun to water badly and when he reached down with his left foot for the first step it encountered a dark film of slime that had grown over the surface of the steps. His heel shot out from under him and he crashed downward, sliding over the slick stone on his backside with increasing speed. The thought of tumbling into the room below both prone and defenseless was enough to send terror clawing through him and he dropped the torch to stop his descent before it could become a full-fledged avalanche.

A dull throb voiced itself from his ankle.

Well, that's a piss poor bit of timing to turn an ankle now, he thought.

He retrieved his torch with a grunt and cautiously got to his feet, gingerly putting weight on the turned ankle. The pain was sharp but bearable. He thought it would probably support him if he didn't ask too much of it. Holding the dagger slightly before him, he put his right shoulder against the outer wall to prevent another fall and descended the remaining twelve steps.

Gilkur reached the bottom step just as another orange pulse of light and chorus of moaning reached its crescendo. His knees threatened to buckle and he felt a groan of terror escape his lips. Grasping the archway next to him for support – he had once more dropped the sputtering torch – Gilkur stared wide-eyed into the face of pestilence itself.

Before him, in the center of a wide room lined with iron-barred cells and extending well beyond the reach of the available light, stood a shimmering orange hole in reality. The liquid surface roiled giving the gate the appearance of a boiling pool of viscous liquid standing vertically on its edge. In the center, a face only marginally human continuously shifted and contorted as if it were unable to hold any single form for more than a heartbeat. In one moment it had two eyes and a mouth, the next it had only a triple set of gaping, fang-lined mouths before moving on to its next transient form. Around this, rising to the gate's heaving surface only briefly before disappearing, Gilkur could see the faces those family members and comrades he had left behind in the keep. He watched in horror as Norisse's face, contorted in unbearable agony, rose to stare with sightless orange eyes before sinking from view. It was immediately replaced by the yawning visage of Crodar Fitwell, Oxwell's rotund innkeeper. From this hellish maelstrom issued the low pleading moans that he had mistaken for wind.

Gilkur's knees finally gave way and he found himself kneeling next to the wall, his body turned from the horrific scene and his face buried against his arms.

Gods, he thought, they're all in there. Every last one of them. Could the sight of such a thing make you go mad? Just days before he would have scoffed at such a notion; he had been witness to so many of the world's horrors. Now, here, perhaps in the presence of the Amulon Itself, he was no longer so sure.

"Gilkur." The rasping voice came from the gate behind him. It had an undeniable tone of command but Gilkur could also detect an underlying slipperiness, as though its owner had just downed a tankard of fish oil.

Gilkur opened his eyes but did not turn to face the gate. The moaning had eddied again and he once more became aware of a child's muffled sobs. He ventured a cautious glance toward its source. Off to his right, in the first cell, he could make out the huddled form of a child. The child's back was to him and it was impossible for him to tell if it was a boy or girl.

"Gilkur Alaan," the voice repeated, this time its gravelly tone was one of impatience.

Struggling to his feet, he turned to face the gate, his eyes downcast. He thought if he had to look at it just one more time he'd lose whatever tenuous hold he had on his sanity. He was surprised to notice that he had somehow managed to maintain his hold on the dagger. He also noticed how much gray there was in the hair that covered the backs of his hands and suddenly felt himself ancient beyond reason.

"I know the despair you feel, Gilkur." And now the voice had changed, had taken on the tones of sympathy. "Your friends and family are gone and so you no doubt feel at wits end. And with good reason. Yet, all is not lost. You have still a chance to redeem the souls of those dear to you."

At this, Gilkur forced his eyes toward the hideous apparition in the gate, not wanting to look again into the face of madness but not trusting what his ears told him without verification with his eyes. In place of the hideous montage of boiling faces, the gate's surface, now as calm and placid as a pond at dawn, contained only the composed, beardless face of a man in his middle years. Yet the calm before him felt wrong, tense, as if the previous motion was just below the surface, held in check by only but the brute force of some immense force of will.

Was it true? Could those closest to him, those for whom he bore the responsibility of protection, still be saved? His thoughts seemed to swim from him, just out of reach, his efforts to reach them hampered by the weight of the coldness that seemed to be flooding into the recesses of his mind.

"Not... too late?" he heard himself ask.

"No. Not too late and yet time grows short."

"Yes. Yes, of course." Gilkur's mind struggled to catch up with the gist of the conversation. "But why do you offer such aid? How do you benefit from the return of the keep?"

“I get only the benefit of restoring the order of things to their rightful balance. Such is enough.”

Gilkur sighed. He did not believe that – all such interventions had some effect on the world and judging from what he had seen in the gate, this creature, whatever its present guise, was not here to do good. But perhaps the question was unimportant. He was being given a chance to turn tragedy to good fortune. “What can I do? What is the cost of such a return?”

“Cost?” The face in the gate paused briefly, as if thinking this over. “The cost of such a thing is difficult to calculate, Gilkur Alaan. But I think you’d name the cost both dear and at the same time modest in exchange for the gain. An unsavory task is all that’s required to bring Alaan Keep, the town of Oxwell, and all their residents back to their former place.”

“What would you have me do?” he repeated.

“You must kill the child in yon cell.”

Gilkur eyes, pale blue orbs that had wandered down to the floor as he sought to collect his fleeting thoughts, twisted once more toward the gate. The features of that shimmering orange countenance were drawn down in apparent regret.

“The child?”

“Yes, blood must be bought with blood. It has always been so. And yet the price is not too dear, I think. This child is already near death. In the scheme of things you will only be hastening his return to the great circle but by a short time.”

He looked at that face and thought, *It’s mournful of the price it asks for this exchange*. But as his eyes continued to search he though he detected something else there, too. What was it, anticipation? *Or perhaps it’s just your tired mind filling in the blanks*, he thought. *It’s just so damn hard to concentrate*. He tore his eyes away and looked toward the huddled shape in the cell with regret and resignation.

“The child is sick? Going to die?” he asked, searching for justification that he did not need.

“Yes.”

Such a decision was no decision at all. How could he begin to balance the life of one dying child against the lives of so many others? Even were they not his kin and comrades he would have found the decision elementary if unpleasant. But these people were *not* strangers; they were those who counted on him for his judgment and protection. Somehow he had allowed that judgment to lapse and that lapse had brought catastrophe. Now, here was a chance to correct that failure, to set things right. Gilkur felt the heft of the dagger in his hand and adjusted its grip. Its twelve-inch blade was, he knew, nearly sharp enough to shave with and glowed orange with the light of the gate as if it had just been drawn from the forge. He knew of ways to make the task quick and, if not painless, at least bearable for the child. He forced himself out of his stupor enough to get his feet moving slowly toward the cell and the boy. He would carry out this bit of ugliness with a heavy heart but a dry eye.

The child huddled in the corner of the cell with its back toward Gilkur and its head down, almost in a posture of prayer. The pale, skinny legs of a young boy poked at him from beneath a blanket, shins against the cold stone floor. The blanket was made from the fine soft gray pelts of snow rabbits and Gilkur could see that along with the sobs that wracked the child’s small frame, he also shuddered with the effects of a high fever.

It occurred to him that the boy had probably seen no more than nine or ten summers before the hard practical part of his mind thrust that thought away. Turned away from him as the boy was, it was impossible for Gilkur to discover if he knew the child, if that a detail even mattered at this point. Such feelings of sentiment and kindness could only make the inevitable harder. He thought so trivial a fragment of knowledge as the boy’s identity was mute at this point.

He reached forward and grasped a handful of the boy’s shoulder-length brown hair firmly but gently with his left hand. He meant to turn the boy around and thrust the dagger into the boy’s heart, mercifully stopping that organ before the boy’s mind had a chance to

register more than the first of the pain. The boy's fever-slowed reactions, he thought, would make the timing of that approach even easier.

He drew back the dagger in his right hand, preparing for an upward thrust into the center of the boy's chest and pulled the youngster's head around toward him. Behind him, the orange light blazed and he could hear a surging moan of barely contained euphoria from the gate. But all this he only registered as background noise, as someone might register the voices and lights of a party taking place behind a half closed door. The blade had already begun its dreadful ascent when he met the boy's eyes. This he had meant to do, for to take the boy's life without looking him in the eyes would have meant a dishonor with which he was unprepared to struggle for the rest of what days remained to him.

But instead of the listless fevered eyes of child breathing his last, Gilkur was surprised to encounter the clearly aware gaze of a terrified but determined child hanging desperately to life. In that instant, he had a clear memory of a terrible dream from his youth. In that dream – one almost obliterated by time and the terrible fever that had wracked his body – he had been kneeling naked and shivering on a stone floor in the terrible presence of an orange god of fire. And of an aging warrior with haunted eyes coming to sacrifice him to that god.

Gilkur stopped the blade with a huge mental effort. Its tip had already pierced a half a finger's breadth into the boy's skin just below the breastbone and a thin runnel of blood welled out around the blade and down the boy's stomach.

At the same time he felt a searing white-hot burning from the scar he bore in the same place on his own chest, a scar that had appeared mysteriously during his sickness as a child. With this pain his thoughts, mired in a sludge of thick oil for the past hour, returned to their normal clarity.

Me! he thought, *This boy is me!*

"And what of it?" the voice of the gate demanded, seeming to read his thoughts. The mask of melancholy calm in that voice was gone, replaced by the demonic rasping it had been when Gilkur had first entered the room. "Do you hold your own life so dear that its value is more precious than all the other lives in the town and keep. Lives you were sworn to protect."

Yes, what of it? he thought, looking down at the boy's panting, terrified face. His own face. He felt the trembling tension in his right hand increase and the dagger slipped another fraction of an inch into the boy's chest. He imagined he could feel the frantic beating of that young heart just beneath the tip of his blade. *To bring them all back, Norisse and the others...*

Yes, he thought, to bring the others back he could drive this blade into his own heart. But the lord in him demanded an answer, demanded to know the why of it.

He turned his gaze once more toward the gate and was unsurprised to find it had returned to its original state. Two inhuman faces, connected at the ear, stared balefully at him from its once more boiling surface.

"Do it!" the two mouths demanded in a screeching discord that dragged Gilkur's tortured eardrums across a row of icy razors. Simultaneously the chorus of moans from the souls trapped beneath the gate's surface rose to a cataclysmically mournful crescendo that made his eyes water and his heart cry out.

Gilkur opened his mouth to demand a reason, for all the good it would do him, and then closed it again. What reason did there need to be when demonic forces were involved? Indeed, didn't such entities by their very nature *defy* reason? Yes, that was part of it, he decided. But he didn't think that was the whole of it. There was something else here, some potentially important piece of this puzzle that was missing. But with the screams of his friends and family pounding on his ears and the wild and somehow hypnotic pulsing of the gate in his eyes, his mind kept sliding by it whenever he seemed to be getting close.

He was on the point of abandoning his mental search when the clear vision of a similar gate on the battlefield of Toroth entered his mind. He had no idea if this vision came from within him or from some other source, but it had the effect of snapping that missing

puzzle piece into place. Closing that gate had been a turning point in the battle. Just as the battle had itself been pivotal. How many countless people would have died if the outcome of that battle had gone the other way, if Amulon's forces had overrun Toroth and the surrounding kingdoms? Gilkur had no idea what that number might be but he saw clearly where this chain of logic ended. Suddenly all the choices seemed to lead to damnation and he could feel the frayed strings of his sanity starting to give way. He watched in horror as Norisse's pleading face rose once more to the surface of the gate and for a single breath tensed his arm to drive the blade home.

But as Gilkur turned back to the boy's sweat-stained, gasping face, he knew he could not. He flung the dagger away from him and heard it clatter against the bars of one of the cells. As he did so, there was a scream of outrage and fury behind him. The orange light faded and with it so did the boy until Gilkur was left holding only air.

Alone in the oppressive darkness beneath the keep, Gilkur dropped to his knees, his face in his hands, and began to weep.

*** The End ***