

DRAGON HEART

By

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For the Third Foundation



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## CHAPTER 1:

### Revelation



War arose in the Land of Light, Criton and his loyal siblings fighting against the Dark One and his brothers, who betrayed the Light. The Dark One and his supporters fought Criton and his followers; but the rebels were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in the Lord of Light's realm. The Dark One was thrown out onto Centuria, and his supporters were exiled with him. And I heard a voice saying in the Land of Light, "Woe to you, O Centuria, for the Dark One has come to you!"

When the Dark One saw that he was on Centuria, he pursued Daethian women who would bear him male children. But by the magic of Corin some of the women were given the two wings of the Bronze Dragon that they might fly from the Dark One into the wilderness of Dumnonia, to the place where they would nourish the warriors who will end the Dark One's reign.

--from *The Book of Light*

Shashtah's desert boots pounded against the algae-covered stone in time to the wild hammering of his heart. The magically-sustained plants that clung to the tunnel floor, roof and walls, gave off a faint glow to his light-sensitive eyes. Using the diaphanous gleam as a guide, he ducked, twisted sidewise, broad-jumped and hurdled through the tomb-dark maze in the heart of Mount Cinnamar. Half by memory, half by faith, he fled through corridor after

corridor, praying he would not collide with unforgiving stone. The certainty that his body would be torn into unrecognizable shreds and his soul scattered to the desert winds if he fell drove him as a prong-horned skympsam flees before a ten-winter storm. He ran as though all the demons of Cinnamar were after him.

Which they were.

Except for the one that was in front of him.

Half a heartbeat too late, Shashtah sensed the slight shift in the darkness. He tried to stop, but his boots were better adapted to climbing dunes than to scrabbling down prison halls. He lost traction and skidded directly toward his enemy. He accepted his fate with a philosophical shrug and held onto his turban with his right hand. He crouched and slid toward what he hoped were the demon's legs.

A massive weight, more oppressive than the presence of the mountain above him, brushed past his arms and over his head. The reek of decayed flesh filled his lungs, causing him to gag.

Shashtah spun out of his skid.

The horde at his heels suddenly came horn to claw with the monstrosity that was now at his back. Squeals of pain and fury lanced through the dank air as the demons tore at each other in their eagerness to pursue their prey, only making the tangle of limbs and body parts worse.

Shashtah didn't wait for them to sort themselves out. He fled blindly down tunnel after tunnel until he felt the stone floor level out. His lungs screamed for air as he bore sharply to his left. He took a deep breath--and immediately regretted the action as he choked on the prison's stench. *Down, right, down, down, right, up, left, down, and out!* He forced himself to concentrate on his escape route, silently chanting the path through the maze in time to his throbbing pulse.

Somewhere behind him, the demons finally disentangled themselves and renewed the chase.

Not that Shashtah could blame them. He did, after all, have the black pulsing jewel that contained the heart of the Dark One clutched tightly in his left fist.

Stairs heading down appeared out of nowhere in front of him. He half-jumped, half-plummeted to the next floor, holding his desert cloak tight against his body to keep the fabric from billowing within reach of the claws that slashed at him out of the darkness. Pain shocked through his ankles as he landed at the bottom of the steps, but his bones failed to break. The howls and gibbering of a squabble at the top of the stairs gave him the incentive he needed to limp on.

The horde of demons, prevented by the cramped space of the corridor from taking their true forms and using their most powerful magical abilities, shaped themselves into wind and mist in one final effort to catch him.

Shashtah heard the inhuman cries change to the lonely howl of the North Wind just as his straining eyes located the one spot on the tunnel wall that was not glistening with algae. He closed his eyes and dove head-first toward solid rock. He grinned at the demons' screams of frustration as he passed through the illusion and vanished beyond their grasp.

Shashtah emerged into glaring sunlight that would have blinded anyone except a Dumnonian. He landed in a tuck on the rocky outcropping that jutted out of the sand below him. He tumbled down the barren slope in an undignified tangle of cloth and sand, saying a private prayer of thanks to Leot, Lord of Light, whose merciless orb burned down on the blistering dunes. *Full daylight!* he congratulated himself. *Excellent timing! Now if the legends of Lord Criton's binding spells are true, most of the demons won't be able to emerge until nightfall and the worst ones will remain trapped in the mountain, unable to follow me at all!*

Shashtah drew lungful after lungful of the fresh, desert air into his aching chest as he waited for his solid amber eyes to darken against the glare. Those eyes were the only major thing about his appearance that marked him as closer kin to the elves of the Great Woods than to the Daethians. The elves had the same, otherworldly eyes, ones with neither pupils nor whites. But elven eyes tended more toward greens and violets in color. Plus, Shashtah had yet to meet any elf whose eyes would naturally shield him from the brightness of the desert in full sunlight.



As soon as Shashtah's vision adjusted, he stood up and dusted himself off. Runnels of sweat poured down his deeply tanned face and onto his linen shirt. He wiped his dirt-smudged, beardless chin with his right hand and licked at the moisture out of habit. He had tried to teach a Daethian trader that trick of survival once, but the man's fluids proved too salty to slake his own thirst. Apparently the Dumnonian ability to reclaim water from their own bodies was yet another adaptation to their hostile homeland for which they could thank the Lord of Light.

Shashtah combed his damp, layer-cut, blue-black hair into place with his fingers, revealing his slightly pointed ears. While trading in the shadow of the Dragon's Back Mountains, he tended to keep his hair carefully combed over his ear tips to hide the one other feature that truly differentiated him from the Daethians. He had found that his ears rather than his eyes bothered his customers most for some reason he could not understand. In the deep desert, though, he had no need to hide the strange feature. In fact, at the moment he had great need of it.

Shashtah stood about a third of the way up the peak on the only mountain in the immense wasteland that was Cinnamar. The desert winds whistled around him as they sliced across the mouth of the canyon that sheltered the secret entrance. He listened intently with his superior hearing. No sounds of pursuit mixed with the soul-chilling howl of the winds.

The jet-black stone in Shashtah's left fist throbbed wildly, demanding his attention.

Shashtah stared in disbelief at the obscene gem. *Did I really do it? A lowly desert nomad who is still unworthy of a Dragon? Did I really do what countless Krills and other thieves have died--or worse--trying to accomplish?*

His only answer was the unholy pulsing of the stone.

Shashtah's fingers absently brushed against the brightly-colored patterns that danced across his leather belt as he stuffed his prize into his pouch. The belt was the one piece of Dumnonian flamboyance that he allowed himself. He'd chosen camouflaging, sand-colored cloth and leather for the rest of his garb, but the belt had been a gift from his parents when he had departed on his first mission for the Dumnonian king, Shaharadesh. That was the last time he had been truly happy, the last time he had seen either of his parents alive. The tales of long-dead heroes and their foes paraded around his waist in a glorious swirl of jewel-tone dyes: ruby, topaz, emerald, sapphire and amethyst. *Foes no longer*, he corrected himself. *Now we all have but one foe.* Shashtah felt himself shiver in the desert heat, more at the irony of the alliance between the Dumnonian Dragonriders and the Daethian Dragonslayers, than at the chill of the sweat drying on his golden brown skin.

All his life Shashtah had wanted to be a Dragonrider. The Bronze Dragons of Dumnonia, with their armored hides, fearsome breaths and gem-like eyes had fascinated him since he had seen his first dragonette, Tphah, at

the court of Dameth, Dragonlord of Dumnonia. For some reason he still could not understand, his father, Garesh, who usually avoided Dragons like a simoom, had taken the entire caravan to watch Dameth receive the Fledgling Tphah at his basecamp after Shaharadesh assigned her to him. Shashtah still bristled at the way Dameth had stared completely through Garesh and his followers--centaurs, Galantites, Krills, sprites, and even a giant who could use weather magic. Granted, the Dragonlord must have survived at least ten solo missions into Cinnamar to earn his Dragon, Tlee, but Garesh had survived almost seven times that many. The only difference between the two Dumnonians was that Dameth had foresworn all followers in exchange for his Dragon, and Garesh had given up the chance to ride a Dragon in exchange for his caravan of powerful misfits. Every Dumnonian warrior faced that same choice, and, growing up as he had in a dragonless camp, Shashtah could not favor either side. He only knew that from the moment he saw Tphah's glistening eyes, the life of the Dragonrider was the only life for him. Shashtah had undertaken nine missions for the Dumnonian king in the hope of reaching that goal. Nine times he had succeeded beyond even the fantasies of his admittedly irrepressible imagination and had been able to shower Shaharadesh with marvelous gifts. His efforts to impress his king had left him with little more than his weapons, his horse, and the clothes on his back. But the last gift, a talking sword seized from the hands of a dying werewolf, had earned him the right to undertake his tenth mission, his Dragonquest. *Now, if I can just*

*find a way to get this gem into Shaharadesh's hands, he'll have to give me a Dragon!*

For a heartbeat Shashtah fancied that he heard his long-dead mother's voice carried on the fierce winds: "Dragons on the brain, I tell you! Don't you ever think about anything else?"

A harsh laugh tore from Shashtah's throat. Even his mother would have had to admit a Dragon might be handy at the moment. Blood flowed freely from a dozen cuts beneath rends in his sand-colored shirt and his leather trousers as he stared at the mouth of the canyon.

Mount Cinnamar wasn't much of a mountain. It looked a lot bigger than it was simply because there was nothing but barren wasteland around it for countless wingspans in all directions. Nothing had lived in Cinnamar for as long as the Dark One had ruled there. No grasses struggled to survive among the stones on the treacherous slope. No ants carved a home in the shade of the rocky shelf. Not even a fly stirred to bother Shashtah's wounds. Only ghosts and demons and devils and other things that had never lived, or that hadn't had the decency to die, populated the lifeless country. *How long can I survive out here, even if the Dark One's forces fail to find me after sunset?*

Shashtah mentally shrugged the question to the back of his mind. Daethian-style thinking had no place in the desert. Out here, faith was all that mattered. If he believed he would survive, somehow the Lord of Light would

grant him the power to do so--even if his physical body died. Only the loss of his soul could change that, and he had no intention of losing his soul.

The panic Shashtah had felt in the clutches of the demons finally receded enough for his stomach to remind him he was starving. His last meal before he had left on his Dragonquest had consisted of unleavened bread, water and a single date. Some ancestral memory insisted that the hero's feast had been more elaborate in years gone by, when caravans had streamed across the barren wastes under the careful watch of the Dragonriders of Dumnonia. Now, almost all of the food the Dumnonians could scavenge went to their precious reptilian mounts, and Shashtah did not begrudge the fabulous creatures their sustenance one bit. Somehow the desert people's bodies had adjusted to the need, developing the power to subsist on a diet that would have killed a Daethian within a rotation--the twenty-day cycle that regulated the lives of the Dumnonian Dragonriders. The Daethian wisemen speculated that the powerful magics that warped the desert landscape had somehow mutated the desert dwellers as well. Shashtah preferred to think that the ability was a blessing granted to them by his god so that the Dragons might exist. Whatever the case, food was something that could wait until he reached safety.

His injuries, though, were another matter. If he wanted to be alive to eat when he did walk out of Cinnamar, he needed to do something to stop his bleeding.

Shashtah glanced around until he found his camel-colored turban lying on the sand. He picked it up and used his bejeweled jambiya to tear pieces from the cloth. He bound his injuries tightly enough to stop the flow of blood but not so firmly as to cut off his circulation. He worked with the speed of long practice. The last thing on Centuria he wanted was to give those living nightmares another chance at him. They would have just that far too soon if he failed to put enough distance between himself and the mountain before nightfall. Satisfied he was not going to bleed to death, he climbed up to the rocky shelf and raised his darkened amber eyes to scan the horizon.

Seif dunes stretched away from him, running for thousands of wingspans parallel to the north and south winds. Of all the realms on Centuria, only the countries of Rashtar, Daethia and Dumnonia remained free from the evil powers locked in the mountain beneath his feet.

Rashtar lay far to the northeast, beyond the Dragon's Back Mountains. The barbarians, who lived behind the formidable natural barrier, largely ignored the conflict with the Dark One except when a Cinnamarian or two actually managed to slip through Daethia's defenses or found a magical pool or other means to transport them into Rashtar. Then the Rashtarians made short work of their enemies.

Daethia and Dumnonia, however, shared borders with Cinnamar. Unwilling to abandon lush farmlands and magical forests for the open desert, Elves, Galantites and Krills had crowded within the Dragonslayers' tiny country

of Daethia, about three days' ride to the east of Mount Cinnamar. Shashtah could cut across the seif dunes and hope to reach the Elven or Daethian border patrols before the demons found him. To hide among so many until he could find a caravan to carry him to the King's Camp would be Hatchling's play. But navigating around the enormous dunes would be treacherous.

The vast expanse of Shashtah's homeland, Dumnonia, stretched several days' journey to the north. He could pick a gassi, a path sliced between the dunes by the vicious north wind, follow it part of the way, and then turn his horse loose. With luck, one of the patrols from a Dragonlord's basecamp would spot either him or his stallion if a sandstorm didn't bury them first. Or he might find a magical warp that would carry him far away from Mount Cinnamar. If he reached a basecamp, he could hire on with a caravan that was heading to the King's Camp. The mere prospect of trying to cross the expanse of Cinnamar toward the brutal deserts of Dumnonia instead of toward the farmlands and forests of Daethia seemed insane at best.

*Then again, is not every warrior who dreams of skimming through the desert skies on dragonwings a bit sunstruck?* Shashtah grinned as he drew a bit of horsehair from his second belt pouch. His slender fingers sketched the image of a horse in the air. Sparks glittered like diamonds as he prayed silently, *May I see the mount that Thou hast hidden for me.*

A black desert stallion and all of his tack shimmered into existence before him.

Shashtah crooned softly to the spirited animal as he removed the hobbles from the stallion's legs. Then he pulled a bit of multicolored ash out of the same pouch. As he scattered the ash on the wind he prayed, *May the hooves of my horse leave no mark upon the sand.* The second invocation was as unnecessary as the first had been, but, as a warrior several days' ride from any hope of help, he felt a prayer or two wouldn't hurt.

Shashtah vaulted onto the stallion's back. Water might be to the east, but Dumnonia and the Bronze Dragons waited for him to the north. The malevolent jewel safe in his pouch and dreams of his future Dragon in his heart, he dug his heels into his horse's ribs and rode for home.

\* \* \*

For the better part of two candlecars Shashtah's stallion cantered north along the rocky gassi between two massive seif dunes. Only desert mounts had such stamina beneath the strength-sapping heat of the merciless sun. Any other horse would have dropped dead before running a hundred wingspans. But even the splendid stallion had his limits. Shashtah slipped to the sand and walked his mount, giving the horse small drinks from his nearly-empty waterskin. The sun was already sinking low in the sky by the time Shashtah judged that it was safe enough to ride again. Walking had helped to keep his wounds from stiffening, but the injuries burned, ever-present reminders of



what would emerge from Mount Cinnamar when the sun finally set and Lord Criton's spells weakened enough for the demons to escape.

As Shashtah rode north into the growing darkness, he dreamed of the Dragon who would be his when he reached the King's Camp. Young or old, male or female, he didn't much care. All he wanted was to Bond with one of the magnificent creatures and to know that he would never be alone again. They would join a century and fly together over the glittering sands, carrying "Eternal Death to the Dark One!" with their fellow Dragons and Riders. They would soar effortlessly on the desert winds, crossing above harrats and kavirs and wadis, hunting their enemies, driving away lesser creatures with the Dragon's noxious breath and reducing powerful demons to ash with bolts of pure magic.

Shashtah felt his stallion stumble, jarring him back to his surroundings. The sun had set, and the shadows had grown too dark for most non-desert creatures to see. Shashtah slid to the sand and removed the stallion's tack. He gave his weary mount the last of his water. Then he held the sweat-drenched horse's head close to his own. "May the Light shine upon my tongue and my ears that the words of this noble creature shall be clear to me and that my words shall make sense to him," he whispered. Pure white light radiated from his fingertips.

"What more must you ask of me?" the stallion panted, his language suddenly comprehensible under the effects of the spell.

"Fetch help," Shashtah commanded.

The stallion nodded his willingness to obey, neighed his challenge at the desert winds, and cantered north.

*May the Light protect my stallion and show him the way.* The benediction whispered through Shashtah's heart.

The wind had shifted. A steady sirocco now blew out of the south. The silhouette of the Dark One's mountain had long been hidden by the great seif dunes, but Shashtah could imagine the shadows stirring on its slopes. The demons would soon be upon him.

Shashtah felt his soul quiver. He had best keep moving while he still could. He paused long enough to bury his horse's tack in the sand to hide his trail. Then he took a deep breath and trudged northward in his stallion's wake.

Not being a particularly bright lot, the demons took until well after moonrise to locate the weary Dumnonian.

Shashtah's heart originally leapt with joy at the sound of leather wings, envisioning a Dragonrider coming to his rescue. Then he remembered that the prevailing wind had shifted, and his heart sank. He scanned the sky with his sharp night vision.

Demons filled the air. Bat-winged they were for the most part, with more limbs and horns and eyes than any natural creature would have dared to boast. Patches of hide, fur, scales and decaying flesh in an appalling array of

disgusting colors shimmered in the moonlight. Hell-flames ringed some of the monsters, while others seemed either too dull-witted or incompetent to understand that kind of torment. Atop one of the larger demons sat a being more jackal than man. Impressively tall in spite of a wicked curvature of his upper spine that betrayed a once-broken back, he--it was most definitely a "he"--strained with sturdy tendons and stringy muscles to maintain his perch on the demon's shoulders, just in front of its massive wings. The ribs of the creature's gaunt chest threatened to puncture his mangy yellow hide. A ridge of scraggly black hair rose along his spine from his tailless buttocks to the base of his canine skull, near equine ears that were flattened against the wind. Thirst-blackened lips pulled back in a sneer. Sadistic yet intelligent yellow eyes peered out from beneath the creature's heavy brow. He giggled obscenely as his glistening black nose scented his prey. The monstrosity wore no clothes except for a tattered black kilt he had stolen from a deceased member of the Kyondoca, Daethia's elite guards. The kilt did nothing to hide the fact that his organ was erect with the thrill of the hunt. He flourished a giant flail above his head. Three wicked, spiked balls flashed in the moonlight at the end of thick chains. Only one metal shone that brightly in any light: Galantite, for which the diminutive miners of Mount Paradin were named. Only one of the Dark One's henchman had ever amassed enough of the precious metal to have a magical weapon of torture forged in the hellfires of Mount Cinnamar: Yapada.

Shashtah shuddered involuntarily as he recognized the Demonlord and his deadly lash. *He's too powerful! How was he able to escape the mountain?*

Fingers numb with fear, he reached into his belt pouch and extracted the pulsing black gem. "Let me go, or I'll destroy it!"

"What could you possibly do to the container of the Dark One's heart?" Yapada cackled.

*Steal it.* The words flitted through Shashtah's mind, but he had no time to dwell on the thought as he watched the demons perching along the crests of the dunes, blocking his escape in all directions.

Yapada vaulted to the sand and bowed toward the stone.

The black gem flared with dark light.

Yapada grinned, revealing hideously yellowed fangs. He tested the weight of his flail in his hand as his ears pricked forward, eagerly awaiting the sound of his victim's screams. "Prepare him."

Several demons rushed into the gassi.

Shashtah cringed as they grasped him with their claws and nails, but he resisted the temptation to struggle, knowing all too well that he would need every grain of his strength to survive what was to come.

The demons tore the cloak and shirt from their victim. Tentacles wrapped around Shashtah's wrists and ankles and held him spread-eagled, bare back to the Demonlord. They lifted him slightly off the ground so his feet could not take any of his weight.

The muscles on Shashtah's back stretched tight, which he knew would only increase his suffering. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to release the tension he could feel building within him. It did no good.

Yapada, a master of torture, held his blow for what seemed like an eternity, letting his helpless prey writhe in anticipation of the imminent pain.

The gem, still clutched tightly in Shashtah's left fist, pulsed wildly in time to his own frantic heartbeat.

The three spiked balls finally whistled through the chill night air and tore deep furrows across Shashtah's back. Instead of breaking bone, the magic in the weapon created the all-too-real illusion that the flail was also shredding his soul.

The evil gem glowed brighter and melded to Shashtah's hand, sucking at his torment.

When Shashtah's muscles stopped contracting uncontrollably with pain, the flail whirred toward him a second time.

Shashtah convulsed and arched his back in agony at the blow.

Yapada's giggle set the demons to gibbering with delight.

The stone blazed in Shashtah's hand as he contorted in pain beneath the merciless lash.

Yapada waited until Shashtah's muscles ceased twitching then landed a third blow.

A prayer that he might lose consciousness flittered through Shashtah's shattered thoughts.

He must have screamed the prayer aloud, for the Demonlord's laughter redoubled. "Why would I deprive my Lord of his feast?"

What was left of Shashtah's mind tried to recoil into unconsciousness, but the force within the stone kept him alert and fully aware of his lacerated flesh.

The Demonlord struck a fourth time.

The half-flayed Dumnonian realized that he must have screamed again, since his throat suddenly hurt worse than his back.

The gem in his hand became a beacon of darkness, splitting the air with its unholy light.

Yapada landed a fifth blow.

Shashtah's world twisted into a simoom of pain and terror as the evil within the stone suckled on the essence of his soul.

As the beating continued, Yapada held each blow, waiting for Shashtah's muscles to stop shivering with pain and for the expectation of the next lash to become almost unbearable.

Through it all Shashtah battled with the heart of the evil god. Long after he relinquished any hope of his physical body living through the night, he struggled to keep what he could of the divine spark within him intact. In some strange way the pain actually helped, clearly delineating what was flesh and what was not. He ceased praying to his god for aid, fearing that the effort would distract him from his internal war and doom him forever to such torments at the whim of the heart's owner.

At dawn the demons vanished, chased back into their prison by Lord Criton's spells.

Shashtah lay bleeding onto the sand where the demons dropped him. The grains felt cool against his feverish face. He concentrated on pulling air into his lungs and letting it out again even though his shredded muscles protested at every breath. For a few heartbeats he fancied he was dead, but he knew he had to be alive. *Being dead wouldn't hurt this much.* He had no idea how many lashes he had taken. He did know, though, that there was only one reason he had not been smashed to a paste candlescars ago. *Magic . . .* He had no way to fight such power. He could not pull his thoughts together enough to summon water to slake his thirst or manna to give him strength. *Even if I could think straight, I don't know a single spell that would be of any use against Yapada's power.* Depression wrapped around his heart. Strangely, the despair helped to calm him. His pulse slowed, and he opened his eyes.

The dark stone still shone in his left hand.

Shashtah's fingers remained cramped tightly around the gem. Either he could not drop it or it would not let itself be dropped.

Through the heat of the day Shashtah felt the evil presence in the stone keeping him alive, delighting in his thirst and hunger and anguish as he lay exposed in the midday sun. Fortunately, no native animals existed in Cinnamar, so there were no vultures nor anything else to feed on his torn flesh. The only wind was a zephyr from the north, too gentle to carry sand to settle on him. His injuries crusted over in the brutal heat, and his bleeding stopped. He pieced his thoughts together as best he could. *Maybe my horse will find help.* He clenched his teeth against the insane laugh that tried to follow the sunstruck notion. The nearest basecamps were far to the north, beyond the Border, hidden in secret locations among the dunes. Even if his stallion did stumble into a warp that brought him out near any of them, someone still had to spot the horse and figure out what message he was carrying. Then that person would have to retrace the stallion's path, travel through the warp—assuming that the warp even went two ways—and figure out which gassi to follow. Shashtah closed his eyes tightly. *It's impossible.*

The rays of the sun as it started to pass behind the peak of the dune touched the gem.

Shashtah saw the flash through his eyelids.

The light sliced through him, and he heard a voice: *Have faith.*



*Why not?* Shashtah seized the light and gathered it tightly in his heart. *I have nothing else.*

\* \* \*

Night fell again, and, when the crescent-shaped moon rose in the star-filled sky, the demons and their commander returned.

At a signal from Yapada, tentacles hauled Shashtah's abused body into the air.

"Back for more?" Shashtah croaked through cracked lips.

The Demonlord grinned, his yellowed fangs flashing in the scant moonlight. "So willing! The Dark One will feed well tonight!"

Certain he could not endure another night under the vicious flail, Shashtah begged, "Just take the stone!" His harsh whisper hurt his ears almost as much as it hurt his throat.

Yapada giggled. "Prepare him!"

*Why won't he take the stone?* Shashtah's mind raced, searching for an answer as the demons spread-eagled him once more. His reason scattered as the first blow landed on his destroyed back. He was stunned that his body was still capable of feeling more pain.

The gem flashed in the darkness, pressing against his hand with a will of its own and feeding on his ever-increasing agony.

Slowly the truth began to take shape. *The demons can't touch the stone. But then why not carry me into the mountain with it? Unless they can't carry me into the mountain while I possess the stone. Or the stone possesses me.*

Shashtah shuddered from the pain of another lash.

By the time dawn came again and the demons disappeared, Shashtah knew with dread certainty that the Dark One and his servants had no intention of letting him die. They planned to keep him alive until they completely destroyed his soul. He had used the last grain of his faith to maintain his true essence through the final blows from Yapada's cursed flail. He could not let the Demonlord flog him a third time. Slowly, in excruciating pain and trusting to the hungry god within the gem to keep him alive, Shashtah shifted his battered body to face the north and began to crawl.