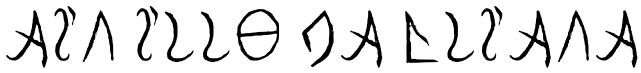

Dawnbringer: Legacy

A Tale of Irándiel

Following upon the Story of

Dawnbringer: Lightborn

Joshua Elzner

A Note to the Reader:

The events of this book take place in the years accompanying and following the narrative recounted in "Dawnbringer: Lightborn," and while the main protagonists of the latter are not the focus of this book, it is nonetheless highly recommended that you read the previous saga first, both for the sake of context and also to avoid a number of significant albeit unavoidable spoilers. That story sets the stage for this one, and thus should be read first if possible.

To learn more about the author or for further writings and creative work—including worldbuilding and music—you may visit his website:

atthewellspring.com

talesofirandiel.atthewellspring.com

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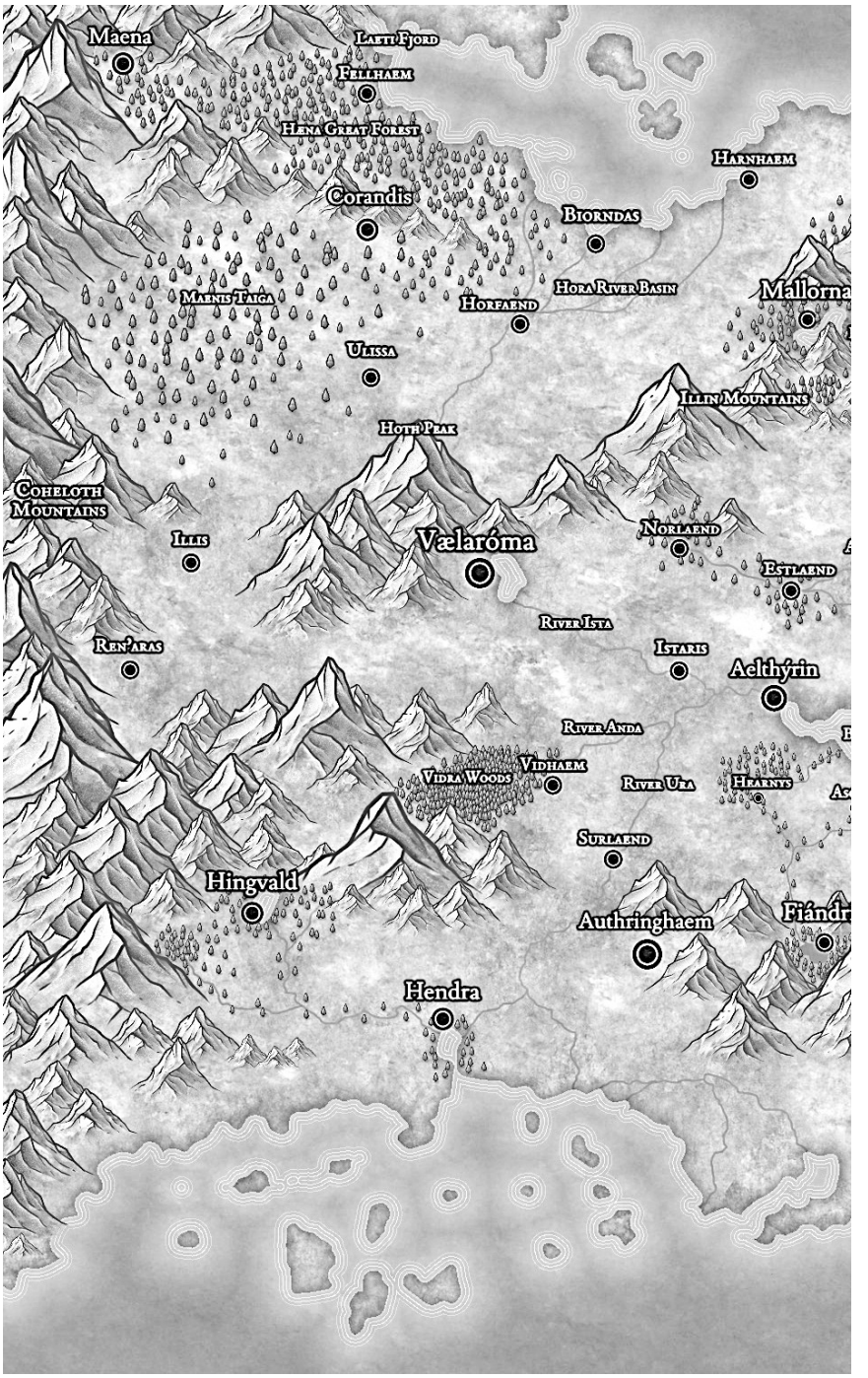
Phonetic Spelling of Central Names and Words

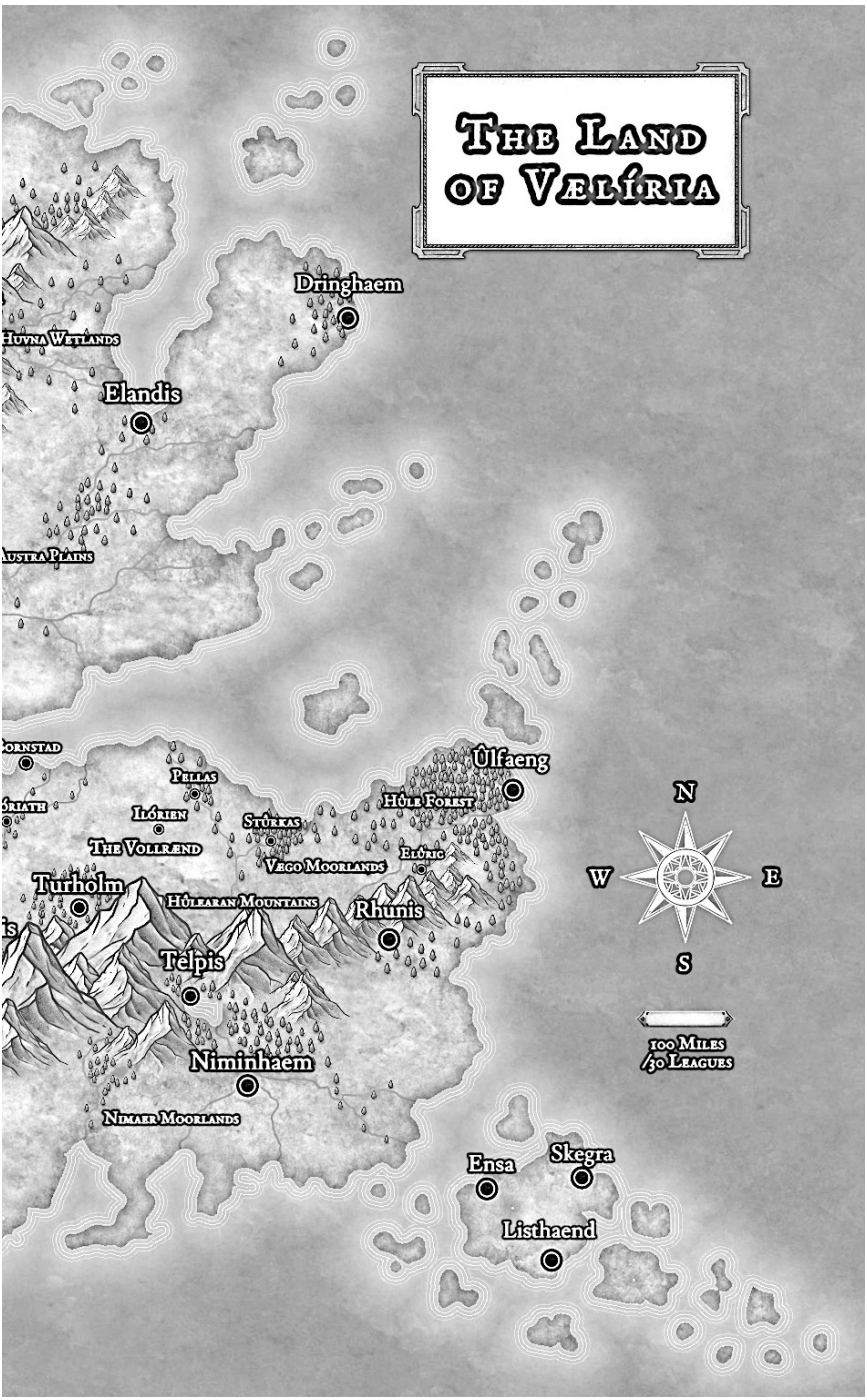
Despite their different development over a number of centuries, the tongues of Vǽliria and Telmérion have the same root, deriving from the same linguistic and racial ancestors. Thus the pronunciations are almost identical, and many words are shared between the two languages.

Aelthýrin – ah'ehl-THIH-rehn
Aeyósha Hasilómë – āy-OH-shah hah-sih-LOH-meh
Albrýndaer Hríndas – ahl-BRIN-dair hren-dahs
Anaíon – ah-NEYE-ohn (as in "eye")
Arechaíon – ah-reh-KEYE-ohn
Astër – AH-stehr
Belheróth – bell-heh-ROHTH
Benaíon – behn-EYE-ohn
Bruï – broo-ee
Daeran – day-rahn
Dágra – DAH-grah
Draíon – DREYE-ohn
Édvin – AYD-vihn
Égill – AY-gill
Eldáru – el-DAH-roo
Eöten – eh-OH-tehn
Germûndi – gehr-MOON-dee
Hældáris Illómiel – hail-DAHR-is ill-OH-mee-el
Hæras – hay-rahs (plural hærási, hay-rah-see)
heurin – hyoo-rihn
Igrándsil – ee-GRAHND-sihl
Irandielístë – ih-rahn-dee-ehl-EES-teh
Îsáric Stendä – ee-SAH-rihk STEHN-dah
Ílya Mýrica – IHL-yah MIH-rihk-ah
Meléngthar – meh-LEHNG-thahr
Midrôchus – mid-ROH-kuhs
Mineäsi – mihn-eh-AH-see
Mórnwyn – mohrn-wehn
mykkëvéngr – mih-keh-VEHN-gr
norándas – nohr-AHN-dahs
Neréthion – neh-REH-thee-ohn
nomári – noh-MAH-ree
norándas – noh-RAHN-dahs
Onylándun – oh-nee-LAN-duhn
Onælándi – oh-nay-LAN-dee
ötûnr – oh-TOON-r
Relmaríndë – rehl-mah-RIN-deh
Rhovánni – roh-VAH-nee
Rhóvas – ROH-vahs

Symbélyia – sim-BEH-lee-ah
Soldís – sohl-DIS
Stûrkas – STOOR-kahs
Synnóvë – sih-NOH-veh
Telmérion – tehl-MEH-ree-ohn
Télmoth – TEHL-mohth
Toróäs – tohr-OH-ahs
Ûlfaeng – oohl-fayng
ûrandi – ooh-RAHN-dee
Vægo – VAY-goh
Vælíria – vay-LIH-ree-ah
vrû'ádach – vroo-AH-dak (or DACH, guttural)
Winfréyi – wihn-FREH-yee

The Land of Vælíria




The Land of Vælíria
Dringhaem
Huvna Wetlands
Elandis
Austra Plains
Cornstad
Briath
Pellas
Iláthien
The Vollrænd
Stúrkas
Vægo Moorlands
Hóle Forest
Elólic
Úlfaeng
Turholm
Húllafan Mountains
Rhunis
Telpis
Niminhaem
Nimaer Moorlands
N
W
E
S
100 Miles
/30 Leagues
Ensa
Skegra
Listhaend

Book 1:

A Song for Vælíria

Prologue

I ask myself why nostalgia is such a powerful and visceral emotion, why my mind is inexorably drawn to the early years of my life as to a haven of security and a space of precious beauty, even though it was also a time of darkness, hardship, and loss. Is it solely because in this emotion—in nostalgia, though the word perhaps is inadequate—I long for the "good old times" when things were simpler? I do not think that explains just how deep the ache goes, the tugging in the pit of the stomach and the tearing of the heart. No, of course it does not. After all, when I contemplate deeply this sense, I realize that I do not desire to return to my childhood or my youth, nor to the circumstances that enfolded me during that time. My heart desires something else entirely: something glimpsed during that time but existing beyond it. Something timeless and eternal.

But if nostalgia is a longing for something timeless, why then does it spring from memory or awaken memory? I suppose it is because *memory*, as paradoxical as it may sound, is inseparable from *longing*. All longing is born from remembrance, for it is stirred on toward the beauty that we do not yet know by the beauty that we have once known. The human heart cannot desire unless it first remembers, and memory gives birth to desire. This is true even if this memory be nothing but the memory-before-memory that is impressed as a seal upon my inmost being in my very coming to be in this world, in the Love that surpasses all memory and experience but stands at the origin of it all.

Yes, and remembrance of the past is always also simultaneously longing for the future. Nostalgia seeks to cast a bridge from the present to the past, but it does so not merely to re-live the past, but in order to open up a way into the future, a future in which all the beauty that has touched and moved me in the past comes to live again, full and rich, and yet without any of the transience, imperfection, and loss that mark all beauty in this broken world.

Thus nostalgia, truly, is a longing for the timeless eternity, for the rediscovery of the wonder and freedom and peace, the simplicity and joy and playfulness of childhood, and yet wedded fully to the maturity,

sobriety, and depth of adulthood. It yearns to draw all things together into unity where they have been fractured by time and by all the pains that occur within time; it yearns to discover in the seeds of beauty that have touched me, from any and every source, however small, the fullness of infinite Beauty. Yes, it yearns to plunge into this Beauty in a ceaseless delight and an expansive, playful freedom, in a warm, sheltering peace, and in an intimate presence and belonging that is not dimmed or lessened by anything, nor distracted or threatened, but abundant and overflowing forever without end.

Chapter 1. Upon the Waves of the Sea

Hældáris. 3rd Telmeric Age, Year 29 (V.Y. 1174)

The waves crest white and full as the sea roils wildly under the touch of the stormy wind, spreading out beyond sight in every direction under a heavy sky sagging like water-drenched cloth full to bursting. The dance of the waves would be beautiful were it not for their danger, were it not for the threat of mishap for those whose lives are suspended upon the ocean's waters in the sailing ship that for a month has been treading its way westward from the land of Telmérion toward that of Vælíria. Relmaríndë stands foremost upon the deck, at the very prow of the ship, not because she is any leader of those who care for the vessel and guide its course, but because she is the only one of her kindred for many leagues, and, as a child of the Ancient Kin, she feels it is her duty to give courage and hope to the others in the face of their fear. Her face is marked by the agelessness that is a trait common to all her people. She looks younger than she is, in the very contours of her face, which is noble and round in cheeks and chin with an arched nose and high, intelligent brows crowning eyes of piercing purity, and with flesh soft and radiant like that of an infant. But the gaze of these eyes, and the aura that seems to irresistibly emanate from her person, causes her to appear not only young but ancient, with a light of wisdom that seems always to be looking beyond what is seen, in a perception like that of a woman at the end of her years and facing the very portal of death; and yet this is always softened also by an immediacy of presence, of wonder-filled attentiveness to all that makes up this world, which is usually only seen in children. A man stands beside her, the son of the king, in whose blood flows the same heritage, though mingled now with two generations of mortal stock—an intermingling, however, that neither he nor she sees as anything but a boon, a beautiful union that brings benefit and enrichment, not degradation or loss. After all, the very ruler of the land, the promised king, showed in his own person that this "confluence," this wedding of the people of the Velási and the people of Telmérion in a single heritage, was both a pact with the past and a promise of the future, a promise of harmony and of peace.

To all appearances the man and the woman seem to be siblings, with hair of a similar auburn hue, though the woman's is more vibrant, like heads of wheat pierced through with the brilliant light of the setting sun as it bids its last twilight farewell before descending into night; the man's hair, on the other hand, is more a ruddy brown with subtle hints of warmth, like mud on the side of the road before the soil is again overtaken by grass and growth. The same hint of agelessness and sight-beyond-seeing also shines in their eyes, hers a glistening blue and his a dark hazel green, though upon deeper inspection it appears that he has only a small portion—though enough for overflowing—of what lives fully in her. The man's jaw is adorned by a thick but well-kept beard. And though the beard gives him a rugged appearance as though half of his countenance is embroiled in battle either against the bitter cold of his homeland or against the wildness that lies in the heart of every man, it does not entirely hide the contours of his face, which is wide and strong like that of his father, but gentle, too. As similar as the man and woman may appear, however, in fact they are not siblings, at least not born of the same father and mother, though their lives have been bound together inseparably by other bonds, both spiritual and legal, which surpass those which unite mere siblings in the flesh.

The stillness of these two who stand together at the prow of the ship, upon the forecastle as it narrows to a point cutting its way through the waves, contrasts greatly with the flurry of movement and sound that surrounds them, as the sailors bustle about making all possible preparations to weather the storm that draws near to them with dreadful certainty. Yet even as the two remain standing like sentinels, the woman turns to the man who is near her and says in a voice of gentle concern, "Hældáris, do you feel it?"

He does not immediately reply, as if her question has caught him by surprise and he must first attune to his own feelings to gauge to what she might be referring. At last he answers, "I feel the fear of the men—the sailors and the soldiers alike. The sailors sense, I think, the severity of the coming storm. As for those below deck, very few have ever departed from their own land upon the waves of the sea, and so any storm would be more than a little unsettling."

"As it is for you?"

"Yes, as it is for me," he admits. "It is my first time away, as you well know. And to be honest, I find little comfort and consolation in our current circumstances at this moment apart from your presence near to me, Relmaríndë."

"And I am glad to be near," she says, looking at him with tenderness in her eyes. "We pass through danger and into danger, and only behind us—where we cannot now go—lies any hope of a swift recovery of the peace that we have previously known."

"If they have called for our aid from such a distance, I wish for nothing else but to pass into this danger, and through it, if only I may help in the reestablishment of peace for those who have lost it."

"You speak words of courage. I pray that your heart, when tested, may find in itself that which you now so freely pledge, and which I know you truly intend. And you have that which can bring it forth when needed, and sustain it. For peace has been the cradle of your life, the fruit of the love of those who went before you," Relmaríndë says. "And yet you are also still young. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean to imply that you take such peace for granted. Rather, I think you cherish it deeply. And precisely because of this you feel in your heart the desire to become a fashioner of peace as well, and not only its recipient. This is why I am glad to accompany you on this journey, not merely as your protector but as your companion." Such has been her manner of speaking since the first day that they met in the woods so many years ago. There is in her words, as there is in her mind, no duplicity, no dissimulation, no veiling of the truth through fear or through false shame. She speaks her mind in simplicity, and this makes her words both more trustworthy and more powerful than they would be otherwise. Indeed she is known by all to be one to whom any question may be posed if one has the courage and the desire for an answer born of truth, born of the inner seeing of the heart.

At this point the commotion behind the two has largely subsided as preparations are completed for the ship to weather the storm. A mysterious silence and stillness, within and beyond the noise of the stormy wind and sea, seem to descend upon them all. Even in the midst of the sound of the waves lapping against the hull of the boat and the wind whistling as the heavy storm clouds and thick sheets of rain draw ever nearer, in but a few more minutes to engulf the travelers entirely and to force them below deck, there is a moment in which time seems to stop, as if inhaling and exhaling slowly and with great deliberation. This is the silence and stillness that is but a deep breath before the plunge, a moment's preparation before the contest. Recognizing this, both Hældáris and Relmaríndë linger in it for a moment, listening to its voice, and then the latter asks again, "Do you feel it?"

"You...you refer not to the fear of the people? No...of course you do

not," says Hældáris in reply. He then closes his eyes for a moment, as if the better to feel. When he opens them again, he continues, "I feel a force of great evil and malice, and also of incredible power. Is that to what you refer?"

"It is. The presence is subtle, and yet it is profound. I am not surprised that you did not feel it until now, for it is almost imperceptible, although growing. I fear very shortly its presence shall be all but overwhelming."

"What is it?"

"I know not precisely," replies the woman. "But I fear it is a creature of the deep, a creature born of darkness. And it may well be the cause of this storm, or at least a factor in its intensity. Only tales have my people heard of these creatures, though many things we see and experience in the hidden spaces of the heart where all things meet as in a great ocean containing countless ripples ever conjoining and communicating from heart unto heart."

"And this is a creature," remarks Hældáris, "whose presence in the ocean of being is both unwelcome and dangerous..."

Relmaríndë nods and takes a step toward Hældáris, as if doing so allows her to come more clearly to the point. "I spoke metaphorically of an ocean, as did you, but speaking of a literal ocean would also be true. I fear this creature is a *mykkëvéngr*, a great sea serpent."

"It is one of the eötenga?" asks Hældáris.

"Aye. I think that alone explains the feeling that it stirs within us," says Relmaríndë. "In my early days I felt them often encroaching upon the fringes of my consciousness, or even seeking to invade its center, until from our land they were expelled. What I feel now is the same." And then, placing a hand upon his shoulder, she concludes, "But come, let us seek shelter from the storm before its full fury reaches us."

† † †

"Think you that the mykkëvéngr will attack us directly?" Hældáris asks when they have descended below deck.

"Let us pray not," responds Relmaríndë. "That would, I expect, be the death of us. But we yet have reason to hope, as these creatures are rumored to take little interest in the affairs of men, and for long ages there has been hardly a word of their presence or activity. If they were truly inclined to interfere with humanity, then how has oceanic trade flourished between the different continents for these last many centuries?"

"Then why now do we sense this malicious presence with the ap-

proach of the storm? Are these creatures wont to throw tantrums at sea with none to witness them, and we have simply found ourselves unfortunately caught up in their midst?" asks Hældáris. But then he exhales deeply as his heart intuits a possible answer. "Or is it because it has first sensed *us*? Is that what you would say?"

"I fear so."

"Is it you and I, then, who are endangering our company? What a woeful thing that a protector should become instead a threat to those they intend to safeguard!"

"Slow yourself, Hældáris," interjects Relmaríndë. "Do not jump too quickly to conclusions, nor allow fear to cloud your judgment. What you say may have grounds in truth, but we do not see all possible ends of this affair, nor even the full measure of the conflict. If you are to be a guide and a stronghold for the men whom you lead into danger, then you must find more strength in the light that intangibly holds all things than in the darkness that would visibly assail it. Let not the first encounter with darkness stir you to panic."

Bowing his head, his cheeks reddening in embarrassment, Hældáris replies softly, "You are, of course, entirely correct. I thank you for your words."

Placing her hand for a moment upon the crown of his head, his long hair thick under her palm, Relmaríndë then raises Hældáris' face and looks into his eyes, the same color and intensity as those of his aunt. "I do not intend to scold you," she says. "There is no place in our relationship for such things. Just as you so often speak wisdom to me, so I hope I can for you. Take my words only as a reminder and an encouragement. You are strong in spirit and in body, and stronger yet I believe you shall be, when the crucible of conflict purifies you."

"Provided we survive this first conflict to pass into yet others, and beyond them," answers Hældáris, though the tone of his voice is no longer one of dread or discouragement, but of confidence flickering into flame as it stands face to face with fear. "May that be granted to us. For I never expected that something so drastic and so dire would greet us before our ship even reached the shores of Vælíria."

"Nor did I," remarks Relmaríndë, "but may it be granted to us, indeed."

Changing the subject, Hældáris says, "But now I shall speak with the men of the coming storm. And then I suppose we have little choice but to endure it, hoping that it shall indeed prove nothing but a squall at sea, and not a confrontation with powers beyond our ken."

And this he does, approaching his men either singly or in groups—as he finds them—and conversing with them of the storm and its dangers. Though he refrains from giving face or voice to the malevolent force that may reside within it, he does warn them to be ready for all eventualities. He also encourages them to seek, as they may, to aid the seamen who guide their passage so they need not bear the burden alone, even if little can they do with their lack of seafaring knowledge and expertise.

All the while that Hældáris does this, the man Aeyósha leans against a wall with his arms crossed over his chest, watching his childhood friend with a keen eye. "The men are worried," he then says after Hældáris has spoken with everyone, drawing his attention to himself. "But we also have confidence in the purpose that has been entrusted to us by our king, in those who with their skill carry us across the waves, and in your leadership."

"Thank you, Aeyósha," replies Hældáris.

"Aye, and I speak honestly. However, you look worried, more than a mere storm, however serious, might warrant."

"It is really nothing but what you said: the storm has me worried."

"I do not believe you," says Aeyósha, pushing off from the wall and standing face to face with his friend. He runs his hands thoughtfully for a moment through his bushy beard, the color of ripe grain or lightly baked bread, and as he inclines his head to look into the eyes of Hældáris, a couple veins on his brow, trailing up to the crown of his shaven head, are visible. Aeyósha is a large man standing at least three inches taller than all the other members of the company, a good six foot four inches, with a bulk of muscle evident even through his tunic from a lifetime of hard farm work and training with martial weapons. He is one of the "king's men," as they are called, ordinary laborers who through zeal for their kingdom and for the protection and well-being of their families have also taken up voluntary training in combat should circumstances ever call for their courage and prowess. And the cause for which they now sail, while not relating directly to the benefit of Telmérion and her people, nonetheless seemed enough to Aeyósha to merit his joining Hældáris and his company on their journey. A physically imposing man at first sight, he is indeed quite intense even in his personality, though not in cruelty or lack of compassion as rather in their opposite, and in the ardor of his convictions and the swiftness with which they are put into action. But when one gets to know him deeply, as has Hældáris since they were both young—Aeyósha being

three years his senior and a friend and mentor from the days he could first speak—one realizes what a simple, humble, and unassuming man he is, indeed one of the "little people" who by their very ordinariness make nearly everyone feel at home in their presence.

Aeyósha reaches out and places both hands on Hældáris' shoulders, as if to hold him in an iron grip of compassion and understanding, and, looking deep into his hazel eyes with his own a brilliant blue, he says, "You are worried for something else—something which you think it advisable to hide from the men. Am I not right?"

"Er-yes... You are right," Hældáris admits, and he finds himself relieved to have voiced this truth to another whom he trusts so deeply, and immediately wonders why he ever thought to conceal it from him. "Relmaríndë and I sense that this storm may be caused by a beast in the water, one whose attention might be directed toward us."

"Well, that is quite unfortunate," replies Aeyósha, shaking his head. But then, straightening up and raising his chin slightly, he says, "Is this that mysterious heart-sense that you have tried to explain to me? That 'feeling things that the eyes cannot see'?"

"Aye. Precisely that."

"Well, while I believe that it is possible, and that if anyone would know about such things it would be the heirs of the king and the progeny of the Ancients—I must admit that I hope you are wrong in this case."

"As do I, Aeyósha, as do I," says Hældáris. "And even if we are not wrong, there is no certainty that it shall be any direct threat to us."

"So are we to just wait and see, weathering the storm and hoping nothing comes of it but wind and rain?"

"Even if we wished it otherwise, there is nothing else that we can do but this."

"Then we shall do willingly that which we must do by necessity," concludes the gentle giant. "I shall keep an eye on the men for the moment. Why do you not sit down and rest? You have been on your feet all day. I trust you to tell me if anything more arises in the feelings of your heart, or if I may be of assistance in some other way. For my part I shall not hesitate to inform you of any changes or needs that arise among the men or our surroundings."

"I will do that. Thank you, my friend." After this Hældáris settles down in a corner of the main cabin, beside his sleeping bunk, and draws his knees to his chest, feeling the violent rocking of the ship all around him, hoping that they need only wait out the storm, though he cannot

help instead expecting the moment when the worst shall come. And as he waits his mind carries him back to his own homeland which a month prior he had departed, setting sail from the great port city of Brûg'hil with the companions allotted to him. His mind carries him back to the fecund valley between the mountains that has been his lifelong home, his place of discovery and adventure, and the space where the wonder of childhood blossomed into the maturity and responsibility of adulthood.

† † †

The elder of two children, his sister Almaréä being two years younger than he, Hældáris grew up in the warm hearth's embrace of a loving family that not only provided a sense of security from his earliest years but also taught him much regarding compassion and care for others both near and far. He witnessed from early on the responsibility that his father bore—both seriously and lightly—in the duties of his kingship and his custodianship of the people of Telmérion as they recovered and sought to secure life and well-being for themselves after the terrible years of the Imperial Occupation, the Stûnclad Rebellion, and the War of Darkness. The king was also a man known for his wisdom and the depth of his insight, traits born from years of suffering and loss and also from the crucible of his own failure, bringing to birth in him the compunction of heart that is the beginning of true understanding. Thus his was a heart open and sensitive not only to all who came seeking his aid, or who petitioned him from afar; but in addition he sought out those whom he might aid, or he sent trustworthy persons in his place. When it was a matter of upholding or formulating law, he had a special intuitive awareness of the universal principles of goodness, and also often of the way that these principles could be expressed in positive legislation or just decision-making. Hældáris witnessed all of this, and certainly it had a deep and lasting impact on the man that he himself in later years became. But in addition, his father was—and remains—also a man of profound personal attunement such that his external duties never, or at most rarely, made his son to feel like his father had no time for him, or that his needs, worries, and desires were a burden to him. And he did for his son what so few fathers seem to do: he played with him often, and spent time joining him in whatever games or adventures his son devised.

His mother, more soft-spoken and retiring than her husband, was tenderhearted and compassionate in equal measure, a woman of deep empathy; and even her natural tendency to melancholy, born of great

grief undergone but not forgotten, did not hide her abiding, albeit quiet, joy. It would be wrong to say that their father was cheerfulness while their mother was sadness, but it is true that they each knew both realities thoroughly, and felt them not only in the cradle of their home but also in the many people whom they encountered throughout their life. And if there were one specific trait in the queen that stood out among all the others, it was that, even without Velási blood in her veins, she possessed such profound empathy that she was often able to give voice to another's feelings before the person was even fully aware of these feelings themselves.

The court of the king was not enclosed within itself like the aristocratic hall of some self-styled lord, nor some wealthy palace far separated from the cares and anxieties of the poor and the common. No, for even with the reestablishment of the high kingship, the land of Telmérion retained—and indeed found anew in deeper measure—the spirit of equality that had always marked it. From the king's own table, as it were, food was often shared with those in need were he to but hear about their plight. Or rather, this would be the case if the food ever made it to the table to begin with; but before he ever accepted food for himself and his family and allowed it to be set before them, he would inquire about who might be in need and spare for them all that was reasonable to spare (and in cases of particular need, sometimes more than was reasonable, though never to the harm of his children).

Hældáris also mingled freely with those his age who lived in the burgeoning town, Fian'cæhil, built in the wooded valley between the mountains; and though all knew (or came to know) that he was the firstborn of the king, he was a boy like any other and—since his father insisted on no separation or special treatment—he was accepted as a friend and playmate. There were, despite this, times when the parents of his friends would, as can happen, seek leverage with the king through his son. After all, no matter how benevolent or just a leader may be, it is part of the human condition in a marred world that some shall still seek status, position, or privilege in his eyes, that through favoritism or deceit his authority may be turned to their own personal gain.

From his boyhood through his early adulthood Hældáris studied much in many subjects, from the history of his people and of the wider world to commerce, economics, and politics, from the literature of Telmérion to the language of the peoples of Vælíria and Tel-Velfána, from the religion of the ancients to the burgeoning sciences, be they mathematical or astronomical or concerned with the organic living

things of the world. He also trained, as is necessary for any man who is to become a king after his father, in the arts of combat; in this, he had the kind education and indeed companionship of a dear friend of his father, a man whose hands had known both the strife of war and the humble labor of peace, and who, since the first days when war finally gave way to peace, moved near to his king and friend and assisted him in all manner of things, befriending and training his children being one among them.

All in all, his early days were happy ones, in what was perhaps the most blessed time that the land of Telmérion had known since its wounding by the blindness and greed of men in ages long past. And one of the happiest days for him was the one in which, seemingly by chance, he happened upon Relmaríndë in the sun-dappled forest. Twenty years of age he was then, and in the beginnings of his manhood and full responsibility, starting to share in his proper way in the burdens and cares that lay upon the shoulders of his father. And the paternal care that he had known from his father had since blossomed into a kind of camaraderie, a true fellowship, that certainly strengthened Hældáris' heart and, as he came to understand more and more, strengthened also the heart of the king. But at this age he began to think also of his own future family and the gift and task entrusted to him to carry on the line of kingship in the blood that he had received.

It was not a principle without exception in Telmérion that rule was carried on through hereditary means; indeed in many of the seven clans, which in the ascension of the high king were not abolished but re-established even from the very ashes of death and destruction in which they lay, rule was often either attained through feats of nobility or entrusted to one who received the support of the people. But in the case of the high kingship the matter was different; for this was no ordinary blood nor clan, but the custodianship of the memory and hope that had been promised to the people in ages long past, when the world was still young.

Relmaríndë appeared like a bolt of lightning out of a blue sky, or like a brilliant ray of light out of the darkness of midnight—that is, her arrival was as unexpected as it was consoling. Older she was than he by more than ten years, though her people counted age far differently, for even if she had been younger than he, she would in future outlive him by years innumerable. For she was one of the "deathless," and as far as the evidence indicated, the sole survivor of her kind—yet she insisted otherwise, though she refused to say any more in this regard to prove

the truth of her insistence. And knowing how different would be the trajectory of their lives, he had resisted for a long time any thought that there could be a union between them, a union of any kind but friendship and companionship.

But it seemed, far beyond his own imagining, that Hældáris appeared to the heart and mind of Relmaríndë as just as much a marvelous gift as she was to him. And so in his twenty-eighth year they were betrothed, and a year later wed. Neither of them at the time would have guessed that within but another three years they would depart from the shores of Telmérion for the land of Vælíria, in order to be mediators of peace—whether through diplomacy or arms—in the catastrophic events that threatened the very well-being and existence of that society, which only thirty or so years before had thrown off the yoke of Imperial tyranny and had attempted to rebuild itself as something new.

When the news came, the king was not slow in responding. Having lived through a crisis of civilization himself, he knew the pressing and delicate nature of such situations, and he called together his counselors and the *hærási* of the six other clans, or their representatives. And he read in their presence the missive that had arrived in the hands of a messenger who, with twenty companions, had traversed the ocean to seek their aid:

> *To the high king of Telmérion and the rulers of the clans,*
>
> *We, the undersigned, address you with desperation in our hearts at the conflict surrounding us on all sides, conflict which seems far beyond our own powers now to confront or to overcome. Having heard of your wise and prudent rule, word of which has reached even across the seas to distant lands, we beseech you to come to our aid. But we lament that we know not even for what to ask; strength of arms or aid in battle we hesitate to directly request, for we know not if it would be right to wish for such. Perhaps diplomatic intervention and foreign emissaries may be enough to help tip the scales again in the direction of freedom and justice. Yet we also acknowledge that it is not possible for the rulers of your people, be they king or clan-leaders, to depart from your allotted station to traverse in danger for many months in order to bring us the aid of your wisdom or your strength of arms. And so we ask simply: send us what aid you deem fitting after you have read our account as contained below.*

As you know, thirty-five years ago, in the year 1150 of our counting—since the colonization of our land by people from your own—a rebellion sparked into flame in response to the violent and unjust tyranny of the Emperor Maríndas IV and his forebears, and this toppled not only his governance with his demise, but also the structure of the Empire itself which had endured for numerous generations. Those were days of hope both strong and enthusiastic, indeed for many persons days in which hope reached almost unto folly, the fruits of which folly we now witness. For the Republic that has replaced the Empire has proven itself to be founded not upon solid foundations of right and truth, but upon the wishes and ideals of those who were artificers of its birth and establishment. Thus another group has arisen, with claims not unlike those raised with the first rebellion, and already the spark has turned to flame, and blood has once again wet the soil of our land. The cry is heard again as we heard it then—the claim that blood is the soil of the future and the price of peace.

Much of the heartland of our continent has already been buried under the heavy pall of warfare and conflict, and soon we believe it shall spread to all the clan-lands that have existed since days long past. One tyranny meets another, one worn in the open and one cloaked in fair words, though but a few decades ago the open was hidden and the fair was unveiled.

But we are weary. And weariness has turned to wariness. War is upon us, though we wish it not, and we seek to bring a peaceable solution to this conflict. But so far our deliberations have proved to be fruitless and our efforts at conciliation and agreement to be but yet more kindling to the fire. And so we turn to you, knowing full well how rare a thing it is that one nation ask for aid from another in its own internal governance, but aware too of our own folly, which has led to this impasse.

Send even, if you may, a delegation of men to mediate terms of peace, or if this fails, to side with those who seek to preserve peace and life rather than to destroy it, that perhaps a path may become visible before us that only a third party may bring. We seek only freedom for our people and an establishment of just rule—a reality so apparently simple which

has yet escaped our grasp.

Know that we write this letter at risk to our own lives even from those who consider us "allies," and that we count only on your mediation to justify our action should it prove ill for us.

Send back to us our company of messengers with word should you refrain from giving aid, or even better, have mercy and send to assist us what men you judge to be right. Those whom we have sent know well that it is also their part to protect and accompany any whom you send on their journey to our land.

Signed,
Adalvár Herísta, Fornst Fénrik, Eowald Íldris
Haléndi of the Republic of Vælíria

Much debate was sparked by the words of this missive, and the number of those who feared it was a ruse was not insignificant. Were these merely words of flattery meant to incline the ear to listen even despite the heart's misgivings? And what was the true motive being communicated, not perhaps in the words, but behind them or even despite them? Was it really only a petition for a delegation to bring political counsel and aid, or was something more, or something different entirely, being sought? Unacquainted as even the governing officials of the land of Telmérion were with the interior situation in Vælíria, they did not recognize the names of these men who claimed to be "*haléndi*," people's representatives, in the young republic. Nonetheless, the tone of the letter was both dire and imploring, and even if the situation was not identical with that being portrayed, something indeed must be amiss to elicit such a plea. Thus, after lengthy deliberation it was decided that representatives of the clans of Galaptéä, Rhóvas, and Onylándis would be sent, accompanied each by a small contingent of warriors primarily for their own protection and for whatever eventualities may require might of arms—though it was hoped this measure would prove entirely unnecessary.

Three ships, and three companies—this was the decision upon which the council agreed. Hrísta Lórsen, second counselor of Onylándis, set out from the port of Oromardë with eighty men of arms and ten others whose skills lay not in combat but in affairs of the mind or in governance. From the clan of Rhóvas Íllis Renahær was sent, in smaller company than Hrísta but with equal boldness; he was a man well known for his assistance to the *hæras* and his vigorous pursuit of

reform and rebuilding after the great losses during the War of Darkness. For the lands of Rhóvas were second only to those of Mineäs in the destruction they suffered during those years. Finally, Hældáris was sent on behalf of the clan of Galaptéä and in the name of the high king, his father, with the numbers already mentioned, and Relmaríndë was both his counsel and his support.

It was not the king who originally chose his son to be his representative on this dangerous quest. It was Hældáris himself who suggested it. "Father, I have trained long and with diligence to bear the crown after you," he said, "and in this I would like to stand in your place, to do what you cannot do and yet to do it as you would do. No, it is not that I wish it; in fact I fear it. But I feel something within my heart calling me to it, as if I am *meant* to set out upon this journey. Consider it, if you must, a test of my fittingness to rule."

"I wish for no such test, my son," the king replied. "I would not send you even to another village as a test of your fittingness. It is you who have been given to me, and you have shown the integrity of your heart again and again. A fool would I be were I to put you to the test in such a manner."

"Then not a test," Hældáris insisted. "But I feel called to go nonetheless. Allow me, I ask you, to depart on this journey not to prove myself to you, but rather to live in truth according to what you have taught me: to come always to the aid of those in need."

"Now that is something else altogether," his father replied with a deep sorrow in his eyes, but also a kindness that held joy born of profound trust. "That is something which I must take into the silence of the heart, into the entreaty of the spirit, to listen to the only voice that may rightly say yea or nay." Seeing Hældáris' crestfallen face, the king immediately added, "But worry not! If what you hear is true, then it can come from only one source. Then, if I too listen aright, I shall surely hear the same. So trust and await my answer. I shall not delay."

And so it was that, beyond the expectation or desire of either man, father or son, they both discerned the truth of this task. And it was a fitting choice indeed, though painful to both of them, for even the natural reason of the mind indicated in countless ways that Hældáris was the best person to take his father's place. But where limited human sight could go wrong, trust alone would take its place, and so both had to step into surrender beyond the uncertainty that lay before them. And Hældáris suffered no delusions that the choice was easy for his father; he saw it clearly in his face when he voiced his approval, and he

saw it in his tears when he bid his son farewell, drawing him tenderly into his embrace, this same embrace that had been an abiding source of joy and security through all the years of his life. He hoped with all the fiber of his soul that he would return again to see his father's loving eyes once again, and to feel the warmth and kindness of his embrace.

Chapter 2. Born in the Darkness

Albrýndaer. Vælírian Years 1134–1146 (2nd T.A. 977–989)

He was born in the darkness, far from the light of sun, moon, or stars. He knew not the elegance and nobility of mountain, valley, tree, and flower, or even the richly woven tapestry of the culture and artifice of humankind. But even so, he was born in the midst of love, and this mattered far more deeply. For a time it was even enough, until love spoke its word, as it always does, a word that wants to embrace the entire world and hold it close. His parents were exiles, imprisoned like so many others in the vast underground caverns beneath the Empire of Vælíria. A more unusual and harsh prison has probably never before been known, and its like shall rarely occur hence for all the ages of the world. Proving to be a death-sentence for many, it yet came to be a home—or at least a place in which existence could be sustained—for those who survived. His parents were among the survivors, criminals in the eyes of the Empire above, though they were condemned and imprisoned not for crime, but for disagreement, for taking an unfavorable stance toward the established government, or toward the Emperor himself, though concerning the specifics of this they never spoke. His mother, Milly, was with child whenever she and her husband, Daeran, were cast into the great prison, and they were still learning to survive in such a difficult climate whenever she brought her child into this world. And thus Albrýndaer was born into profound destitution and vulnerability; and yet at first he knew little of this, for as is the case with all children, his heart in the beginning needed nothing more than the love of mother and father, and their tender and abiding care. And this, in mysterious and undeserved goodness, he received.

It mattered not that the light that bathed the smiling face of his mother and the kind face of his father was that of flickering lamps, and that the dwelling that welcomed him—his home—was a narrow cave, sparsely furnished, with the immeasurable silence and sense of weight

of thousands of tons of rock above that is so evident in underground caverns. What mattered was their faces gazing upon him with love, with gratitude, and with care; what mattered was the touch of their flesh against his own, whether the soft breast of his mother pouring out nourishment and life, or the calloused hands of his father, worn from work and yet holding Albrýndaer with a strength that was not violence but security.

What he knew of the world was dark and cold and rough, rugged stone and dim light and ceaseless chill, and even his bed was but a trough in the rock overlaid with a few tattered blankets. But his mother and father lay themselves on either side, and they spoke to one another with words whose meaning he did not understand but whose essence he felt; and they spoke to him, too, in tones much the same, and, as he would later learn, told him of the surface world, of its beauty and lightness, of its expansiveness and variety. And though they had little reason to hope for a return to this place, to the wideness of reality beyond the confines of their prison, they could not keep themselves from imparting to their son a love for this reality, and a longing for it. For even if the hope was more slim than a single thread of silk stretched to the point of breaking, they knew that without hope, man's life is not worth living and has, in a sense, descended already into death.

But even as Albrýndaer grew and came to understand the words that his parents spoke to him, he could not form a clear image of the world above, the world drenched in the light of the sun during the day and the moon and stars at night, the world cloaked in grasses and trees and formed by mountains, hills, and valleys whose splendor made the human heart rejoice. No, he had no experience by which to measure these words, and so they meant little more to him than a memory of his parents, frail like a torch at the point of burning out, which to him was a promise likely never to be fulfilled. But he did know something else, and in this he found a hope even beyond the hope that they sought to communicate to him, and a wideness wider still than the expanse of all the world.

For the movement from the cradle of love in which he was conceived and born, and cared for from his earliest days, to the cradle of Love that held the world itself, was a short one. For him what was truly great and wide, rich and full, was love. It was not the landscape that he tried to picture in response to the descriptions of his parents; nor was it the contours of the dark caverns in which his years were spent. It was not even the culture and society of which he learned, the language he came

to speak. Indeed, it was not even the people whom he came to know and for whom he cared, nor those who cared for him, though these stood to him above all the rest. Rather, in all and beyond all, as a light permeating all things, itself too pure and vibrant to be seen with normal eyes, and yet in which alone all things were seen, was the Love that had created the world and ceaselessly sustained it.

What he first intuited in the loving gazes and tender voices of his mother and his father, and in all their touches of care and of love, he came to see—with the sight of the heart—in all things that exist. Yes, and this Love, he knew, was not an impersonal force, some anonymous energy that flowed through all things; nor was it all things, as if all things were but one entity, just faces of a single being. No, this Love was distinct from all things that existed, from all that could be seen or known or felt in the natural ways of the world. And yet it was ever the ground of their existence and their goodness, a ceaseless gaze of cherishing tenderness that made them to be what they are at every moment, a gaze without which they would sink again into nothingness. This was a gaze that was wholly personal, a presence both intimate and transcendent, ever near and yet ever beyond, a Love that grounded all natural love and yet bore none of the traits of its weakness, fallibility, and mortality. It was a Love infinite and eternal, which cradled both ends of life and its every moment, and every single thing both material and spiritual, in its embrace and in the gaze of its cherishing and its care.

And it was in this Love alone that, for Albrýndaer, the light truly shone in the darkness, and the dim caverns of the prison that was his home became beautiful to him, and precious. Even if he did not have a landscape to look upon, stretching out in all directions, nor a sky wide above him, shining with celestial lights, he found in the arching caverns, in the detailed veins within the stone, in the resounding silence and the echoing sounds, and in the small civilization of prisoners that surrounded him, an inscape both deeper and wider than anything this world could offer. For he found something beyond the world, which lived through love in every thing that existed, and yet surpassed them all, as much, or rather more, than his mother, his father, surpassed him, and yet was the origin of his existence and sustained him through tenderness and never-ceasing kindness. If such was true of his earthly progenitors—and surely it was!—how much more true it is of the progenitor of all, whose generation is not of the flesh, even though flesh too is born of this Love, but of pure goodness, beauty, and truth outpouring from the plenitude of all Being. And this Love poured cease-

lessly as a gift into him as if he were the only one, uniquely seen and loved, poured into the heart and life of Albrýndaer Hríndas, a child of darkness bathed in mysterious light.

† † †

Albrýndaer was a sickly child, though, all things considered, none could expect it to be any other way. When the only sources of light he knew were the flickering lamps that burned oil or grease and the dim luminosity of the glowing ore-veins that wove through the rugged stone of the caverns, it was inevitable that his body would suffer deprivation. When his diet was the little and imbalanced nourishment that could be scrounged from this subterranean climate—mushrooms and weeds that needed little or no light and creatures of the deep with tough meat—it was inevitable that his growing flesh would develop not hale and hearty but frail and emaciated. And yet the paradox was that his very weakness taught him strength and his very lack taught him to find abundance in little.

A child with pale skin, almost white, he had eyes a brilliant green that shone in a long yet deeply dimpled face, framed by ever lengthening hair the color of burnt copper or ebony ore, in other words, a brown that was hiding almost entirely in black. By the time he was four years old his hair reached to his waist, though often it was tied behind him in a knot or braid, so as not to obstruct his vision or activity, though at night it was let down to keep him warm in the ceaseless chill of the cave.

Physically he was not a beautiful child, but rather haunting, like a ghost in the darkness, his pale skin almost glowing as it refracted any sources of light, and his hair all but invisible. But to his parents he was beautiful, inside and out, though as they looked upon him they could not restrain their hearts from worry. How long could a child born in such a place and under such circumstances survive? The fear of his premature death remained with them always, and though this intensified their tenderness to him, it also created an atmosphere of anxiety which he undoubtedly felt, with the keen sensitivity that is proper to all young children, not yet numbed in response to the painful or corrupting events of later life.

"Specter" many began to call him, or *heurin* in the tongue of the Empire. His parents detested this practice, but they were unable to prevent it. Little as he was, he did not understand the name or its import, though its pejorative sense certainly lingered with him, at least as his budding mind began to open and the process of discovery expanded

from sensate awareness and basic curiosity at the essences of things to the interrelationships between persons and the dynamics, both good and ill, by which people treated one another.

And he was a sensitive child, both in his natural disposition inherited from his mother and father and also in the circumstances of his earliest growth. For his existence was focused inward in a way rare in the history of humankind, narrowed almost to a pin-point. This caused him to feel and to process things more deeply than he would have otherwise, and he became profoundly and constantly perceptive, watching with keen eye and attentive mind, and with heart both desirous and vulnerable, every small event or reality that passed before his gaze, his ears, or his touch. As a blind person who is taught by another to project what they feel with their other senses into the reality of space, to visualize the vision of the eyes with the inner seeing of the heart, so too Albrýndaer learned quite quickly, partly through education and partly through the spontaneous impulse of his spirit, to see in all the little things that he encountered each day a depth and a breadth that few others were able to see, accustomed as they were to a wider and more superficial approach to life and existence.

His parents did not allow the unfavorable circumstances of his birth to impede him from growth, and, being themselves part of the noble, *norándas* class, they imparted to him an education as rich and as full as they could manage. Whether it was language or history or geography, ethics or the budding beginnings of philosophy (and children are the best and truest philosophers), they taught him all that they were able, or sought out teachers for him from the other cave-dwellers. An odd circumstance indeed, surely, but they understood deeply that life flows like a river down the generations, from person to person, from heart to heart, and that a man has nothing but what he has received, indebted as he is for his very life and knowledge to those who have preceded him, and above all to the author of his existence, whose gift creates a dependence that is not servility but freedom in self-possession and self-gift. This latter, however, Milly and Daeran did not acknowledge. Of all the virtues and forms of knowledge that they sought to impart to Albrýndaer, piety was not one of them. An organism without a heart or a house without a foundation, therefore, his life would have been, except that he received this knowledge from another even more trustworthy and solid source. If they supplied it not, nonetheless he had it, and had it in such a way that nothing could take it away were it not his own infidelity.

There were few books in the underground prison; but those that his parents could find they passed into their son's hands. And he was an avid reader, devouring books in the cave's dim light, finding in them one of his few links—and a vivid link—to the world outside the cave, to a world both alike and unlike the world in which he was born. He came to understand that he was a part of this world, a member of this society, and indeed a member of an Empire that claimed to be this society's "greatest achievement," though the circumstances of his birth gave the lie to such a claim. And if his skin was pale and his frame weak, marking him as a creature different, a creature of the underworld, of shadows and darkness, nonetheless he knew himself to be a man, a human being, a kin to all those who walked upon the earth, and his heart held a flickering flame of hope and desire to someday take his place among them.

Of all his studies, what fascinated Albrýndaer the most was philosophy, called by the people of Vælíria *elasándra,* the love of wisdom. Perhaps this was due to the circumstances of his life, since the journey of the mind found the constriction of the body to be not merely a hindrance but a catalyst. Or then again perhaps his fascination with *elasándra* was born and developed despite the circumstances of his life, and he found wonder and expansiveness even though little of the world was present to his gaze to stir such wonder. Be that as it may—and it was probably both—Albrýndaer was a reflective child, often so absorbed in thought that he was nigh oblivious to his surroundings, a distant look in his eyes. To get his attention others would need to speak loudly, to touch him directly, or to place themselves before his line of sight. His parents knew not what to make of these flights of thought, and though they sensed the budding depth within him, they also worried that his "absence" (though it was not truly absence) was due to undernourishment and poor health.

On the other hand, when he was called upon to turn his gaze to others, when his parents or elders spoke to him, or the very few who were nearer to his own age (though he was the youngest of all the underground dwellers), his distant gaze became an intense and almost uncomfortable directness of presence. His eyes seemed to pierce into the person upon whom their gaze was directed, not in criticism but in a curiosity, a longing, that was unsettling to all but a few. For Albrýndaer himself, of course, the two gazes—the distant and the piercing—were one and the same gaze, simply directed upon whatever drew his attention in a given moment. Those things beyond the eyes' normal

sight drew him just as strongly, or more strongly, than the things visible to his eyes, and he looked at them both with the same full-hearted and full-bodied presence that permeated his whole existence.

Such were his dispositions through his youth and into his adolescence. Even so, what has been explored of the tendencies of his heart and mind is but a gesture, for these things in his youth were but the seeds of what would blossom fully in later years, when childhood passed into budding manhood, and adolescence into full adulthood. Further, there were other things as well that affected him in his early life, things that had a deep and abiding influence upon him, some for good and some for ill.

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He met Ílya early in his life, though in after years he could not remember either the precise time or circumstances of this encounter. Rather, it seemed to him almost as if he had always known her, as if she had always been there at his side from the very beginning. She was three years his senior, brought here by her father in his exile, though she was born in the world above. Her features were more akin to his than those of the others who lived in this cavern-dwelling, but considering that she had received exposure to the light of the sun and to the world above before being plunged into the darkness—and considering even how the pallor of her skin complimented her complexion rather than marred it—the impression she left was as if the opposite of that of Albrýndaer. If he seemed at first glance to be a specter, she seemed to be some creature of light, perhaps of the fae, or even an apparition of one of the Anaíon (though Albrýndaer knew nothing of these gods, being bereft of such knowledge through the intervention of his parents, who firmly resisted any conviction in the existence of deities beyond humankind). Ílya seemed to glow with a mysterious light that emanated from within, and her blonde hair framed her petite face and form in a beautiful way; but above all, her demeanor and her manner lifted all of this to a level of height and depth far more than physical. For she was a creature both of deep and sober presence and of unusual joy and cheerfulness.

Considering her situation, the habitual possession of such a character was all the more unexpected and all the more amazing. But as much as Albrýndaer was quiet and retiring, thoughtful and even somber, to the same degree Ílya was lighthearted and humorous, ever bringing light into the lives of those who found themselves in her orbit. If wonder at the mystery of reality stirred Albrýndaer to silence and quietude, so it stirred Ílya to playfulness and creativity, whether that be

designing games or collecting rare plants or creating paints to scribe murals upon the walls of the cavern. And these two attitudes complemented one another perfectly, two aspects of the same awe, two responses to the same gift and the same wonder, that quiet movement and that silent song, that restful activity and that vibrant relaxation that mark the existence of all true children.

Albrýndaer found himself caught up into Ílya's energy with an almost irresistible impetuosity, though in fact this was due only to the fact that he had no wish or desire to resist such a movement. For it awakened in him something profound and unique, unlike anything else in his life. A single glance of her eyes or a word from her mouth was enough to grasp him in the very depths of his pensiveness, lost in his own explorations of thought, and to draw him out into explorations also in body and in act.

By the time Albrýndaer reached his eighth birthday, the two of them were nearly inseparable, spending long hours of their days together when not occupied with other cares, though in the underground dwelling there were many of these. They would often explore the nearby tunnels, drawn, despite the warnings of their parents, by the sense of adventure and the yearning for discovery. Every new turn or every unexpected rock formation, every new plant or pool of water, was like a world unto itself only waiting for their beholding presence to unveil its mysteries and the delight that it held.

At other times they would simply find some sheltered alcove of stone or some patch of weeds growing in the dim light of the cave, and they would sit together talking of all kinds of things, unaware of the passage of time. In Ílya Albrýndaer found not only a source of energy and a spark of enthusiasm that drew out from within him capacities that lay recumbent, capacities for activity and play that otherwise he was little inclined to pursue. He also found in her an open ear and a listening heart far beyond anyone else in the encampment, and she would lovingly receive his long monologues on different topics that gripped his mind and imagination. Often she would interject with questions or comments in words that revealed not only the honesty of her listening but also the depth and acumen of her understanding. But he would listen to her also, to thoughts and aspirations that she expressed, or to struggles that she had with her father or with the work allotted to her, and in all circumstances he delighted to listen to her voice. Often he cared little what the particular topic of conversation might be, as long as he was allowed to hear the echo of her heart and her life sounding

within his own.

But other discoveries also unfolded for Albrýndaer through Ílya's presence at the heart of the sacred sanctuary of friendship—so peaceful and serene, so safe and enduring—that blossomed in the space between their hearts and made them one in the "we" of mutual belonging. In the earlier years, before they had yet shared their deepest and most intimate conversations, when he was eleven years old, they bathed together in a pool of cold, crystalline water in the subtle, gentle light of the cavern, glowing veins of ore threading through the low ceiling of stone overhead. And though they had done this many times before—after all, Ílya had been with Albrýndaer nearly from the time he could speak—it had been almost two years since the most recent occurrence. And this time proved to be a different experience, or the awakening of something new in the context of what came before, like a flower blossoming in fecund soil or laughter and delight in the reciprocal exchange of loving gazes. For Ílya's body in the previous two years had grown and matured significantly, and Albrýndaer himself had grown as well, and his mental and emotional maturity were always well beyond that typical for his age. When therefore he beheld her naked body in the gentle light that fell upon it, and saw the beauty of her unique, feminine features, a spark of wonder and awe was kindled within him.

He had seen the uncovered body of his mother before, but this moment was a new and deeper discovery, the opening of eyes that saw once, and yet learned that there was yet more to see even in what had already been seen. It was the first full awakening to something he had beheld without ever truly beholding it: and he knew now, in the deep intuition of the heart, the true beauty and sacredness of a woman's body. And he thought to himself that there existed nothing more beautiful in the whole world, and even if he were ever to walk upon the surface of the overworld, and to look upon trees and mountains, hills and rivers, nothing would ever compare to what he beheld in that moment. The only things that surpassed such beauty as he then witnessed were those realities that transcended human sight, invisible and intangible even if glimpsed through what was seen and felt: the realm of the spirit rooted in the creating and sustaining Love that permeated all things.

But indeed even in beholding her flesh he saw more than flesh—the spiritual beauty that was uniquely her own, the beauty that he touched when he lovingly spoke her name. And in response to this beholding, one desire alone stirred within him, gathering all else together into it-

self. It was the desire to protect her with all of his strength and all of his capacity, that someone so beautiful would never be harmed or hurt, and that this beauty would shine undimmed unto its end and its consummation.

† † †

A year or so after this event, they spoke together in the sleepy afternoon hour following upon the midday meal, before each of them was required again to return to their families and help with the chores and work of the day. Called the *sétas,* the seventh hour, it was a time in which the people of Vælíria often napped, and this custom, though lessened, continued even in the underground prison. Lying on their backs looking up at the dull light of the ore that wove through the stone hundreds of yards above their heads, they were at first silent, content simply to exist without the need for words. But after a while Ílya sat up and turned to face Albrýndaer who lay beside her. Seeing this, he sat up as well and, looking at her, asked, "What is it?"

"Often you seem to be elsewhere than here, Albrýndaer," Ílya said to him, "as if your mind has gone off on some journey to a faraway place."

"Are we not often silent like this?" he asked. "Why do you bring this up now?"

"I speak not of this moment, but of a disposition always with you," she explained. "What adventures do you find in that head and heart of yours?"

"Adventures I guess you could call them, at least some of them," he replied. "But sometimes rather I think I am in danger of getting caught in a cycle of pensiveness where the momentum stops and I do little more than think about thinking. Or think about things with little way of giving expression to them outside of me—which amounts to more or less the same thing."

"What do you mean you cannot give expression to them outside of you?"

"Well, it is more that I feel little inclination or ability to do so," he replied. "I feel content just to explore the inner world that is hidden within the outer. Whether that be sitting beside a pool of water, crystalline and pure, reflecting light even in a place of darkness. Or whether it be watching a beetle go about his work digging in the soil, or bats flying from cavern to cavern, or the simple play of the ore's light upon the darker stone that surrounds it. I just settle down here and rest, content to let things *be*, and to be, myself, before them. It is almost like they live within me as I behold them, and this living only deepens the

longer I remain in contemplation."

"And what is so wrong with being content to do precisely that?" Ílya asked. "Is something lacking in this? After all, it seems to me that this knowledge is enrichment and fulfillment, abundance and life, even if ever pressing on to the 'more' that it cannot quite grasp."

"Well, sometimes I feel as though all these things are asking something of me," he attempted to answer, though struggling for adequate words. "I just do not know what it is." Then, turning his gaze toward her, he added, "I suppose I see it in you. Whereas I *think*, and in thinking find joy, you *live*, and in living find life."

"But what is the difference between the one and the other? Are they not both activity and both repose? Are they not both contemplation and both action, just in their own way?" Ílya asked. "The play of the mind and the play of the body, the play of leisure and the leisure of play?"

"They are the same thing, I suppose," Albrýndaer replied, "but they are also different. I think that they just need each other. The world summons us to restful beholding, to thoughtful reflection. To imagination. To the journeys and adventures of the inner mind and heart, as you have said. But the world also summons us to playful activity, to getting our hands and our feet into the world itself, and to changing it and letting it change us. I want you to teach me the latter."

"And I want you to teach me the former," Ílya replied with a kindly smile.

After this she led him to a corner of the large cavern where, from a secret cranny in the stone wall, she drew forth some objects that she had there hidden. Looking upon them, Albrýndaer saw that they were small statues or figures of men and women, and of buildings, and of trees. Despite this, he asked, "What are these?"

"They are figurines," Ílya explained, "by which I explore the world outside our prison. I have created a little game. Would you like to play it?"

"A game? I do not know if I have ever played a game before."

"Oh, then you must! If you want to know things truly, you cannot know them only by thinking. You need to *play* them to really know them from the inside, most intimately and deeply."

"Then let us play," Albrýndaer concluded with a smile.

And so they did. Ílya explained to him that she had devised a game wherein a group of heroes—like those they had learned about in the tales of their elders or in the few books they had been able to read—set

out on adventure to explore mysterious locations or to save and protect the innocent. A set of "rules" guided this game, for she had learned quickly that freedom flourished in limits and dissipated whenever it was unfocused. Freedom was creative whenever channeled to a point, awakening the striving for something good and worthwhile even if it be in a made-up game and an imaginative story. Freedom was not creative, nor even truly free, whenever it tried to cast aside all form and shape, whenever it tried to ignore all the contours of life and its drama from birth unto death, from moment unto moment, from day unto night and night unto day, from outside to inside and inside to outside, and from person to person. Here was the rich stuff of wonder and play, and the domain of freedom's exercise and its flourishing. And in the midst of their shared play, crouching in the dim light of the cavern over the figurines that Ílya had carved, Albrýndaer learned much about the nature of life and freedom, of wonder and activity, that he could not have learned from thought alone.

Indeed, for many hours in the coming years he and Ílya did this, and the impression it left upon him was indelible. It changed him. And it changed her. He began indeed to play himself even when alone, getting lost for hours in some game or imagination, and his habitual pensiveness began to lose some of its heaviness and inertia while retaining all of its depth and stillness. But above all, as Albrýndaer and Ílya joined together in this way, their shared activity forged both of them together in a new and profound way, by joining their hearts and minds together in a shared wonder, in an activity that was fruitful precisely because it was gratuitous, and ordained to no end outside of itself. Its whole purpose lay in its delightful and lighthearted participation in the gaze and activity of creative Love, in being contemplation given flesh in the activity of hearts and bodies, which for all the ages of the world shall ever be called "play."

Chapter 3. Mykkëvéngr

Hældáris. 3rd Telmeric Age, Year 29 (V.Y. 1174)

Hældáris is stirred from his thoughts by the hand of Relmaríndë upon his shoulder. She crouches down before him and looks into his eyes with tenderness and concern. "Something is occupying your mind," she remarks.

"Many things fill my thoughts," he says in reply, pushing himself to his feet and standing face to face with her. "But as I sat here I thought particularly of Father. I miss him. And I fear that I shall never see him again."

"I think I understand that," says Relmaríndë. "Though I had no warning before I was separated from my people, it has been many years since I have seen them. And separations are painful, whether they are temporary or permanent."

"This temporary separation," says Hældáris, "or this fear of a more permanent separation, is nothing compared with what you have experienced and what you have lost. I should not have even brought it up."

"Compare not the pain of one person with that of another. What you are feeling must be felt. This is your first real confrontation with the threat of death—and with one exception it is mine as well. To think of the risk and to experience the fear of loss: this is only natural. How can your mind not go back to the cradle of your home and the origin of your life?"

"I suppose so. It is just that you have known such loss and I have experienced such abundance."

"I have also experienced abundance, even to overflowing, Hældáris," says Relmaríndë, "and you have tasted loss and pain, even if different than my own. Why does it matter so much to you?"

He thinks for a moment and then replies, "I think it is because even after these years knowing one another and sharing so much of life together, and these years even of wedded love, you still remain a mystery to me, so far beyond my understanding. Or even better, you become a mystery more deeply felt the more I come to know you and draw near to your heart."

"Do you think you are not a mystery to me as well?"

"No, it is not that..."

"Sometimes I feel unworthy to have you, my brother," Relmaríndë says. "Do not underestimate the depth and breadth of what lives within you."

"Nor should you, Relmaríndë," he replies. "And do not underestimate the depths of my weakness and folly, my blindness and narrowness of heart. Sometimes I feel like a foolish moth drawn to a flame not knowing that it shall burn him."

"And sometimes I feel like a frail flame about to be blown out by chill winds, and your presence preserves me," she concludes, and then she turns back to the topic with which the conversation began, "You spoke of missing the presence of your father and fearing the loss of him."

"I did," says Hældáris, "Of course, I think of Mother as well. Yet for good or ill, in this moment it is Father especially who lingers, as it were, within me. I have wanted so deeply to be the kind of man that for the entirety of my life he has proven to be. To become a father as he is a father, and a king as he is a king."

"You speak already in the past tense, Hældáris," she interjects. "The story is not yet concluded."

"That is true, yet I see little hope for anything but a premature end to a fruitless quest."

Relmaríndë silently takes a step to the side and reaches out for something that leans against the wall, raising it up and proffering it to her husband. Seeing the sword in her hands, the same sword that once belonged to the king, he receives it in upraised palms. "This was his, and now it is yours," she continues. "Let it be a reminder that you cannot hope to be a father unless you are first a son, or a lover of men as a king unless you are first the king's beloved."

Hældáris draws the sword to his body, as if to hold it to himself as one would a small child, weak and endangered. But he does this only for a moment before straightening his body, exhaling deeply, and slinging the baldric over his shoulder and letting the sword rest in its scabbard upon his back. "This sword has become so many things to me now," he says at last, "which at first it was not. At first a gift of Hiliána, it has now become a king's gift to his son and his heir—and for this reason as much as for its original intent, it is for me truly as its name suggests: *illoándir,* a lightbringer."

A moment of silence is shared between the two as the ship continues to rock around them, and the sound of waves beating against the hull echoes through the cabin, and then Relmaríndë says, "It is almost dark

outside now, as twilight descends into night."

"I was lost in thought for so long a time?"

"You are more like your father than you know."

"If our dispositions are so alike, then I hope that our actions may be alike as well."

"Your actions will be your own, and such they ought to be."

"Yes, but they will be true if they are born of the love that I have first received, and express that love in truth."

Looking upon the countenance of his wife, Hældáris feels a surge of tenderness and affection and steps forward to draw her into his embrace. Holding her head close against his chest, he kisses the top of her head, and then he says, "I am fortunate beyond words to have a companion such as yourself, Relmaríndë.

Stepping back to look in Hældáris' eyes, Relmaríndë says to him, "As you feel with regard to your father, so I feel with regard to my people. I feel as though their life and legacy have been entrusted to me, and it is a weight both heavy and light, which I carry and which, in my very burden, carries me."

Nodding, Hældáris answers, "Neither of us shall have much chance of anything, however, if we never reach the shores of Vælíria and instead perish upon the sea. Or rather, within it."

"And I thought you were the optimistic one, and your sister the anxious one," Relmaríndë remarks, and though her words could be understood as a rebuke, Hældáris knows that they are not. She is rather trying to make light of the situation not in flippancy but with a touch of humor and remembrance, drawing her husband's mind back to earlier days when danger was not so pressing.

"There is much yet for me to learn from my sister," he says, "and I wish that I had more time for this before I departed, since my eyes were so late opened to the true beauty of her heart."

"We may yet return."

"Aye, we may yet. Though I find that difficult to conceive of at present."

"In that respect, shall we go up to the deck of the ship to gauge the seriousness of the storm, and to inquire of the captain?" asks Relmaríndë.

"I suspect we shall be of little assistance, but let us go," Hældáris says, and at this moment a shout sounds from above, too muffled to understand but clearly a shout of concern.

Almost as if the timing was arranged precisely for the end of their

conversation, they both hasten up the steps to the deck, whereby they are immediately pelted by heavy and cold drops of rain slanting down like a sheet from a densely clouded sky. Not only are they greeted by rain, however, and the wind that carries it through the air, but also by a flurry of activity even more intense and feverish than they witnessed when the ship's crew was preparing for the coming storm. The waves are tumultuous, but to their immediate estimation not dangerously so, at least not enough to threaten sinking the ship. Seeing the captain Hældáris draws near to him with Relmaríndë at his side and calls his name, "Olándir, what causes this ruckus? Is something amiss?"

Turning his body in mid-movement, as if to answer Hældáris while not easing the momentum of his own activity, Olándir shouts back over the noise of the wind and the rain, "Something is amiss indeed. And it is not the storm."

"Not the storm?" Relmaríndë voices for them both. "What then do you mean?"

It is as if the bottom drops out of their hearts whenever they hear the captain's response, "There is something in the water. Something very large. It is making passes beneath us."

"How long has this been happening?" Hældáris asks when he finds his voice again after the first shock of fear and surprise.

"Only just now has it begun," Olándir says, and then he adds, "Listen, I can't stand here chatting while my men need me. If it is some kind of aggressive beast, we need to prepare the weapons immediately." And without allowing them any time for further words, he turns and moves away.

Immediately Hældáris and Relmaríndë share a purposeful glance and the former says, "What are we to do?"

"Do? I don't know that there is anything we *can* do," replies Relmaríndë, the expression that crosses her face one that Hældáris has only occasionally seen before, a countenance of profound anxiety and grief. And this, even more than her words, startles and alarms him. For as sensitive, kindhearted, and gentle as she has always been from the first day he met her, he has also sensed in her an incredible strength of mind and heart, and even of body, which is unlike that of ordinary mortals. But here she has found her match, and more than her match.

"W-we must try," he says, trying to force some measure of calmness and courage into his voice, though he feels none in his heart. Grasping about in his mind for some course of action, he continues, "I shall gather the men together and tell them to take their weapons. This beast

shall not have us without a fight."

Her mind clearly occupied with other thought, Relmaríndë nods absentmindedly and watches Hældáris from where she stands as he disappears into the body of the ship once again.

"It is as I feared," she says to herself under her breath, but follows it immediately with, "*Oë Eldaru ya tua Illiandir, hygas en venas a noän, en daras elandra ya ren tua, aïn haifa ohomë nu ti.*"

With this entreaty she walks to the edge of the deck and, holding tight to the railing, directs her gaze downward into the waves, seeking to plunge to their depths and to see the threat that assails them. And it does not take long, but a few moments, before she sees it: a long and dark bulk slithering through the water no more than twenty yards beneath the ship. Yet even so, she feels it before she sees it, and the feeling is so intense that it almost pushes her to her knees. Her legs buckle so violently that she remains standing only because of the railing to which she clings.

A mysterious presence seeks entry into her mind, invading her senses and her consciousness as if to throw open the doors of her freedom and to ravage her interior. It takes all of her self-presence to resist it, and the struggle is so intense that she loses consciousness of everything else around her—of everything but the struggle of two interlocking minds and wills, hers and that of whatever force moves the mykkëvéngr and gives it life. In all that follows she is unconscious of her surroundings and knows only this clash of beings, this invisible strife of spirit and spirit, of light and dark.

Hældáris, returning now to the deck of the ship with the men under his command following shortly behind, see her and makes a move to draw near to her. At that moment, though, another shout is heard and all eyes turn to the west, where the face of the setting sun shows through a cleft in the parting clouds, its light glittering brilliant across the cresting waves and through the falling rain, even as it descends from twilight into darkness. And they see it, the thing toward which the shout directed the attention and the hope of all: land! A mass of land lies before them on the very horizon of sight silhouetted against the last fading light of the sun and thus unmistakable.

"Keep your harpoons and lances trained on our foe," cries Olándir in command, "but set your hearts toward land. We have yet a sliver of hope!" With these words the captain, in a burst of energy and speed, goes below deck to engage the remainder of his men in the near fruitless task of using oars to row through the stormy waters toward the

shore that awaits them. Thankfully the storm is not any stronger than it is, and the waves and the wind are pushing them already in a northwesterly direction, so they shall not be fighting the swell of the ocean directly. But there is still little or no hope that they shall attain land if the creature threatening them launches its attack.

Hældáris comes to Relmaríndë's side and speaks to her, but noticing that she is unresponsive—enraptured in some mysterious interior battle or dialogue, and unresponsive to his words and his touch—he grasps her arm to steady and protect her. Aeyósha too comes to her side, and, after looking deeply at her and then at Hældáris, he turns his gaze to the water. Then comes an intense moment of expectation in which the very air itself seems to hold its breath, and all of those upon the ship feel as if a wicked hand reaches out to grasp their throats and to strangle them. And as soon as the moment comes, it passes, and the air is broken by the bellowing cry of Aeyósha, "Here comes the beast!" Only a second or two later the sound of his voice is dwarfed by the roaring of swelling waters and the deafening crash of wood as the mykkëvéngr, its scaly serpentine backside, jagged fins splayed out along its length as they break the surface of the waves, rams against the ship.

Wood shivers and splinters and the ship rocks so violently that many men lose their footing and fall hard against the deck, arms flailing wildly for some means to steady themselves and rise to their feet again. But the ship holds.

Aeyósha lets out another bellowing roar, this time not a communicator of words but only an expression of frustration and of fear. And then, turning back, he sprints to the other side of the ship and casts his gaze into the waves. "If it comes back for another, I think we shall not survive."

Captain Olándir reappears on the deck and says, to no one in particular, though all his men attend to his voice, "The hull has been damaged, but only slightly. With any luck we can withstand even a few more blows, though the ship will be taking water."

"I fear it shall be much worse than that," retorts Aeyósha, turning to face the captain.

"What do you mean? What do you know of seafaring?" asks Olándir.

"Of seafaring I know nothing. But of the behavior of animals I know much, of animals hunting and consuming their prey." Aeyósha's eyes lock with those of Hældáris, who for a moment turns his gaze away from Relmaríndë—still captured in her inner struggle—to look at his

friend. Then Aeyósha looks directly and intently at Olándir. "This beast is toying with us, captain. I've seen it so many times before. It—"

But his words are interrupted whenever the mykkëvéngr rams the ship again from the opposite side of the hull with equal force. When the men have steadied themselves again, Olándir says, "How could it do more damage than it has? It seems the ship yet holds against its strength. Does it not ram us with all its might already?"

"Have you seen it up close, captain?" Hælдáris asks, turning to face him even as he keeps a hand tight on Relmaríndë's arm.

"No, I was—never mind. We do not have time to talk," Olándir says, and turns away, considering the conversation concluded. "Prepare for another hit!"

"But you don't understand!" cries Hælдáris, voicing what is in Aeyósha's mind as well. "The serpent has fins like blades upon its back. We have not seen the worst of it yet."

"Oh, by all the gods above and below!" the captain curses, spitting, though this has little effect as his spittle is caught up in the wind and the rain. "Prepare to struggle for your lives, men!"

And then it comes. The serpent's long body snakes up above the cresting waves and for an instant the eyes of all are fixed upon it in terror, and then it slams against the ship with full force, the fins of its back slicing into the hull like the blades of a jagged-edged saw against old wood. The ship shakes violently and a terrible crack sounds through the air as it splits in twain. The force of the hit and the splitting of the ship throws most of the men off balance and many, even trying to hold on to the guardrail or rigging or mast, plummet into the water. Only a few manage to remain where they are. And even for those who withstand the chaos and the movement, little can be done. For where they stand soon changes, as the parts of the boat twist and turn in the crashing of the waves, undulating up and down and thrashing about wildly, threatening to overturn entirely and plunge them headfirst into the waves.

And even then the mykkëvéngr is not done, and it returns again, sawing through one of the remaining halves of the ship. After this Hælдáris sees little more, as the force of the hit dislodges Relmaríndë so violently that she nearly catapults over the railing and would fall straight into the sea had Hælдáris not such a firm grasp upon her arm. But even this is to no avail, and the movement of the ship as it splits asunder is too much for him to keep a grip both on her and on the handrail. He releases his handhold on the ship in order not to lose his

hold upon his wife, and they both together plunge into the water of the ocean.

What happens after this is difficult to express in words for the sheer terror of it and for the amount of things that occur in such a short span of time. Hældáris lays his arm tight around Relmaríndë's waist and tries to hold her limp body close to his own while with his legs and his free arm he attempts, though vainly, to remain above the water. With every new wave his head is thrust under and he takes a mouthful of water, salty and cold. The sun has all but set now and everything descends rapidly into darkness, but Hældáris knows some of what is happening around him simply by the sound: the mykkëvéngr continues to ram the ship until it is in what must be splinters, and the shouts of men echo all about him in the water, cries of fear and of pain, but also cries of friendship even in the face of death as men cling to one another and seek to aid their companions in grasping broken pieces of wood and directing them toward the land that looms as a black shape in the distance. And over all this, the whistling of the wind and the swelling of the waves continue.

Among the din the shouts of Aeyósha are heard, encouraging the men in a loud voice. Hældáris too wants to encourage these men who have been entrusted to his leadership and his care, but he is unable, both because all of his effort is spent in trying to breathe against the onset of the waves and to keep himself and his wife above the water, and also because in this moment there is nothing he could find within himself to say. His heart is broken and his mind is spent, and he is staring into a black pit of bottomless evil, opening wide maliciously and laughing in mirthless delight as it devours him and all those around him.

Suddenly he feels a firm grip around his chest, heaving him up from the water—and Relmaríndë in his arms—and his side strikes against something hard. Wood. The grip releases him. He realizes that he has been lifted up onto a sliver of the hull that, though he cannot tell its size, seems wide enough to hold almost his entire body above the water, with only his lower legs dangling still in the chaotic water. "Now stay there, and hold tight both to her and to the raft, if you can." It is Aeyósha's voice. How did he get so near? And how did he see his friend in the darkness and the chaos?

But there is no time to answer these questions. He feels it in his heart and his mind before he feels it in the water: the serpent passes directly beneath him, and there is a bulging of the water, almost a boiling, as it

passes; and even as chaos engulfs him Hældáris finds himself for a moment looking up at a narrow break in the clouds above him, through which a handful of stars glisten. And then the wood beneath him splits and the water drags him downward into its voracious depths. In the vehemence of this movement the wind is knocked out of him and for a moment consciousness slips away. As quickly as this happens, however, he wrenches himself back into the waking world, only to find that Relmaríndë has slipped from his grasp.

"No! No! No!" he cries in panic, batting the water wildly with his hands in an effort to find her, to grasp her before it is too late. But instead a wave catches him full on and thrusts him deeper under the water, disorienting him entirely. His body twists and rolls uncontrollably, and indecision takes him. With half of his mind and his body he reaches out for his wife, still searching for her in the muffled underwater tomb, hoping against hope to lay hold of her, and with the other half he tries to orient himself and to propel himself back up toward the surface. In effect he is rendered immobile, and he feels the life begin to slip from his limbs, as much in shock as in despair, as much in loss of air as in the pain that splits through his body. And he sinks into darkness.

Chapter 4. Adolescence

Albrýndaer. Vælírian Years 1146–1147 (2nd T.A. 989–990)

One unavoidable part of growing up in a prison, even as unusual a prison as this, was the fact of criminals. For not all who were cast into the subterranean dungeons were condemned only for political motives; there were also many who were doers of evil in its many manifestations: murderers, thieves, brigands, and the like. And one such criminal stepped into Albrýndaer's life when he was still small and vulnerable—budding, it is true, into life, but too weak to defend himself—and caused what is one of the deepest and worst of traumas: the ravaging of the heart through the violation of the body. Like a despoiling bear neither gentle nor loving, this man, Méldor by name, an acquaintance and even friend of his family, caused a damage to the eleven year old boy's already malnourished and frail body—and to his sensitive heart—that would leave scars forever.

And what followed upon this experience, though intended to bring healing and security, in fact brought yet further scars. After this hap-

pened to him, Albrýndaer, confused and conflicted, fled from the inhabited area of the caves, unable to bring himself to return yet to his family, or to speak with any others whom he might come across. In the dim light of the glowing veins of ore, he passed into the narrow tunnels that branched off from the main cavern, paying far too little attention to his location and almost none to recalling the path so as to find his way back again. In this moment it seemed to him almost preferable, after all, to disappear from the sight of all, to take refuge in some small crevice of stone and to make a safe nest for himself. And this he did, if only for a moment, when exhaustion began to overtake him.

He curled up in a small alcove at the end of a narrow passage, clear water dripping slowly at intervals into a pool not far away. Letting down his hair and drawing his cloak tight about him, he tried to slip from consciousness into sleep. But instead his body only let loose its pent up tension and began to shake uncontrollably as if in fever, both cold and hot, burning with chill and sweating with icy perspiration. And in his mind, before his inner eye where the impressions of sight and feeling remain even after their objects have passed away, he relived again and again the moments of his desecration. The face of the man, and his voice, and his rough touch, came again and again in waves, unwanted yet inescapable. And try as he might to move beyond them to some meaningful thought, to some escape, he found all avenues closed and the same horrific experience approaching him from all angles.

Wrenching himself from his fetal position, he threw himself forward onto the stone floor of the passage and plunged his face into the cold water of the pool. He bathed his face and his arms over and over again, and then his whole body, as if the touch of water on flesh could somehow reach deep within and purify also the shame and confusion, the regret and loss, that he felt deep within himself. But instead he found only physical illness, due to the combination of his anguish of heart and his cold dampness of body. When at last he woke from the sleepless oblivion that eventually overtook him and left him lying numb upon the hard stone, he shook truly from head to foot with terrible chills, and his body ached with severe fever.

How long he remained in this place and in this position, the shadow of death hanging over him, he did not know. And little was his mind present enough even to ask such a question. Only a thin thread of self-presence remained, the inner core of consciousness, the sanctuary of the "I" that abides even when all else seems plunged into nothingness through sickness, intense suffering, or affliction of spirit. And all of

these he bore simultaneously in this time, and they bore down upon him until one thought alone remained with him, one impulse, stretching out as if a child trying to emerge from the womb or a plant to break through hardened soil. This thought was that the Love that had held him from his earliest days, from the very origin of his life before he even left the sanctuary of his mother's body, stood always in opposition to a lovelessness, an evil, so deep and so terrifying that its sight and experience could bring nothing but horror. And if Love had held him always, there existed also something that sought to sever him from this love; and if security had touched him and even pervaded him before, so insecurity now crept up on him—no, more, it violently rent its way into his very self, as if a poison injected into the flesh there to pollute all, until sick and unfit either to receive love or to give it.

This was Albrýndaer's first taste of true horror and loss, the taste of a world severed from the Love that gives all things meaning. And with the slightest thread of his remaining consciousness, he hated such a world, and feared it. Yet even more, his inmost heart reached out, with a sinuous aspiration so frail and so subtle that it was hardly more than a thin thread of web in the darkness or a single hair of the head fallen to the ground unseen: his heart reached out for the Love that in that moment seemed so far away, the sole lifeline to save him from drowning in the murky waters of death and despair.

He was found like this days later, though he knew it not. Consciousness only returned to him whenever voices penetrated into his mind as the person carrying him in their arms drew near to the encampment again. With eyes fluttering open, he beheld an unrecognizable bearded face directly above him, and others farther away, blurred as if seen from deep underwater. And then all thought and awareness slipped from him again.

Only when his raging fever calmed, through the ministrations of his parents and a member of the community who was skilled in the arts of medicine, did he open his eyes again. And he found himself lying now on his back on his own pallet and in his own dwelling, many layers of cloth thrown over his body to keep him warm.

Eventually his father drew near and bent over him, his face lined with worry, but also with anger. At first, Albrýndaer assumed that the anger hidden in Daeran's expression was directed toward his son, but soon it became apparent that the reality was otherwise. "How do you feel now, my son?" he asked.

"H-how long has it been?"

"Since you were found? It has been close to two days," said his father, "though you were missing for just as long."

"I am sorry," Albrýndaer said in a whisper.

"Why do you apologize?"

"I am sorry for endangering myself and leaving the camp."

"Please do not concern yourself with that, my son." Then, placing a hand upon his child's forehead to feel for fever, though perhaps this was but an excuse for a gesture of tenderness and compassion, he repeated his original question, "How are you feeling now?"

"Better, I think," replied Albrýndaer, "though I remember little of these last days."

"Yes, of course...though it is clear you are getting better. Otherwise we would not be able to hold this converse at all." Then a shadow crossed Daeran's countenance, and he closed his eyes for a moment, as if to shake away phantoms from his eyes or to summon up some clarity and courage from deep within. "I do want to speak with you, however, about what led you into the tunnels. What could have driven you to do something so rash?"

"I-it was nothing, Aba," answered Albrýndaer, finding himself torn between the desire to share the pain and shame of his abuse with his father and a deep-seated inability to bring himself to do so.

But to his surprise, Daeran said, "It was *not* nothing, Bryn," using the nickname that only his parents and Ílya used to refer to him, and, at that, only in moments of special intimacy or poignant speech. "We know that something serious happened to you. We had to care for you, after all, in your illness, and we inspected your body." And then, after a moment's hesitation, "Someone did something terrible to you. This much is certain, and if you are not willing to share this fact with us voluntarily, then I must insist upon bringing it up."

In response, Albrýndaer simply burst into tears, tears of embarrassment and tears of relief, knowing now that his secret was known before he had time himself to hide it or attempt to forget it. In response to these tears, Daeran leaned forward and wrapped his son in his embrace, holding him silently for a long time until the his tears were spent, and his sobs had given way again to silence, and the shaking of his body to stillness.

Leaning back and looking deeply into Albrýndaer's eyes, his father said to him, "I would like to know who it is that did this to you. You understand that, do you not? Great ills could follow upon keeping this a secret."

Unable to speak at first, Albrýndaer but nodded silently, wiping the lingering tears from his cheeks and drawing his knees up to his chest. But then, as if to break the strangle hold that was soon to grip him and steal his voice entirely, he spoke the truth to his father and told him the identity of his abuser. A flash of emotion crossed Daeran's face upon hearing his son's words, but it swiftly hid itself again. The latter understood only the manifestation of anger and disappointment, and a deep sense of betrayal, that a man whom he had considered a friend had done something so horrific. But the rest remained beyond Albrýndaer's grasp, and even as he looked up at his father, intense exhaustion again overtook him, and he collapsed back into his bed. Seeing this, Daeran drew the covers again over him and, with a gentle whisper, said, "Rest now, my son. And worry no more about anything."

And whether he wished to do anything else or not, Albrýndaer could not but follow his father's words, and a deep, albeit dark and troubled sleep took him.

When he woke again his mother, Milly, was present, and their eyes met for a long moment whenever he sat up and turned to her. It was not difficult for him to see that she had been weeping, and had only shortly before left tears behind, as her eyes were still red and swollen. Forcing a smile, she said, "Let us get you something to eat. You feel well enough to eat, do you not?" He nodded to this and watched her silently as she busied herself preparing him a meal. "Since you were unconscious for so long, we had to get water into you one way or another, but it was impossible to do the same with food. You must be beyond famished."

"I suppose so," he replied, "though I really have not had time even to notice that."

"Well, regardless of whether you feel your hunger or not, you need nourishment, otherwise another kind of illness will overtake you."

"I could eat, and I suppose that is what matters."

"In that you are right," Milly said, sitting down before him and handing him a platter of food, which he began slowly to eat. "Your fever has been gone for over a day, and even your restless sleep gained some measure of repose at the end. I knew that you would return to us —return to normal—soon." Something about the pronunciation of this last word, "normal," sounded to Albrýndaer's ears strained. In fact, the lighthearted manner that his mother was now presenting appeared to him contrived, and he wondered what bothered her so. Yet even if it

was only the grief and sorrow of knowing what pain had been inflicted upon her son, this was more than enough.

"Where is Aba?" Albrýndaer asked when he had finished eating.

Lowering her eyes, Milly replied softly, "He is *out.* But worry not. He shall be back quite soon, I am sure."

"Perhaps I should rise and try to walk some. I could perhaps seek to find him," said Albrýndaer. "I imagine he would be glad to see me up and about."

"I...no, I do not think that is best," retorted Milly hastily, and the intensity in her voice was far beyond what simple concern for the health of her son would merit. This Albrýndaer could not doubt.

"Why not? I am feeling quite well enough for that," he pressed. "It might do me good."

"No, you really should not. Please stay inside for now, and rest. I will tell you when it is good to leave our dwelling."

"Leave our dwelling—"

"I mean to press yourself too hard," his mother corrected herself, before he could say any more. "We do not want you slipping back into sickness, do we?"

Just as Albrýndaer was about to open his mouth again, another voice sounded from behind his mother, and a moment later the figure of his father appeared in the small cavern, the thick leather flap of the makeshift door—like that of a tent—shutting behind him.

"It is good to see you up, my son," Daeran said. "How feel you now?"

"I am full well again, I think."

"Good, good. I am glad to hear that. I have something else to show you, which might help your peace of mind and body still further."

"And what is that?" asked Albrýndaer.

"Why do you not come with me, and I shall show you?"

When Albrýndaer made a motion to rise, his mother caught him with a firm hand upon the shoulder, resisting him. But her face was turned not to him but to his father. "Daeran, what are you thinking?" she exclaimed, tension strong in her voice. "Did we not discuss this?"

"We did, but I have not changed my mind."

"It would not be helpful for him."

"And why not?" Daeran said. "He needs to know the way that the world works, and to understand that we are all on his side."

"But this is wholly unnecessary."

"I think not. I think it more necessary than anything. We cannot

shelter him forever. Look, after all, at the world in which he is growing up, and the suffering to which he is subjected to day after day."

Seeing the heat of argument rise between his parents, Albrýndaer shrugged off his mother's hand and rose to his feet. Both of them turned to him, surprised at his quickness and his resolve. "It does not matter," he said with hardly a thought. "Let me see what Aba wishes to show me. I am old enough to handle it now, and I would regret not seeing it, now that I know his intentions."

"But you would not, son, you would not," sighed his mother, but even so her eyes revealed that she recognized her defeat. If she were a woman of stronger will, she would have resisted still further, but her spirit now was broken through the events of the previous days, and through the years that she had been imprisoned far from all the light and beauty of the life that she once knew.

Wrapping an arm around his son's shoulders, Daeran led Albrýndaer out of their dwelling and through the scattered tents of the encampment to what he knew to be the "town center," if this encampment could be called a town. Like others of its kind, scattered throughout the massive cavern that was the dwelling of all the subterranean "prisoners" of the Empire, it was smaller than the usual village above ground, with a form of governance and authority more like that of a family than an institution, just enough to keep chaos at bay and to facilitate cooperation between the different members of this unnatural and forced community.

When they came to the center of the encampment, Daeran stopped walking, and Albrýndaer stopped with him, though at first he did not understand why. In the half-light of the cavern it was difficult to see anything clearly at a distance, but as he peered forward in the direction that his father gestured, Albrýndaer discerned a sight which immediately made him regret so hastily dismissing his mother's warnings. In the very heart of the encampment's center, erected out of wood and cloth, was a gibbet a good ten feet tall, and the figure of the man for whom it was made still hung upon it, the rope tight around his neck and his legs dangling freely at an odd angle, showing that his neck had been broken when the support under him had been pulled away. The vision seared itself into Albrýndaer's mind and imagination like a brand of fire pressed against the flesh. But in after years what would haunt his dreams as much, or more, than the vision, was the eerie sound of the rope creaking in a slow rhythm under the weight of its victim: a man who had surely done great evil and had desecrated the innocence of a

young and helpless boy, but who had now been made a grotesque spectacle of death in the name of justice.

Overcome by this vision, Albrýndaer was saturated with a feeling of disgust, not only at what he saw, but at his father for bringing him here, and at his mother for allowing it—and at himself for witnessing it—even as his heart burned at the memory of his abuse at the hands of the man who was now suspended as a corpse before his eyes. Little then did he hear his father's words, "You understand, do you not, Bryn? This was necessary. It was impossible for us to leave this man unpunished and free, for he could harm others besides yourself, were he not to attempt to hurt you again as well. This was done to protect you. In a climate such as this, there truly is no other choice, if any semblance of safety and of justice is to remain among us."

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In the months and years following upon these events, the tenor of Albrýndaer's life changed drastically. How could it be otherwise, after his own person had been violated so profoundly and so directly, and, in the response given to this, the very security and understanding that he had always felt from his father and mother from his earliest days was all but shattered? Had they manifested true empathy and compassion, focusing on sheltering and caring for him rather than on punishing his abuser, and involving him in the trauma of witnessing his death, perhaps things would have been different. Perhaps he would have been able to speak with them of the immeasurable pain of heart that he bore within himself after the abuse he suffered. But instead he found himself slipping away from them more and more, closing off from them both his heart and his life; and if he shared himself and his aspirations with them before, he did so no longer. All their inquiries into his well-being were met with resistance or evasion. They continued to play a large role in his education, but the most intimate and secret core of his person was now closed off to them entirely; and even if Albrýndaer wished to open it to them—and a small part of him did—he found himself incapable of doing so. For a fundamental distrust had taken root in his heart following upon that terrible and traumatic week, a distrust that would mark him for years to come. It was a distrust not only in his mother and father, but also toward others as well, as if his disposition, which before inclined spontaneously to thinking the best of other persons and assuming the good in their intentions and the wisdom of their actions, inclined now instead to thinking the worst, or at least remaining always on guard for the hurt that he assumed would

unavoidably come were he to allow himself again to trust in another.

And much of the marvel and beauty of reality, of its wonder and its sparkle, was faded in his eyes, and a heavy shadow fell over all things. But this shadow fell especially upon his own heart and his own body, and of all the places where the pain of his loss were felt, it was in his relation to himself that he felt it most keenly. The scars of hurt, the scars of confusion and shame and fear, cut so deeply into him that he did not know if they would ever heal, or if their healing was possible. And though he continued to believe in the Love that held him always, a Love wholly good and wholly beautiful, a seed of insecurity and doubt was nonetheless implanted deep within him. A part of him now felt a world far contrary to the one that he had known before—the world held always in the security of Love—a world, rather, of profound isolation and insecurity. Which one was the true world? Could they both be true, or had the new depths of evil and darkness that he discovered revealed the falsity, the naivetë, of the world of love in which he had once believed?

His heart thus bore a profound awareness, and a profound question. If this world had truly been born from the heart of an eternal Love, what had happened to turn it into the world that he now knew, a world marred by evil and teetering on the brink of the abyss, an abyss of loss, insecurity, and ultimate aloneness? In his own life, the answer was evident, all too evident: it was the evil that he himself had encountered. But this was no answer to the true question his heart asked, for behind the direct ills that afflicted him, behind the human failure and malice that resonated in his own heart and flesh, he felt a vast ocean of evil. In every human heart—in his very own heart—this evil dwelt, a tendency broken and obscure, opposed to the light, and often kindling into actions which hurt the lives of the living and shattered relationships. An evil both personal and cosmic: this is what he felt, an evil that lived inside every person as some heritage of the past, some trait that all bore as part of their inheritance in this world, and yet also an evil that fell upon all of them from without, like a heavy shadow weighing upon them and seeking to resist and oppose their ascent to the light, seeking to oppose their movement beyond the evil that lived within them and toward the Love that called them. But even in this struggle, in this fight against evil both within and without, love and light also drew them, fought for them, and protected them, also both within and without. For in the confrontation with evil, an innate aspiration to beauty, to goodness, to truth—to love—also lived within every single human

heart. And the world still sang its mysterious song, a song marred by evil and discord, yes, but giving hints of a harmony still.

In light of this, despite all the loss that Albrýndaer suffered during this painful time, there was one person with whom he continued to feel safe: with Ílya Myrica. She was like a lamp in a dark place for him, a lamp that, as frail as it may be, and as humble its radiance, continued to flicker and to burn, giving both light and warmth. They continued to spend a great deal of time together, and doing much the same things, though the tenor of their relationship changed—in many ways immediately and in other ways only gradually. Ílya knew the weight that Albrýndaer now bore, and was considerate of it, though she never pressed him to talk about it, and he never brought it up himself.

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If in earlier years Albrýndaer had feared that he was in danger of thinking too much and acting too little—and even more of getting caught in a cycle of fruitless pensiveness—this fear only found actual grounds in later years. As a child it was not a true danger, for his thought was always born of wonder and stirred on by desire, by curiosity, and by hope. So even when he thought, he thought in the beauty of the real and toward it, and all the movements of his mind and heart found their origin and their end in a contact with the world that approached him from the outside, and which ever enfolded him. But after his heart was shattered in that fateful time at the cusp of adolescence, when the child begins to lean toward the future man, then the tenor of his thought indeed began to radically change.

As it sadly happens so often for societies that grow old and decrepit in their "enlightenment," forgetting the foundations that have given them birth, and the truths that have fostered them to life, so it can also happen in the life of the individual man. He ceases to think in wonder and begins to think in doubt; he ceases to live his life from the wellspring of desire, and instead begins, out of fear, to attempt to safeguard himself against death. Having tasted the death that is loss of innocence and the bitter poison of evil, Albrýndaer witnessed the destruction of the wonder that was once the foundation of his very life and the atmosphere of his existence. And thus his thoughts became, rather than adventures of the heart, burdensome preoccupations from which he felt incapable of freeing himself.

For years, it is true, he continued to play, at least in the little games that he and Ílya devised. And these were in a manner a refuge and a consolation to him. But even such play, such a little sanctuary of won-

der, was to dissolve and give way more and more as he moved beyond childhood and into full adolescence and from adolescence into adulthood. And indeed he became a man, both physically and mentally, at a very young age.

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Already years before this period Albrýndaer had already begun to take on responsibilities within the community, life being what it was in the underground, marked by perennial lack of resources and hardships of all kinds. At first he engaged in simple work fitting to his age, gathering mushrooms or dimlight rushes from moist areas of the cave, one for people's nourishment and the other to be used as wicks for candles and lamps. These sources of light, too, he helped to make at times, though this was usually something that each individual or family did for itself: soaking the fibers of the wick in melted fat of the underground animals and setting them aside to cool and to harden, and then delivering these lights to those who were too ill or elderly to easily make them for themselves.

Later on, whenever his age passed from single digits into double, there was an attempt to teach him to tan and treat leather. But the job was difficult for him, because the odor of the fluid used for tanning bothered him a great deal. Deciding that his nose was simply too sensitive for this kind of work, after only a month it was decided that he would apprentice in other crafts. And so he settled with the crafting of pottery and other clayware—usually understood to be a woman's work rather than a man's—and this at first embarrassed him a great deal. Already he was keenly aware of his weakness and frailty, and this begot in him a hypersensitivity to any way that he might be a failure in the tasks expected of a young man his age (though he had no other reference points) or a burden on others.

Milly tried her best to console him and encourage him that, though man and woman were indeed different and excelled in different areas of life—each having unique gifts and capacities—there were many areas where their capacities coincided, and they were more alike than different. For whether a person be a man or a woman, they are above all a human being, a unique individual, even if this humanity is always lived, in both the flesh and the spirit, either as masculine or feminine. "You may be doing what many see to be 'a woman's work,' but I do not see any reason why it makes you less of a man. And indeed I think you do it almost as well as any woman I have ever known." And this, in fact, was the truth, for Albrýndaer was particularly adept at working and

shaping with his hands. All knew, though no one voiced it to him directly, that this was due both to his gentleness of spirit and to his thoughtfulness of mind, such that he was never even tempted to rush through his work, but coaxed it into being with a sense of almost timeless attention. Such an attitude annoyed certain people, of course, but beyond its intrinsic goodness, it also certainly helped to bring good pottery into existence.

When he wasn't working at making pots and other such things, Albrýndaer was often sent to gather either the mushrooms and rushes of his old work, or to collect clay from the deposits deep in the cracks along the tunnels or in the beds of the many silent pools buried in the depths of the underground caverns. This work, however, was never done alone, because, as has already been said, going into the tunnels alone was dangerous.

Such was his life during these years, one of ever increasing work and of ever decreasing play, and while he did not resent the growing responsibilities entrusted to him—indeed he was grateful to take his place within the community and to be of benefit to others—he did lament the fact that the last fragments of wonder and of play were slipping from his grasp as surely as water through one's fingers.

Indeed, as the months and years passed, the sense of security that as a child he had known—a security that remained even in the unusual atmosphere of his birth and growth—slowly slipped away until nothing remained for him but a profound sense of loss, and then finally, in his ordinary consciousness, hardly more than a numb emptiness.

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And having withheld his inmost heart from his dearest friend, Ílya, he also began to feel estranged from her. She made numerous subtle attempts to draw near to him and to find access to his thoughts and feelings, but more and more he shrugged her off with some word or other, or simply changed the topic of conversation entirely. And so she sought instead simply to be with him, to be a friend to his hurting heart, even if she could only circle around the outside and was not allowed access into the inner sanctuary. But this hurt her profoundly. Not only did she care deeply for Albrýndaer and ache in her own heart of hearts for his well-being—and thus feel deep pain and sorrow that she could neither be with him in this place nor help him to heal. She also had come to love him with a love perhaps deeper and wider than could be expected of a young woman her age.

Much like Albrýndaer himself, the circumstances of her life had

been a catalyst of growth and maturation unparalleled, and by the age of sixteen she both looked and acted like a woman five or more years her senior. Thus was expressed once again what can almost be stated as a law of human existence: that the human heart matures and grows, both in thought and in action, both in wisdom and in love, more through poverty and trial than through comfort and ease.

And she had poverty and trial in abundance, perhaps even more than most in the underground dwelling. And though she had a deeply sensitive heart, this suffering and lack never seemed to embitter her but only to make her more compassionate and understanding of the pains and struggles of others. This, too, is a mysterious reality present at the heart of human existence: that suffering may either break a person or it may be a space where he finds himself anew precisely in the movement of love by which he learns to live in the mutual belonging of all persons to one another. As with every process of transformation, even that by which clay is turned into pottery or a a strand of rush into fire and light or any other raw material into a work of art, so it is with the greatest transformation of all: that of the heart and the life of the human person. Indeed, as with every process of transformation, there exists a certain risk, a certain peril, in the movement by which the gift hidden in something is set free and its deepest potentialities are fulfilled. For this occurs in part by the crucible of flame, by the breaking and reshaping, by the changing from one form of life into another, which crosses over a great unknown, even if deep underneath it all there is a continuity that abides in the heart's conviction and pursuit of the beauty and the love that touch and invite it.

And Ílya, for all her joy and cheerfulness—and these were authentic and true—experienced also profound loneliness and sadness. Not only did her relationship with Albrýndaer—her one true friend—come to a stand-still or even begin to weaken and to dissolve with the passage of time. She also suffered a deep lack of love and care from her father, and indeed violence, for he was not a sensitive man and in the best moments was distant and cold, while in the worst moments he lashed out at her in violent anger.

The abuse that she suffered at the hands of her father, though not sexual in nature, nonetheless sensitized her heart even more deeply to compassion with the pain of Albrýndaer. But since he refused to open himself to her and to allow her into his place of pain, instead locking it tight so that no one could draw near, perhaps even so that he himself thought of it no longer, her compassion became as a fire burning up

her own heart. And though it found expression in the silent laments and prayers of her inmost being, joined together with her own most personal pain—and thus catalyzed her healing and maturation yet more deeply—it also began to close her off from relying on others for understanding or love. And in this, sadly, she became more like Albrýndaer with the passing of years. Since he refused to be more like her and to open himself to compassion, she eventually sunk into a similar state of despair—not a despair of life or of goodness like that of her friend, for she remained integrally whole, deeply sensitive and with a thread of undying hope—but despair of ever finding another human heart who really cared enough to enter into the adventure of love and mutual understanding.

The degree of the breakdown in their relationship was illustrated keenly one day when Ílya was seventeen and Albrýndaer was fourteen. For once, and quite unexpectedly, he had turned to her and said, "Ílya Myrica, sometimes I worry for you."

"You worry for me? What reason have you to worry?" She raised her eyebrows in asking this, as if standing accused and trying to defend herself playfully, though under this expression Albrýndaer read something more serious, even sad. Long had she desired him to ask this question, but now it came so unexpectedly, and after so many disappointments, that she did not know how to respond. And even if she had wanted to respond positively, her heart resisted itself.

"I do not mean that you yourself give me cause to worry," he clarified. "No, how could I ever worry about you in that respect? I mean rather that I worry because of your father."

"What about my father?"

"Does he not treat you poorly?"

"In what manner?" she retorted. "What makes you think such a thing?"

"I have heard the way that he treats you and even at times seen the bruises," said Albrýndaer. "Does he hit you often?"

"No," she lied. "It is a rare occurrence, and nothing you should worry about." Saying this, she was dismayed at the tone in her own voice, and wished that she could speak again to correct it. But instead she remained silent and waited for Albrýndaer's response.

"I am sorry. I can see that you do not wish to talk about it. And so I will not press," Albrýndaer said. "But above all I want to say: I am sorry that you must suffer this. I am a coward for not trying to help you more, aren't I?"

"This isn't about you," she responded, again dismayed at herself for speaking so—half consoled at his expression of compassion and care and half angry at him for waiting this long.

"No...it is not. It is about you, Ílya. Please, if you ever feel able to talk about it, or if you desire to lean on me for any reason, do not hesitate."

"I-I..." she begins, but is unable to say what she truly feels. And so she settles with, "Thank you, Albrýndaer. Thank you."

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During his fourteenth year Albrýndaer's father began to teach him how to hunt. Few professions were possible within the limitations imposed by the underground prison—though there were plenty of tasks, as we have seen—and thus one's first hunt had become a kind of "initiation" into manhood. But before a hunt was considered safe, one must train. For this was not a matter of felling a deer at fifty or a hundred yards with a longbow, but rather a matter of directly attacking creatures far more vicious armed with little more than a sling or a stone knife. And Albrýndaer was taught in the use of both. The sling was but a simple leather strap with a wider section in the middle to hold a rock for flinging at one's prey. And it took the young man much longer than he expected to be able to throw the rock in a way that was both accurate and forceful enough to do any damage to its target. It seemed for him always to get caught in the sling when he released it or to go flying off in an unwanted direction. On the other hand, the knife felt easier, if also more fearful. It was hardly more than an extension of the hand, and this was both its strength and its weakness. Eight inches of shaped stone sharpened to an edge and a point, with a handle of wrapped leather: this was all that stood between him and the beasts that he would be required to confront and to fell for his own sustenance and the sustenance of the community.

Bats would not be dangerous to him, but they were notoriously hard to catch either with rock or with blade. The same was often true of rats and other vermin, though these were preferable for their safety, though little meat they gave. It was the more dangerous beasts who yielded more nourishment, and whose hides could also be used for garments, tents, and tools. Wraithclaws were much desired, though they were terribly aggressive, and were often to be found in packs. Luckily they only hunted the smaller vermin as their prey; but if one were threatened they would all band together to defend themselves against their attacker. Creatures that were best described as a mix between a wolf and a bear, with fur of the darkest black and claws that shone ghastly

white in even the dimmest light—hence their name—the wraithclaws stayed far from the camps of the prisoners. And yet they were surprisingly easy to locate, if not to kill, for they were noisy creatures, communicating in throaty cackles.

A wraithclaw was, in fact, Albrýndaer's first kill, though this was entirely unintentional. He and Daeran set out from the encampment, each with weapons for the hunt—though his father intended to use his own only if they fell into danger—and passed some way into the tunnels. They lit no lantern or candle and trusted rather to their own hearing and sense of space, and for a meager amount of sight to the glowing ore veins that were almost never absent from the caverns and tunnels of the underground prison, though varying greatly in quantity from one place to another.

They looked and listened for rats or other small creatures, but before any of this they encountered the sound of a wraithclaw near at hand. As they drew nearer they discerned its shape dimly visible as it bent over the ground, snuffling and digging, though they could not see precisely what it was doing.

"Now this is an unexpected opportunity," Daeran said in a whisper to his son. "Rarely do we find one so occupied. It should not be difficult to come a few steps closer and to knock it unconscious with the sling. Then you know what to do."

Albrýndaer nodded and swallowed hard, trying to calm the violent beating of his heart, which now pounded so loudly in his ears that he could hardly hear anything else. But he took the steps and then placed the rock within the sling, preparing to swing it. And his legs began to shake so badly that he struggled to remain standing, not so much at fear of what the creature might do to him as to what he intended to do to it. And this he did indeed do. The first shot from the sling misses the head of the beast and instead pelted it on the shoulder, rousing its attention and its ire. The second throw, however, directed at the wraithclaw as it charged toward Albrýndaer, struck it straight between the eyes and, combined with its own momentum, sent it careening into the rocky ground.

After hardly a moment's pause, Albrýndaer, spurred on by his training, leaped upon it with his knife bared and plunged the blade deep into its skull through one of the eyes—the best way to avoid ruining either fur or meat or any other bits of the creature of which the people of the encampment would make use. And then, overcome by the visceral brutality of what he had done, he turned away and choked,

trying to keep down the bile rising in his throat.

Seeing this, his father placed a comforting hand upon his shoulder and waited for the retching to stop, and then said, "You did it on your very first try. I have to say: I do not know if I have ever been so scared in my entire life. I suppose that is what being a father does to you. But you took it down and dispatched it before it did any harm."

"You were scared?" Albrýndaer asks, not fully understanding his father's words as his imagination still replays the kill before his mind's eye.

"Aye, that I was. For you, my boy," Daeran explains. "I would hate for any harm to come to you."

Chapter 5. Ötûnr

Albrýndaer. Vælírian Years 1147–1150 (2nd T.A. 990–993)

The taste of death during his first hunt was difficult to stomach, and especially the act of killing. For Albrýndaer had a deep and abiding sense of the preciousness, indeed the sanctity, of life—of all things that lived and breathed, acted and grew, brought forth young and died. He knew, of course, that a man or woman is far different than the irrational creatures who lived beneath the earth or even upon it, and he saw this difference played out in countless ways in his daily life, even in the makeshift society built in the caverns far from the light of the sun. For even if man and beast both live in a cave, one paints pictures upon the walls and one does not, one carves figurines with which to play and one does not, one writes and speaks and shares in formulated language, expressing thought and volition, and one does not. Indeed the man himself can choose to spare his prey in pity, whereas the beast can do nothing but what it has been designed to do, and this is its gift and its nature, and what is precious about it. For to each creature there is a gift and a purpose, and yet in the human person, raised up in intelligence and in will, in the spirit that breaks beyond the boundaries of the material and temporal world, there is a "gathering together" of all that exists in lower creatures and its elevation in something more than itself.

And so Albrýndaer lived, and in all his living he tried to respect the world that he encountered, even as he received plants and animals entrusted into his dominion for his nourishment and the nourishment of those he loved. And so too he worked, learning even more as he grew of the many parts that went into human life and how much care it re-

quired, even for such simple things as the mending of clothes or the preparation of a single meal or the regulation of healthy relations between the diverse encampments sharing space and resources in the vast cavern of stone. But encountering the fragility of life, balanced as it were on a precipice and ever striving to stay aloft, he also began to feel viscerally, in his very heart and bones, the fear of death. For if he had once been confident and serene in the enfolding embrace of Love, this confidence had now been taken from him, even as he could not stop searching for it. But in its place he felt only absence, and fear filled the void.

Work and responsibility were a refuge for him during this time, providing a stability that he could not discover within himself, and idleness would have been destructive, as it is for every man. For if he could not occupy himself meaningfully in moments of repose, of gratuitousness, as he had once done even in the activity of the mind and of the heart, then it was good that he had external activity to occupy him. It mattered not whether it was pottery or cooking or hunting or repairs of clothing and tents, or any other work, in all of it there was a meaning, for in all of it he touched with his hands, with his very flesh, the mystery of the real. Indeed, even though he could gratuitously play no longer, there were rare moments when he felt the same contact with meaning, with purpose, and with beauty in work that he had once known in play. He came to experience, even at a time of intense darkness and suffering, the truth that for the mature heart work and play at their root are one. And this was new for him, and new in a way that he desperately needed; for while he could summon no sense of motivation within him to devote himself to playful activity as he was used, his daily responsiveness to the demands of work put him in a situation where life could be lived once again, and thus hope could be found.

And in the daily responsibilities of life—sometimes irksome and oftentimes difficult—he found the hard shell that had been growing up around his heart softened a little, and at least for these moments (would that they could be always!) he looked out beyond himself, beyond his own personal struggles and doubts, and to the people for whom he worked, and to the life that he shared with him in co-responsibility for the existence that was theirs. And so labor became for him like a book to be read each day, telling a story to which he knew neither the full narrative nor the conclusion, but which was compelling nonetheless—or precisely thus, for he was held in the midst of it. Indeed, labor became a space where he found again some semblance of the contact with

creative Love that he had once known, and though he no longer communed in the depths of his heart with such Love—which he perceived to have, as it were, abandoned him—he nonetheless knew at times that it was there, encircling him in his very activity, and that his own creativity and work were a participation in it. Yet he also knew that without this reality of communion with Love—he knew not what to call it—even his work was constrained and could not truly take flight. Yes, what of the reality deeper than work, which not only illumined and guided work, but also surpassed it? This, in pain and despair, he had long tried to forget, even if the aspiration for it continually came forth again where he least wanted and expected it, and sought expression.

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And so Albrýndaer found a glimmer of life abiding still even in the death that he had come to taste. He grew thus in strength of body, but especially in depth and breadth of mind, and despite the darkness that weighed upon him, he matured as a person and became both more compassionate and more understanding; disillusioned, yes, but also increasingly clear-sighted. The daily activities of life provided him stability, and his growing care for his people—even exiled prisoners as they were—gave him a sense of purpose and of belonging. Or rather his awareness of belonging stirred him to responsibility and to care.

Shortly after his sixteenth birthday, during the last days of the year 1149 (his birthday was the 16th of Ventéras), Albrýndaer at last spoke with Ílya of the topic that for years now they had both known and yet avoided. And once it was brought into the open, the passage of years did not matter, for the pain and all the anguish of Albrýndaer returned to him as if new; yet so too, it did not matter for the mutual trust between them, and once they began to speak, it was as if they had always been speaking.

"What is justice, Ílya?" Albrýndaer asks as they sit together in the dim light, facing one another.

"You would know the answer better than I," she replies.

"But I would like to hear what you have to say."

With a knowing gaze, she inquires, "Why do you ask this question?"

"Surely you know."

"I do," she says, "though I am surprised. I have waited so long that I began to wonder if you would ever broach the subject. It is the image that still haunts you. It is the injustice of the justice that was effected before your very eyes. A man hangs upon a gibbet in a public place, and is ridiculed by all: is this justice? I think not."

He nods in response to her words, but explains, "But I do not know if it truly was injustice. Surely he received what he deserved, and his punishment was ordained to the protection of our community. He was a...was a danger. And he could have easily hurt others besides myself. I have thought long on this, and I see more and more clearly the wisdom of Aba's words. He recognizes that a society without punishment is also a society without law. And without rule of law, what is there? Freedom for the wicked and danger for the weak."

"You believe your father's words, then, that there was no other way?"

"I...I think I do."

"But? Something bothers you about this?"

"Yes. Even though I see its necessity, something does not sit well with me, nonetheless."

"The fact that his death was paraded before your eyes as if witnessing it would bring you satisfaction? As if the man deserved not only punishment but humiliation, torture, and death?" Ílya asks.

"Both of those," he replies, though loath to pronounce the word. "As I think about it, I realize that all of us in this world deserve far more punishment than we receive, even the innocent of us. Or rather...that's not exactly what I mean. What I mean is that none of us deserve all the goodness, love, and beauty that we do receive, and on a daily basis. Every day beneficence is extended to us beyond our merits. Could this not have been extended, even if in small measure, toward Méldas?" On saying the name of his abuser, Albrýndaer lowers his head almost as if to hide his face. He is surprised that he voiced it, but also knows that he must, in order to bring the other great pain in his heart into the open, that Ílya may see and receive it. And if not now, perhaps he shall never find the courage again. "But within all of these questions of justice, something else disturbs me as well."

"Do you perhaps feel betrayed?"

"By Méldas?" It does not get easier the second time.

"That is beyond question, and I grieve greatly at the betrayal."

"Yes," sighs Albrýndaer, but he cannot look at Ílya, knowing that her gaze is compassionate and yet piercing. He is not prepared to go into that place...not yet. Let them go there slowly, step by step. "But you mean by someone else as well?"

"Yes. By whom do you think?"

Albrýndaer thinks on this for a few moments before answering. "My father, and even my mother. I feel betrayed by them, as if they ought to have protected me and yet they did not. I understand that the...the

abuse that I suffered was beyond their knowledge and control. But they could have saved me from receiving wound upon wound in what followed."

"And in that sense of betrayal, you feel alone and isolated?" asks Ílya, reaching out and placing a hand for a moment upon Albrýndaer's knee, though he does not respond to this touch.

"Yes. Alone might be the best word," he answers quietly. "But it is not just an ordinary aloneness. It is not just loneliness as the lack of another person's presence. For even in that, there can be found a beauty —a beauty to solitude, to aloneness, in which the longing and hope of the heart can expand, reaching out to something greater. I once believed in that greater reality, and perhaps I still do, though it is now beyond my reach, and seems to hold me and care for me no more. I once was so confident that it was woven into our every thought and burned in our every desire. I once believed that in solitude too there was communion, for the fabric of all things was woven of Love, and without it nothing at all could exist. This I felt, even before I could give voice to it in speech. But now. Now I know not either what I feel or believe, and only the pain of what I have lost and what I cannot seem to find again."

"I have felt this Love as you," affirms Ílya, "and I cling to it still. But even in that, I could not speak of it as you do even while in the depths of your pain. Perhaps all persons feel so at the beginning, before this knowledge, this intuition, is lost in the darkness that falls upon every life. And how I wish, Albrýndaer, that I could give this certainty back to you again."

"This darkness, this loss, this is precisely the pain of which I speak," says Albrýndaer, unconsciously looking up and meeting Ílya's eyes in the amazement that he is so deeply understood by her. "How can there be any darkness if there is such light? And yet if there is such darkness —as I feel and know in both heart and flesh—then how can there be true light? Is the light perhaps just an illusion? Have I dreamed it all along? Ah, you see...the pain is like a poison. But it is a poison because of the evil, the sheer malice, that is tasted underneath it and within it. How could such evil exist, such terrible violence? And how could those who are 'good' inflict violence in response, as if this would somehow restore the order that the first evil had disturbed?"

"You have an unusual way, Albrýndaer Hríndas, of speaking about the suffering of your heart," remarks Ílya, her voice filled with gentleness. "Never have I met anyone who is so filled with a sense of the real,

of the very weight of being, that he complains of his own trauma by speaking spontaneously of the cosmic battle between light and darkness." She pauses and smiles lovingly and gently upon him before continuing. "And I love this about you. I love this thirst that burns within you, this deep sense of the world of which you are a part. And thus I have grieved intensely at its loss these last years. I felt in the past that you were going to leave me behind in the impetus of your wonder and your longing. But now I just want you to be yourself again, to rediscover the beautiful child that was lost, even though now he shall be a man." She pauses and they remain for a long moment looking into one another's eyes. At last, when they both become uncomfortably aware of the intimacy of their reciprocal gaze, she continues, "I also want you to acknowledge—I want you to acknowledge, Bryn, that your pain hurts because it was inflicted upon *you,* and not only because it reveals that something is wrong with the universe. Perhaps only in this way can you begin to discover what was lost. They both go together, after all, the particular and the universal, your own heart and the heart of all the world."

"I...I do acknowledge this. Though perhaps there is truth in what you say, and I do belittle my own pain," he whispers, nodding his head. "Nonetheless, if I speak in this way, it is not to detract from my own person, but to try...to try however weakly to express the very depth of my pain and loss, and to trace it back to its source."

"Yes, acknowledge it you might," she replies, "but I wish that you would share it with me. I wish that you would allow me to be with you in the pain, as in the thoughts and struggles, aspirations and longings of your heart, as you once did. For as much as you might see in your mind, in your thought, it is not enough. You must also let your heart simply relax and grieve. Finding answers for yourself will not bring full healing where you need it the most. For there are certain things that only tears can heal. Or rather certain things that only tears held securely by tenderness. For if the answer is truly Love, then there is no way to receive it but in love."

For a long moment their eyes interlace in a deep reciprocal gaze, now without even a lingering since of discomfort, for all false self-consciousness has fallen away, and much is said that needs no words. They are, indeed, hardly aware of looking so deeply upon one another, swept up as they are in the space that such reciprocal beholding, such mutual holding, creates between them. And in an instant Albrýndaer feels that this space between them, this bond that unites them in shared gazes,

can be nothing other than a participation in the same Love that has always upheld all things, and that bound him to his parents at the beginning of his life. If they, his mother and father, have failed him, Ílya is still here, loving and secure. And even were she to fail him too—perish the thought—the Love that lives within her and beyond her would continue forever.

But in such love, there is space for pain. Indeed, in such love, ineffably, darkness and evil itself are held—foreign to love, yes, and opposed to it, but borne in long-suffering compassion. And this compassion touches Albrýndaer's heart now, even if only for the briefest instant, and tears well up in his eyes. These are the tears that for four years now have been unable to come forth and find expression. Seeing this, Ílya does not hesitate. She reaches forward and draws Albrýndaer into her embrace. He buries his face against her shoulder and, in the safety that her presence provides, he lets his tears at last flow freely, and his grief find expression in mourning.

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The depth of a person's life, and its true breadth, is not judged on the number and variety of their experiences, but on the profundity with which these experiences are plumbed, grasped, and explored, and the degree to which they beget in both heart and life the goodness for which the human person has been made. A heart spilled out on the surface of many experiences can find itself spoiled, numbed to the depth hiding within every moment, having many things and yet possessing little understanding of the significance of anything. On the other hand, as was the case with Albrýndaer, a heart bereft of so many experiences can yet be led precisely thus to plunge to the very heart of the experiences that it does have, and to the core of existence itself, asking the questions that lie at the foundation of life, and whose answers are the wellspring not only of right thinking but of good action, and thus of happiness and flourishing.

The trials and little beauties of his existence proved precisely thus for Albrýndaer: vessels of the discovery of realms of depth not visible to the eyes, though revealed in all that is visible. And Ílya above all was a vessel in this manner, not only due to the ways in which she invited him to play and to wonder, to let his pensive heart also incline itself outward in incarnate action; but she was such for him above all simply because of who she was in herself. In her Albrýndaer discovered in the deepest way the marvel of what it means to be a person, and he felt in the most profound way that he had yet known the cry of the heart: "It is good

that you exist!" He knew then, from the heart of his experience, what was true affirming and assent to the goodness of another person's being. And in addition to this, he also came to experience for the first time the mysterious longing to plunge into the reality of another individual, to explore all the facets of their being and their experience, even to the very sharing of the inmost thoughts and feelings of the hidden heart. In other words, in this twofold experience—of affirmation and of longing for communion—he experienced gripping his heart the grace that can only go by the name of *love*, a love that, because it is grace, demands of the heart of man everything, indeed asks of him more than he is himself natively capable of giving.

Of course he had loved his mother and his father and the others in the settlement whom he knew; and he loved all the impersonal realities that he encountered as well, from stone to light to water to air; but *this* was something that became a seed of all future growth, to be rivaled in its importance for his development only by his deep innate sense of the eternal Love that held all things, and his relationship with this Love, which had now been so grievously fractured. In fact, in his darkest place, it was the love of Ílya which remained his sole lifeline, the only thing that seemed to him to still be—despite everything—safe and secure. And gradually, through his deepening relationship with Ílya, his eyes were opened in a particular way to the horizons of love, and its limits—or rather its limitlessness, in the promise of totality and eternity that it bears within itself, reaching out beyond the limitations inherent in the frailty of a broken world toward a world where love brings forth the joy of communion without ending or surfeit, without danger of estrangement or the pain of loss.

But, sadly, there was much yet to happen before this awareness would grow into full maturity in Albrýndaer's heart once again, and much loss still even of the very love that he trusted. For while the experience of being loved and received by Ílya proved to be deeply healing for Albrýndaer in the wellsprings of his heart from which thought, desire, and choice flow, it was neither universal nor complete. Even in the very area where the remedy had been applied, he bore the same scars, the same doubts and fears, the same inner resistance and self-protection that he did before, even if these were weakened. In fact, in the time following in the wake of their intimate conversation, Ílya experienced yet another profound hurt, realizing to her grief and sorrow that Albrýndaer spoke no more of the matters upon his heart than he did before. Nonetheless she had in her naivetë hoped for more, even for

an immediate and complete healing. Thus she came to taste deeply for the first time a lesson that would remain with her always: that the human heart, no matter how much love it receives, and how radiant the truth communicated to it, heals only gradually and with much pain.

However, despite all of this, and to her consolation, Albrýndaer appeared less sorrowful in his daily life, and in her presence he was admittedly less sullen and silent; something had changed and she was glad for this. But there was more as well. For she rejoiced, though she felt somewhat ashamed for it, that his tenderness toward her had been renewed, indeed that it grew in the way appropriate for a young man entering into adulthood. He began to express his love for her, reservedly, yes, but truly. Reflecting upon her own response to his love, Ílya recognized the shame as unreal—as born of fear—and she knew that the desire to be loved was neither selfish nor unhealthy as long as it remained rooted in authentic truth and goodness. She thus began to receive from him the love that she had long desired, and in this love found the courage to express her own love as well. And this reciprocity wove their hearts together more deeply than they had been before. The closeness of childhood thus gave way to the closeness of youth and even began to show the first blossoms of the intimacy of maturity.

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As the fruit of his labor and responsibility, and in the subtle shift in his heart through his openness to Ílya and the growing communion between them, Albrýndaer found a new stability within himself. He began to taste the seeds of new life taking root within his heart, and some even beginning to germinate. However, this process was disrupted in only a few short years, and his life, along with the lives of all those in the caverns of the earth, radically changed. When he was eighteen years of age something was awakened in the heart of the earth which would change the fates of many and bring immeasurable suffering. Or perhaps this "something" had always been there, awake and vigilant and waiting only for the right moment to appear.

It all began when a hunter from a nearby encampment returned alone even though he had set out with a party of four. And the story he brought with him was terrifying even for being so difficult to believe. But his solitude gave strong evidence to the truth of his words, as did the wounds he bore: deep claw marks upon his chest and shoulder. Even as the man was being tended and his wounds treated, his story began to spread through the encampment like fire through a dry wood, and within a matter of days to other encampments as well. He had seen,

so his account went, a host of creatures unlike anything he or any man had ever seen before—beasts born out of the very shadows and wreathed in darkness as in cloaks, though bulging forth from this spectral mass were bodies with flesh not unlike that of earthly creatures, not unlike the flesh of men, though blackened and desiccated as that of a living corpse. And their eyes pierced through the darkness not like a light, even an eerie light, glowing with the spark of life, but as a devouring darkness that seemed to eat up one's very soul, as whirlpools dragging a person down into the abyss. These creatures—and there were countless numbers of them—had slain with ease his three companions and he himself had barely escaped, fleeing blindly through the tunnels in fear for his own life and in a half-conscious desire—persisting even in a mind shackled by terror—to bring warning to his people.

And now the man, whose name was Hádra, seemed to live elsewhere than in the world of flesh, his encounter with the creatures of darkness having shattered the sanity of his mind. Only many years later, in other circumstances and by the abiding tenderness of his wife who stayed always by his side, would the light of life in his own eyes be rekindled and his mind return, scarred, yes, but found anew, to live beyond the terror that had once broken him. But that is another story, one of sanity rediscovered even in its very loss, and in the only way that it truly can be found anew: by the abiding presence of another whose love, steady and patient, enters even into the darkness of the sufferer and brings, in this place, both understanding and light.

Albrýndaer heard the news three days after its first announcement. The words he heard were not directed to him, but to his father, and he he overheard them clearly when they were spoken. And he listened intently to the ensuing conversation.

"Man-like creatures clothed in darkness, you say?" Daeran said upon hearing the news. "How do we know that there is truth behind these words? What if the man, overcome by fright, imagined what he saw, or distorted it? What if it was nothing but a pack of wraithclaws or even some unknown beast we have yet to encounter?"

But even as he said these words, Albrýndaer knew that he shared the same thoughts and the same hesitations as did all in the prison, all, that is, who had any knowledge of the history and legend of the people. And if Albrýndaer, born in the darkness himself, knew the tales, then surely the others did as well. Beasts like the walking corpses of men clothed in darkness with eyes as blackest night: these were the words with which the feared and fabled ötûnr were described in accounts of

the old days. Thus, though many spoke words of doubt and caution not unlike those voiced by Daeran, in their hearts they feared.

And the fear was well-founded, as within a matter of days the first encounter gave way to others. And these encounters happened not now in the depths of the tunnels wherein a few men came across creatures lurking in the darkness, but rather in the violent assault of the ötûnr on any who left the confines of the encampments to hunt, to gather, or to work. Thus it became known that a great power had indeed been awakened or stirred to wrath, and that this power watched with keen and malicious eye the dwellings of the people who made their living in their earth-bound prison.

It was not long before most had caught at least a passing glimpse of these fell beasts, and felt the horror that their very proximity stirred in the human heart—or rather the horror which threatened to suffocate and snuff out even the tiniest threads of human hope, happiness, or freedom, assailing the heart internally with even greater violence than any external oppression. And the ötûnr appeared not in the likeness of dead men alone; no, they took also other forms, of beasts of bizarre shape and unnatural size, or of a combination of beasts both natural and fantastical, both large and small.

Experienced hunters were thus stationed at the outskirts of every encampment, taking turns keeping vigilant watch at all times. And yet watch alone these did not remain, for they often sparked into real combat by the appearance of the ötûnr, an appearance that was clearly ordained to bring harm to the settlements of the humans, though what reason for such action these beasts could have, no one knew. For they came at various and unpredictable times and in numbers ranging from a handful to close to thirty, and when the latter occurred, there was little hope for survival not only for those keeping watch and guarding the encampment, but for all the people making their living within it. Soon the survivors from ravaged encampments were seeking refuge in others; or entire encampments, fearing a similar fate for themselves, joined together with their neighbors and consolidated their lives and their protection, building around their tents and workshops and supplies walls of stone and rawhide with but a single gate carefully watched by men with slings.

But slings proved to be all but useless against these beasts, and it soon became apparent that the only way to slay them such that they were truly felled and did not immediately rise again was to pierce their heart or to remove their head. And even then it was necessary to destroy their

bodies by burning, otherwise in a matter of days their very flesh would begin to reform itself or be refashioned by whatever mysterious and hidden power gave them life. And creating fire in such abundance was difficult in the underground cavern, for there was a complete lack of wood, and what little grass or vegetation there was the communities relied upon already either for nourishment or for lighting their homes and encampments. They had to rely, therefore, upon the bodies of the creatures themselves and whatever flammable oils and fats they collected from hunting. Yet this too proved to be a serious problem, for if a siege on the surface world proved to be a trial for the citizens under siege, not only because of the warfare involved but because of the famine and hunger within, so it proved to be even more grievously so here.

Albrýndaer's encampment was soon flooded with immigrants from a nearby settlement who sought to join forces and to create a bastion of defense against the encroaching darkness. And this they did. However, none of the measures taken were able to prevent tragedy. Within a matter of weeks Albrýndaer had witnessed more of death and destruction than he ever imagined he would. And all of this was compounded because he received every injury as if it were his own, and every betrayal of life as a question shouting to the silent heavens demanding an answer. Hunters were sent out to gather what food and resources they could to sustain the settlements even at risk to their own live, and often few returned, and those who did return were wounded in body and shattered in heart, with deep scars upon their flesh or missing limbs, and hollow gazes in their eyes.

After three months the encampment in which Albrýndaer dwelt—though it was surely much the same everywhere else—was on the brink of starvation. The violence of the ötûnr made it impossible to acquire the necessary nutrition, and the infirm or elderly began to die of malnutrition and accompanying illnesses. Albrýndaer's mother herself took to bed and was unable to rise, and he spent as much of his time as he could spare sitting by her bedside and nursing her, though nothing did he have to ease her pain, relieve her fever, or satisfy her consuming hunger. And even as he sat, he felt himself wasting away along with her.

The one moment of light and consolation during this time, as feeble as it felt to Albrýndaer, was when Milly spoke to him one early morning after a restless night tossing in her bed and crying out in delirious dreams. "My dear son," she whispered to him in a hoarse voice, "I feel that I have failed you in every way that a mother can fail her child."

"Hush, mother. Do not speak, and especially not of such things," he replied without thought, and more hotly than he intended.

"No," she retorted, raising a frail hand as if to forestall any further intervention or resistance. "Allow me to say what I wish to say." And seeing him nod despite himself, she continued, "I have failed to protect you from those who would harm you, and even in the face of your hurt I failed to shelter you, to let you know that you were seen. In my cowardice and my fear, I left you to be hurt, even against my own better judgment. And now there is nothing I can do to give you the one thing in which my hope could still reside: a future life in which you can grow to be a man, a man good and true, and can find a way to leave this place...to find the world beyond the darkness where light still shines."

After she had fallen silent, Albrýndaer looked at her for a moment and met her eyes, but he could not sustain her gaze and soon lowered his own. Nonetheless she spoke no more, and awaited only any answer that he might wish to give. At long last he was able to say this, and no more, "It is not your fault, Aïma. I hold nothing against you, so please, be at peace in this regard, and rest."

Hearing these words she seemed satisfied, though her heart was not wholly consoled and the lines of sadness and lament continued to mark her face, lament at the unavoidable fate that awaited her son, as it awaited all people condemned to suffering and death in this underground prison.

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To Albrýndaer's relief the threat of death from illness passed from his mother, and Milly was able again to rise from her bed. But this did nothing to remove the danger—even the certainty—of death from starvation or from violence that awaited her, as it awaited him and all persons in the underground prison. And he felt powerless at the thought, indeed infuriated at the realization that spared as she was from the illness that had struck her down she was still condemned to death in a way perhaps even more gruesome. Was there not anything that he could do? How could a world so deeply held by love be so totally abandoned and left to destruction? These two questions persisted so long and so deeply in his mind that they blended together as one, and he felt two conflicting convictions which he could not reconcile: he felt that all this destruction was his fault, that if only he were stronger he could somehow prevent it, and yet he also felt a profound anger and disappointment, indeed a rage, toward the One whom he had once thought to be enduring Love sustaining and protecting all

things. Even if he had tasted the rediscovery of this love for a moment in his growing communion with Ílya, in the beautiful security and intimacy between them, it seemed to him now nothing but a shadow in comparison with the evil and death he faced on a daily basis. The shame and powerlessness therefore grew to the point of overflowing, and were he capable he would have acted out rashly even for the mere purpose of doing something rather than nothing, of failing an attempt rather than attempting nothing at all.

Yet he knew nothing that he could do, and he cast his eyes about desperately for some escape, for some answer, while none came. And then it happened: the last drop that would break the dam and send its waters bursting forth into folly. Ílya was taken away from him. Without any forewarning or explanation, her father departed from the village, bringing his daughter with him. Albrýndaer would not have known until later, when he intended to meet with her again for the few moments they could still spare to be alone together, except that he witnessed them in the very act of departing. He walked through the encampment to bring back to his home what little water he could from the nearby well, a pool with reservoirs deep in the stone which nonetheless was running dry as if to deliberately mock their pain and to compound their sorrow. And as he walked he looked up and caught sight of Ílya, her arm firmly held in that of her father. They were moving at a swift pace toward the edge of the encampment, and by the look on her face Albrýndaer immediately understood what was happening, though he knew neither the reason for their departure nor their destination.

Setting down the vessel of water he sprinted toward them, crying out her name and waving his arms. But such a display was not necessary, for in some way unknown to him she already recognized his presence and felt it, and turned her eyes upon him, eyes filled with sorrow and longing. "I go, Albrýndaer," she said simply. "I go to a place where we may hope to find more safety and security, and perhaps more hope of life than here. He gives me no choice."

"Then I shall accompany you," cried Albrýndaer without hesitation.

"No, no..." she answered, tears springing to her eyes. "You must stay with your family. Only depart from this place if they also come with you."

"But I cannot just say goodbye, Ílya," he said. "I cannot just let you depart like this."

Yet her eyes said farewell, and he knew it. At this moment her father,

who until now had deliberately been ignoring the young man—for whom he had no appreciation but only distrust, if he took any thought for him at all—turned back to look at Albrýndaer, his eyes flashing. "You cannot come with us even if you would," he said. "It is my intention to save our lives at whatever cost, and a little brat like you shall have no part in endangering or interfering with my plan. Get away and run back to your *aïma* and your *aba*. She is right there; run home now and leave us to our own affairs. Two mouths to feed is already more than enough."

Overcome with fury and disgust, Albrýndaer instead ran forward and sought to pull Ílya from her father's arms, crying out to her in the effort to convince her to stay, "Please, I shall do all I can to protect you myself. Do not go, I beg you. If you want to depart, we can do so together, you and I, and my family too."

But she only looked at him with eyes overflowing with tenderness and with sorrow, and whispered, "Farewell, Albrýndaer. I am sorry." Wiping tears from her eyes with her free hand she then reached out, despite herself, and laid a hand on Albrýndaer's cheek. Then she said, "Go now, before he hurts you."

It was too late, for her father, infuriated by this delay and even more by the display of affection, struck Albrýndaer so firmly in the face that he sprawled backward onto the ground and all but lost consciousness in the flurry of pain and vertigo that overtook him. By the time his eyes were able to focus once again he saw that Ílya was being dragged away beyond reach, looking back at him and saying silently what they both understood to be their final farewell. There was no hope of a future reunion—not in circumstances such as these. And so he did the only thing that he could do: he reciprocated her gaze and said farewell too, adding in that silent voice of the eyes the simple words that he hoped she understood: *I love you.*

Chapter 6. In Heart's Sanctuary

Hældáris.

Hældáris' mind passes in and out of thought and awareness, in and out of dreams and reality, tasting hope and tasting despair, tasting reality and tasting the fear of nothingness. And all throughout he seeks for the light beyond the darkness, for life beyond death, for an end to this story different than the one he has received. He reaches out for the one whom his heart has loved so deeply for many years; but just as in the water of death, she continues to slip away from him, and no matter how much he grasps for her, she is gone.

And then in his memory he again stands before her as if for the first time, the light warmly and gently filtering through the leaves of the trees and casting dappled light upon the forest floor, playing also upon her face and her form as if to highlight and accentuate the beauty of her body and her spirit. And it is precisely her light that moves him even more than that of the sun and the day, the forest and the trees, for it is not a light merely visible, but invisible, shining from within her as a presence both kindly and intense. Yet even as she draws near to him, and he to her, the memory begins to fade and soon she dissolves into nothingness and disappears, slipping from sight even as he looks upon her. Panic-stricken and afraid he clings to her in the hidden places of his heart, searches for her, calls out to her; but as he searches even the memory of her begins to erase itself from his mind. Terror of terrors! That the beloved of the heart, upon their death, would truly be forgotten! Is not love strong enough to endure even beyond death, to hold the beloved in mind and heart even when their flesh is no longer seen? Is love not indeed, however mysteriously, a promise of life beyond the dissolution of the grave, a hope of enduring communion when all else fails?

Yes, it is. But then again, no; by itself alone, it cannot be so. It cannot be more than a wish, a longing, an aspiration—for there is nothing in human love that itself can sustain the very promise that human love makes. For even if one heart says to another "totally and forever," nothing in this heart can safeguard such a gift and such a pledge, for not

only is it weak and faltering, but at the end death claims all, plunging it in endless night.

And so Hældáris is carried through forgetfulness and loss, through grief and beyond it, and he finds himself in a foreign place which he does not recognize. He stands in newness unrecognized and unexpected, and then he remembers all—in a deeper remembering that has held him even in his forgetting, and has upheld his love even in its loss. And he sees Relmaríndë bathed in an immense light, radiant and pure, intense and yet gentle—a light that does not dim her own light but enhances it, augments it, and sets it free. He raises his hand to her, to hold her and not let her go, but in the same moment he knows that this is not the right response. And so, with hand still outstretched, he releases her, releases her in the frailty yet authenticity of his love unto a greater love, a greater light.

And as she blends into this light that envelops her, she becomes light in turn, invisible to his eyes even while in the same moment she comes to live in the recesses of his heart, abiding forever.

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And now Hældáris' mind carries him back in memory to the earlier years of his life, and he sees them anew, with unhurried glance, as if nothing matters now but to look with truth and to see with light.

He is again a child gazing into the faces of his mother and his father, knowing even before thought that this love, this security, is the truest thing of all, promise of a love greater than itself, of which it is but an image and a reflection. He is again a boy at the edge of adulthood, sparring with his dear friend in the outer bailey of the citadel, laughing and joking in the joys of friendship and unspoken understanding even as they bruise one another with practice swords made of wood. He again sits atop the ramparts of the citadel as the evening sun descends below the mountains in the west and sends rays of reddish light across the cloud-laden sky, his wife silently at his side, her hand held within his. He is again a full-grown man bidding farewell to his family for the last time, embracing his mother and his father with heartfelt affection.

The memories come, living within him, in no particular order, some newer, some older, and yet all coming to abide in a ceaseless present that can only be called "now." And indeed, in and through all of the events of his life, yet also beyond them, holding them and sheltering them as a mother's womb shelters a child, he senses a "Now" that has always been, in fullness of life, before time ever came to be, and which shall continue to exist even when time is no more. And in this eternal

"Now," this everlasting present which is fullness of unbroken life and the consummation of every promise in love unhindered, love abundantly fulfilled without limit or end, he knows that he finds home.

By all this he is consoled, even as, in the very embrace of this experience, he realizes something else: it is not for him yet to enter definitively into this eternal light. And he is saddened by this thought. For glimpsing this light one cannot but long for its fullness. And yet he feels himself sinking back into shadows and into loss, into the struggle and grief of mortal life suspended between life and death, between light and darkness, even as by light it is ceaselessly held. And despite the pain he accepts this return, a temporary sojourn from the light for a time, until unto light he returns again, for ever without end.

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Even in the midst of the affairs of his own service, the king always made time to be, along with his wife, the primary educator of his children. He often taught them himself the subjects with which he was acquainted and also read them books before their nightly retiring. He and his wife fostered in their household a spirit that brought together the two often opposite dispositions into one—namely, discipline and freedom, consistency and space for spontaneity, hard work and a spirit of playfulness. For they understood that, in truth, these mutually conditioned and corrected one another, allowing each to blossom in authentic maturity without any excess or narrowness, but rather in the full expansiveness of truth. Such was the youth and indeed the early adulthood of Hældáris and his sister Almaréä. They learned from a young age to work hard and to appreciate discipline as an indispensable atmosphere of true freedom, and yet also to experience the spirit of wonder and of playfulness as the fuel underneath even the most menial work or the most difficult of disciplines.

The king was certainly generous with his time and with the affection of his heart, both for his children and for all whom he was called upon to love. But it is also true that the very affairs of his kingship were mitigated in part by the wisely ordered decentralization of government in the land of Telmérion, which not only eased the burden on the king and provided safeguards to any abuse of power, but also fostered a sense of communal responsibility among both the lower and higher citizens and among all those in roles of authority. The king knew, in this regard, that he stood in a long line of history and tradition to which he was indebted, and of which indeed he was but a custodian and a safeguard, to interpret the truth that came not only from men but from

the Creator of men, and to aid all those under his custodianship in living according to this truth in right and in good. And in this he was greatly aided, not only by his friends, companions, and counselors, but also by the faith that had been rekindled—yes, that had been unveiled from beneath the forgetfulness of history—and became again the primary motivating force, the primal light illuminating all things, for the people of Telmérion. Here occurred a true renascence, an authentic rebirth, that did not destroy what had come before, even during the ages of forgetfulness, but rather penetrated into it and healed it, lifting it up into a synthesis that was unattainable by the light of natural wisdom alone but which, in the wisdom from above, created a unity no less human, but rather even more authentically so.

Perhaps the attitude of the people toward the seven divines, henceforth called solely the Anaíon, was most illustrative of this truth, though it manifested itself in countless areas of life both great and small. The belief of the people of Telmérion in the caregivers of the world, the Anaíon, which had endured now for two millennia, was not betrayed nor even lessened by the birth of conviction in the sole true and full deity of the All-Giver, the one Father of the world and Maker of all things. Rather, the real nature of the seven was revealed again in its pristine truth, which had for a long time been cast in an imperfect light, or held in partial shadow, as a consequence of the forgetfulness of the One. They were now recognized as finite spirits of great intelligence and will who had themselves been created, in time immemorial before the foundation of the visible world, by the All-Father, who himself existed from eternity unto eternity, being uncreated and everlasting and the sole source of all being, since all things live in him who is Being itself. The Anaíon thus manifested in this world his own presence and closeness, even as he himself did not neglect to be close to his creatures and his children. They were, as it were, but the light of his loving countenance directed upon the world and most especially upon his beloved children. This the people came to understand, and in this understanding they rejoiced. For now the light of which the Velási had been the custodians for long ages shone forth again for all, and, without coercion or force, faith in the one Father spread like wildfire across the continent. This was made even more firm by the evident truth of the claims of this faith, not only in the realm of reason and will and affection—which received such precious guidance and clarity from this revelation—but also from the manifest gift bestowed upon the newly crowned king in the name of Eldáru, the All-Giver himself, through

the mediation of the Anaía Hiliána and in remembrance of the ancient custodian of faith, Séra Galáptes.

A marvelous thing thus occurred that is the trait of all truth, particularly the truth relating to the divine nature and to the unity that he creates among all that exists. Namely, whereas worship of each of the seven Anaíon before had tended toward segregation and selectiveness —with each person or community tending to focus devotion upon that Anaía toward whom they felt especially inclined or in need—now, with the rebirth of faith in the One, true devotion to all of the seven spread and deepened as well, such that every community came, in the worship of the One, to adhere also fittingly to all seven. And this naturally created a piety that was broader and deeper, less fragmented and more whole, than had previously been known, as each of the seven reflected with a particular intensity one or other aspect of the All-Father's care and love for the world, and yet all were united in harmony and peace within the sole providence that is his. Thus was illustrated the truth that authentic unity is not in competition with diversity, but is in fact its only true safeguard, as in the embrace of truth's unity alone do all diverse persons and gifts find both their security and the space in which to blossom, mature, and become most fully themselves.

The great-father of the temple of the All-Giver, a dear friend and heart's companion of the king, was for him, for the years that he yet lived, a rock of strength and a font of understanding and insight. Being beloved of the king and an intimate companion with him in the battle for the soul and life of Telmérion, his presence was also of paramount importance in the years of the nation's rebirth and rebuilding. Hældáris himself could sense the intimate bond that united his father and his mother to the great-father, and his own love for them, a love which also manifested itself deeply and tenderly toward Hældáris himself and toward Almaréä his sister. He died when Hældáris was in his late teens, and the loss was grievous for all who knew him. The memorials of his beautiful life spread far and wide across the land and thousands traveled to attend his funeral and burial in the main temple in the settlement of Fian'cæhil. After him came a great-father who, in a not unfitting manner, carried on his legacy. This was a legacy of humility, kindness, unbounded care and compassion, and the wisdom that is held and shared with all not in the self-righteousness that looks down upon others, but rather in the transparency that shares freely what one has first received, knowing that truth is not the possession of one but the home of all, the little and the great alike.

Other things also were precious and dear to Hældáris during the early years of his life. Among his favorite pastimes, he enjoyed playing the lyre, an instrument which had been gifted to his father by a traveling bard and passed on to his son. The king did not collect gifts to add to his wealth, and so whatever he received he made use of for the benefit of others, unless they were things that were immediately of use to himself in his own needs or the needs of his custodianship. And in fact he had no wealth, unless care of an ancient citadel was considered as such—a citadel, in fact, which was home not only to a training center and barracks for soldiers, but to kitchens that prepared food daily for the less well-to-do of the nearby town, and to a hospital and infirmary where the sick or injured were kept and treated, not only by trained doctors and surgeons, but also by the king himself, his wife, and his children.

Hældáris felt early on in his life a deep love of music, and an aptitude for it. As he grew his voice became full and sonorous, and yet light, and he loved to sing the ancient songs of his people, both in the original tongue as well as in translation—a translation which he himself often performed, though at times with the help either of the king or of the great-father of the temple. The lyre came more slowly for him, and less intuitively, and he found the delicate use of his fingers to be quite a challenge in comparison with the swordplay and manual labor to which he was accustomed. Nonetheless he found playing the lyre delightful, and soon (this was around his late teenage years) he would descend the mountain slope—now well paved with stone steps—and play for the people of the town.

Fian'cæhil was quite small at first in comparison with other towns in Telmérion, and certainly with the great cities such as Ristfánd and Brûg'hil, and even with Onylándun and Minstead in their own reconstruction after the war and the damage of the Earthrend. But the population swelled from a couple thousand at the time of his birth to close to fifteen thousand by the time thirty years had passed. Yes, there were many children born during this period, but the main reason for such a growth was the immigration and settlement of people from other places in Telmérion, places that had been scarred by the fateful events of the War of Darkness. The proximity of the king and his citadel also brought with it a number of boons.

Once Haeldaris reached his eighteenth year, the king began to bring him along every summer as he visited the various clan-lands of Telmerion. These travels allowed the king to remain acquainted with the lo-

cal culture and customs of the various clans and settlements, as well as with their struggles, problems, and aspirations. Since travel often took many days, even weeks, only two clans were visited in a given summer, thus allowing each to receive visitation every three years. This was a time of great joy for both father and son, for each had a great love of the wilderness and delighted in the rugged beauty that marked the land of Telmerion, be it highlands and steppe, woods and hills, or snow-capped mountains and the valleys stretching at their feet. But above all they found joy in one another's company, in simple conversations shared around a campfire in the dwindling light of evening or in the early morning, in jokes and tales, laughter and song, in stories of the past and stories woven of no more than heart and imagination. But in addition to their shared joy, both men also encountered much in their travels to stir reflection upon the role of a king, upon the importance of his custodianship and also upon its limitations; for as good of heart or wise of mind as a ruler may be, little in fact could he change for the better by his own decision or rule alone, and found his truest service in facilitating the freedom and responsibility of others, and their vibrant life.

What stood out to Hældáris the most from these times, even more than his growing acquaintance with both the unity and diversity of the people of his land, with their joys and sorrows, were the glimpses of his father's personality and experience, formed in him gradually over many days interacting with one another at close quarters. Not only did he witness the king's simple-heartedness and his constant prayer, but also his cheerfulness and his humor; and he also witnessed his pain and the sorrow that he bore, soberly yet lightly, knowingly and yet with a joyful self-forgetfulness, as if the sufferings and shadows of life were hardly worthy of attention in comparison with the light and love that, even greater, cradled and encompassed it.

This did not mean that the king was insensitive to his own desires and his own happiness, nor ignored those difficulties and struggles that were uniquely his own, though in fact this was a particular tendency of his, an imbalance growing out of his empathetic nature and the seriousness of his disposition. Like all men he struggled and doubted, failed and started anew, and in particular he had to learn—though Hældáris saw only glimpses of this jurney—to find the way that was uniquely his own in a centuries-old office that he had inherited, and whose duties and responsibilities he was asked to fulfill. At times the king had to be reminded (primarily by his wife) to let himself feel, to

weep, and to yearn for the good things of life, and not only to live for the welfare of those entrusted to his care. Little by little he learned how to avoid becoming subsumed by his office or absorbed into his service, but to rather hold his heart always in a place of primal belonging, of intimacy—with the One and with all those to whom he was entrusted in this life—within which alone his authentic service and ministry could blossom and bear fruit. But the deepest matters of his heart he did not often share with his children, but reserved them for his wife and for his dearest friends; and Hældáris sensed that he also spoke often of his heart's deepest affection with his sister, long dead and yet remaining for her brother a presence always near and ever precious.

The king was thus stretched between the loneliness of compassion and care and the togetherness of loving belonging, between what was life-giving for him and the giving of his life for others. Standing as it were between his longing for the fullness of life (glimpsed in this life although awaiting fulfillment beyond the confines of this world) and the needs and sufferings of his people, which he willingly took upon his shoulders and into his heart, the king was a person and a presence both mysterious and enthralling to Hældáris his son. The latter often witnessed, either at home or on these summer adventures, how the king would need to retire to a space of solitude and silence after witnessing or hearing of the sufferings of his people, there to hand over the burdens to One who could truly hold them, and to root himself anew in the life that, in his very holding of others, held him. Otherwise he would have long before broken under the strain of his office and become bitter and resentful, performing the external actions required of him yet without the heart that gave them life and beauty, sweetness and fruitfulness. Only a handful of times over the years did Hældáris witness the king grow impatient, or voice a word of complaint, though more often he failed to hide the depth of his feeling, wearing his heart so visibly upon his countenance and in his words, though by such outbursts or revelations Hældáris was rarely burdened as rather touched—grateful for the glimpses of his father's heart which he had come to desire and to relish whenever they were given.

A few times Almaréä his sister also joined her father and brother on these travels across Telmérion, though her health was almost too frail for prolonged journeys, and she had many affairs at home with which her heart and her mind, her hands and her spirit, were already occupied. Hældáris was close to his sister from early on and throughout his life, and when Relmaríndë arrived and entered into the orbit of their

family, they too became dear friends and spent much time together. Almaréä and Relmaríndë would often disappear, just the two of them, into the woods at the base of the mountains, only to reappear hours later, sometimes passing the entire day from morning till evening, with nothing to say beyond their own pure-hearted smiles and the joy of their hearts. But this was not so surprising, for the woods held a kind of enchantment about them such that anyone was liable to spend hours in their embrace without noticing the passage of time, spellbound by their ancient beauty and the sense of timelessness that endured within them. Indeed, since the reestablishment of the high kingship and the return of peace to the land, the moon moths—the symbélyia—had returned to the woods of Galas Basin and shone for miles all around, their bluish light radiant and pure, whenever the moon's face was full revealed in the heavens above.

And thus was revived the ancient monthly celebration which had decayed not long after the loss of the line of the Galapteäni kings: *nïeranátas*, night of the moon. During this festival the streets of Fian'cæhil—and indeed the custom spread to many other settlements near and far—were decked with banners of vibrant colors and stalls offering food and drink and games until late in the night. Stage plays were also held recounting great events of Telméric history or even imaginary stories created by the bards and storytellers who throughout the year traversed the land to sing and perform in inns and taberna large and small. And at the conclusion of these celebrations, when midnight came, the people would gather together and, after a prayer to the seven Anaíon and, above all, to the All-Giver himself—a prayer of thanksgiving and praise and a petition for blessing and care in the coming month—they would walk out in complete silence into the woods to behold the dance of the symbélyia for a full hour or more.

Almaréä came to rely deeply upon Relmaríndë in many things, in many matters of the heart—a fact which Hældáris came to witness but which he did not fully comprehend. For in truth their dispositions were far different from one another and at times he struggled to understand his sister. For while they were both quiet and retiring—Relmaríndë was the one who was outgoing, providing a counterbalance to the two quiet siblings—Hældáris tended to be by nature hopeful and optimistic, while his sister Almaréä tended to be anxious and melancholic by inclination. And she evidently suffered much because of this. She felt more deeply the scars left upon the heart of their mother, and even though their mother never asked or expected it of her, she took it

upon herself to carry her burdens as if they were her own. Their mother knew this, of course, and tried to counteract it both with words and with special care directed to her daughter. But as one's own wounds, fears, or false ideas often blind a person to the truth of things, so Almaréä continued in this sense of responsibility even though it was not hers to bear. And it was not only her mother for whom she felt responsible; she was aggrieved deeply also by the scars and sufferings that still plagued the land, shattered by war and struggling to rebuild itself anew. For her the early death of a newborn child, or the hunger and poverty of a single family, or the accidental injury of a worker falling from a ladder while building a house, weighed on her deeply. They were to her as questions begging for answers. This led her to rely deeply upon Relmaríndë, but it also led her to spend a great deal of time in the temple of the All-Giver or in the private chapel in the citadel of the king.

For many years Hældáris felt estranged from his sister and unable to understand the depth of her feeling. Yet the door to deeper understanding finally opened, though the journey to understanding in large part still remained to be undertaken, whenever he witnessed her tending to a sick mother in the town. And this act of care was certainly not an exception. This woman, Halafæna, a widow, had four children under eight years of age, and yet in only two years after her husband's untimely passing she was stricken with a severe illness whose nature no medicine yet created could adequately treat. Almaréä knew this, and moved by compassion and grief she spent the larger part of every day for months at the woman's bedside, also caring as well as she might for her children. Relmaríndë did likewise after a week had passed like this, and Almaréä's activities were revealed to her. Hældáris, twenty-seven at the time, was engaged in helping the people of the town and its surrounds with the grain harvest, and so at first he did not notice what was happening either with his sister or with Relmaríndë. And he had never made the acquaintance of Halafæna and knew nothing of her family.

But his attention was awakened when he noticed his sister's expression as he passed by her in a hallway of the citadel one morning. He paused and turned to her, inquiring of her, "You look exhausted and unwell, Almaréä. There are dark patches under your eyes, and your hair is unkempt, and I see in your face an expression of sadness whose cause I do not know. Please, tell me: what is the meaning of this?"

"I have not slept at all this night," she replied with the simplicity and trust that were so characteristic of her. "I have been tending to a dear

woman in town, Halafæna by name. She is grievously ill, even unto death, and she leaves behind her four children with no one to look after them." Looking into her brother's eyes, she said without thought, "Would you be able to stay with her tonight, that I might sleep? I would stay with her always, but I am so fatigued that I can hardly keep my eyes open."

"Of course I will do so," he replied. "Why did you not come to me before?"

"I did not want to bother you, Hældáris. You have your own affairs to tend to, the affairs of men, and I did not think—as I have never thought—that you would wish to concern yourself with what weighs so heavily upon my heart."

He was not prepared for these words, and they not only surprised him but cut him to the quick. He felt them pierce some place deep within his heart and unlock it. "What is it, my sister, that weighs so heavily upon your heart?"

"You do not know?" she inquired, looking deeply into his eyes with a pained gaze that nonetheless could not conceal a longing and a gratitude deep within them: that of having her brother close to her in this place so precious to her heart.

"Please tell me," he insisted gently, "for I do not believe that the affairs of men and those of women should be so different as we might at first assume. We are different, surely, and have unique gifts, but are we not all made of the same stuff?"

"Very well," she replied with a soft and subtle smile, "but it is much better for me to show you than to tell you. Shall you come with me to the house of Halafæna, that you may witness her pain, and that you may look upon her little ones? Only then, I think, shall you understand both the depth of love and of pain that I carry in my heart when I witness such suffering, and may know something of what is nearest and dearest to me."

"Please, I would wish for nothing else," Hældáris said, and he allowed her to lead him into the town and to do precisely this. For all of that evening and night he remained in the small house, sitting by the blazing fireplace with the children all about him and the sick woman lying on a bed before him, while his sister slept curled up at his side, so close that he could have lain his hand upon her without even stretching his arm to its full length. And indeed this he did, as his heart began to glimpse for the first time a part of her heart and her life which until this moment had been concealed from him, and indeed to learn of a depth

of love, compassion, and care for others that until now he had hardly imagined possible, but which he now began to intuit was the most natural and necessary thing of all, even if it was difficult beyond all telling, needing to drink for its very sustenance from a source deeper and wider than the human heart itself.

Chapter 7. Remnants

Hældáris. 3rd T.A. 29 (V.Y. 1174)

He finds himself engulfed in darkness and deafening silence, and he is at first aware of nothing but pain: a deep ache across almost his entire body and a sharper throbbing from the area of his left shoulder to his lower back. Even before he fully realizes that he is awake, a groan escapes from his lips, and, immediately following it, the sounds of the world come rushing in with the light of awareness. He hears the constant, low rumble of surf and, softer but nearer at hand, the crackling of a fire. And though it takes a moment for his mind to focus, he also makes out words spoken above him, and their meaning gradually forms in his mind. "Try not to move much just yet. I have bound your wounds but they need a little longer to heal before you can move about freely."

Hældáris attempts to speak, but his voice fades away even as he tries to form words in his throat. And he realizes now that he lies prostrate, face down upon sand, though his head is propped by what feels like cloth so as to grant him space to breathe and to keep his face from pushing against the ground. And he recognizes now the voice that has spoken to him. It is the voice of Aeyósha. "You..." Haeldaris groans, at last able to form his thoughts into speech, "ah, my friend, you are here."

"Yes, it is I," the man replies, and Hældáris feels a gentle hand placed upon his right shoulder, as if in understanding and consolation.

"What ha—"

"What happened? I was able to save you from the sea, and to carry you up here among the rocks. For a moment, though, I thought it was too late. You had in you neither consciousness nor breath. But after coughing up a great deal of water you began to breathe again, thank the All-Giver."

"But what about the others?" Hældáris exclaims, forgetting the prohibition on movement suggested to him and turning over onto his

back in order to look up at Aeyósha. He immediately cries out in pain, although does not allow his friend to force him back around again; he must see in order to speak properly. And there are questions that need to be answered. "What happened to the others? What is the fate of Relmaríndë? What of the men with whom we traveled? Have they also survived?"

Aeyósha lowers his gaze in sorrow, and says, knowing that there is no benefit to hiding the truth, "I was able to save only you. The water and the sea serpent consumed the rest in death..."

"What? Not a single other person survived?" Hældáris asks, his heart sinking in sorrow and in disbelief.

"Not that I have found. I am sorry. I dragged you through the water as I myself swam, clinging to a timber, toward the shore. I was able to save no one else." Hældáris sees the conflicted sadness etched deeply into his friend's face. Even though he did what many would have thought impossible—he saved the king's son from the attack of a great sea serpent—he was able to do no more than this.

But Hældáris is overcome with his own grief at this moment and he fails to emphathize vocally with Aeyósha, instead lamenting, "Even Relmaríndë! My wife...I cannot, I cannot believe that it is true. What happened to her? You saw her, did you not—how she was as though enraptured? She could not defend herself. What was happening to her?"

"I know not," Aeyósha responds tersely.

"And I had her in my arms. I was holding her," Hældáris continues, not attempting to restrain his sorrow and grief that seeks expression in tears. "But I was struck—struck by something—I know not what. And I lost her. I could not find her. She was gone. And now..." He does not continue but rather allows his voice to subside into sobs. Aeyósha, witnessing this, simply extends a hand and places it gently upon Hældáris' forehead as if in blessing, allowing it to rest there until the sobbing has ceased.

After a number of minutes Hældáris speaks again of something else, as if resolved to hold the pain and grief of his wife's passing, and of the loss of the men entrusted to his care, in the silence of his heart, as the pain is too fresh for words. "How long have we been ashore?"

"You have been unconscious for close to a day," replies Aeyósha. "We washed ashore deep in the night. Oh, the relief I felt when my knees finally struck sand and rock! By then I could hardly make out anything in the nocturnal darkness, so I had to trust to my previous sense of di-

rection to continue swimming toward land. I hauled you up onto the shore and out of the water, and revived you as best I could. The night was cold, and more bitterly so for the fact that we were soaked to the bone. As much as I felt I was soon to collapse with exhaustion, I carried you into this alcove of stone a ways from the shore and gathered fallen wood and twigs to start a fire. At last, as much as I wanted to stay alert to watch you and insure your well-being, I too slept."

"I am glad you rested," Hældáris says. "It is clear now that you needed it more than I needed watching." And then, after a heavy moment of silence, "Thank you, Aeyósha, for saving my life. You did for me more than anyone could have expected of you."

"Except perhaps myself. I realize that my expectations may be unrealistic, and that I demand of myself things too great, which others would not expect of me. But so it is. Would that I could have saved them all."

"I understand your grief, and share it," says Haeldaris, turning his body slightly and directing his gaze into the sky above them, which is awash with clouds full of moisture and threatening rain. Still feeling both pain and exhaustion, he then asks, "What time is it?"

"Nearly evening," says Aeyósha. "I suspect there is an hour or two of daylight remaining before night falls."

"We have been here but one day?"

"Aye. Not even a full day yet."

"What about my wounds, Aeyósha? What have you to say of them?"

"How do they feel?"

"There is pain, but it is not too severe," replies Hældáris. "Is there any serious injury?"

"I think not. Insofar as I can tell, the wounds are superficial. Nonetheless, we must take great care against infection. I have treated and dressed them as well as I can. There are two cuts—or rather gashes—one upon the back of your left shoulder and one on your lower back on the same side. Do you recall what caused them?"

"I was struck, though whether by a stray piece of the shattered ship or by the mykkëvéngr itself, I do not know."

"Mykkëvéngr? That is the name of the creature?"

"Yes. It is a creature of the same order as those that once threatened our people with destruction."

"I see," says Aeyósha pensively. "You mentioned sensing something before the attack. Was this what you expected? Did you know of its nature beforehand?"

Hældáris opens his mouth to speak, but the thought of his wife for a moment silences him as a pang of grief pierces his heart. Only when he has collected himself is he able to continue, "Relmaríndë is the one who brought its possible appearance to my attention. She felt many things that I have only begun to sense and to feel, like echoes on the edge of my consciousness. She lived at the center whereas I know hardly more than the periphery. And thus her loss is grievous for more than just myself. It is a loss for our entire people."

The conversation lulls for a moment into silence and both of the men listen without speaking to the crashing of the waves against the shore, to the whisper of the light breeze between the rocks, and to the intermittent sound of seagulls calling overhead. Finally Aeyósha interrupts the silence with a question, "Do you feel well enough to eat?"

"Eat?" Hældáris thinks about this for a moment, as in the midst of everything else the thought of food never entered his mind. "My body and my heart are overcome. Food means nothing to me at present, and I would wish for many days to yield myself to grief in silence."

"And I wish that I could give you the time and space to do so. I am sorry that I asked."

"No, please do not apologize."

"Then let me leave you alone for a while," says Aeyósha. "I earlier found some shellfish along the shore. While there is still light, allow me to find some more for the both of us. I may also be able to gather a bit of seaweed and perhaps even some fish."

Hældáris, at the thought of at last having solitude to give voice to his pain, is able to muster no more than a nod in response. As soon as his friend has gone from his sight, Hældáris closes his eyes and immediately fatigue, grief, and confusion overtake him again. His head throbs and spins from the pain of his injury and his brush with death, but even more from the grief that eats away at his mind and his heart. And the pain is too fresh, too raw, to allow space even for discursive thought, and his mind drifts in and out of blank spaces uncounted in time and memory, until sleep again gradually overtakes him. He is awakened by the smell of food cooking over the embers of the fire. Opening his eyes and rolling gently onto his right side (his left side pulses in pain from the weight that had been pressed upon it as he slept), he looks at the fire and sees above it a couple fish and some seaweed, all suspended upon sticks. On the other side of the fire sits Aeyósha, watching him, his face silhouetted against the warm glow, as twilight engulfs their surroundings.

"I was successful in the search, as you can see," he says with a kindly smile, laced both with sorrow and compassion. "Shall I help you sit up? It might be good, as well, to get you up from the ground and to see if your stitches and bandages hold, or if blood flows again."

"Aye, let us do that," answers Hældáris. And as Aeyósha helps him he asks, "You gave me stitches?"

"That I did, though I had little to work with. Hopefully they shall last until your flesh heals sufficiently to hold itself of its own accord."

"Were my father in the habit of giving titles and honors, you would be doubly worthy of one already," Hældáris remarks, glancing at his friend and attempting to return his smile.

"And I am thus doubly glad that he does not," Aeyósha says. "He came into his kingship not by any plan or desire of his own, and he knows that every man is to be judged not on titles that he has inherited but on the merits of his own actions. In fact, he knows that even these actions are never accomplished by force of will alone."

"That is true. Nonetheless he has inherited a title and has done his best to step into it with humility and with responsibility. Would not receiving some such title allow you to pass on to your children a legacy that would invite them to walk in like manner?"

Hearing this, Aeyósha tilts his head to one side as if reflecting, and he says, "I shall need time to think about this, young prince."

"You may call me prince if you must, but only in jest, and as long as I may in similar humor call you 'the prince's knight.'"

"If that is how you shall have it, then you shall not hear another 'prince' out of me for as long as I live."

"So be it, 'knight-guard and savior of the king's son'," concludes Hældáris, the subtlest hint of a genuine smile playing upon his lips.

"Oh, codswallop! Enough of that!" replies Aeyósha with a wave of his hand. "Let us get some food in that belly of yours. And while you eat I shall check your wounds and their dressings."

† † †

Despite the moment of humor that the two men have shared, Hældáris sinks again even as he eats into a profound melancholy and this, in addition to his pain, makes it difficult to finish the food given to him. Eventually he sets the food aside. Aeyósha, for his part, finishes inspecting and redressing his wounds and sits down again by the fire. "I think that I can guess what caused your injuries," he says, "now that I have had another look at them. I thought that they could have been from a spare piece of metal or perhaps splintered wood, as you sug-

gested, but I think your other suggestion is more to the point. I suspect that the fins of the serpent caught you."

Seeing the sadness also in Aeyósha's eyes, Hældáris asks, "Does that bear other dangers besides the wounds themselves? Do you think that the creature's touch may confer some poison or leave some other ill effect?"

"Considering that I have never even heard of such beasts, it is impossible for me to say one way or another. Only time will tell if you develop a yet worse ailment, whether natural or...unnatural. All we can do is watch the wounds closely and keep them clean."

"You spoke of their cause in the singular," Hældáris remarks. "Do you believe they were caused at the same time and by the same thing?"

"Perhaps, though again I cannot say. One thing that is clear to me, though," replies Aeyósha, "is that your sword protected you, and may have saved your life."

"What do you mean?"

"You do not remember? You wore the *illoandir* upon your back whenever you were cast into the sea. And I suspect that it protected you from receiving a much worse and more grievous injury. The jagged tears in your flesh seem indeed to be from the serpent, and would have been far worse were it not for your sword." Leaning over, Aeyósha reaches for something hidden by the shadows among the rocks surrounding their camp, and, raising himself up again with the sword in his hands, he continues, "You see, here on the scabbard there are marks as of something sharp, cutting even to the blade: you can see the metal gleam through in the light." And he hands the weapon to Hældáris, who inspects it and nods silently.

"Aeyósha," Hældáris says after a long moment of silence, during which his friend has taken up his own portion of food and begun to eat, "what are we going to do now?"

"Sleep, I imagine," he replies.

"Well, yes—but after that."

"What is possible for us to do? A task has been entrusted to you, and by extension to me. I trust in your wisdom and discernment, and am confident that even in grief and loss we shall find a way."

"But I would like your assistance in this discernment, and in the walking, both now and going forward," says Hældáris.

"And you shall have it," Aeyósha says. "But I would have your thoughts and advice, also."

Thinking for a moment, Hældáris says, "Provided that I can travel, I

do not think we should stay here for long. Nonetheless, I do not know either where we are or how we can proceed. We have come to this land for a purpose. Nonetheless, I already feel like it has been defeated. Should we seek passage back to Telmérion to bring word to my father and the council about what has occurred? Then we might take counsel with them and perhaps set out afresh. Or should we press forward and try to complete our journey, even if it is only the two of us?"

"It is an entire month across the ocean to return to Telmérion, and the serpent is still somewhere in its depths. Perhaps it has not had all of its fun."

Shaking his head, Hældáris replies, "You are right in that. I am loathe to move forward as we are, and I feel little or no motivation in myself to do so. And yet not only is it the most feasible course of action, but going back may be neither possible nor advisable. Then it is settled: we shall follow through with the intent of our journey, even only you and I." And he sighs, "But would that more than two survived! Would that none of us had been slain!"

"I share in your grief and in your desire."

"Now I know in some measure what my father must have felt," Hældáris says, resting his forehead against the palm of his hand. "To live on when those who have been entrusted to your care have died. It is a dreadful thing."

Aeyósha looks intently at him for a long moment, thinking, and then replies, "Dreadful... Yes, that is a fitting word. And little consolation would it be were I to say to you that it was not your fault that they perished. But it is true: it was not your fault. Indeed, it was far beyond your power to change the outcome in any way whatsoever. In that realization, perhaps, we can find some measure of hope that their deaths were not merely random events happening in an absurd world."

"Are you implying that they were meant to die?" Hældáris retorts, with more heat than he intended.

With a sorrowful exhale Aeyósha says, "All men die someday. And I think it is not at all unreasonable to believe that the death of each person, be they man, woman, or child—and however random or absurd the death may appear—is seen and held by the One who holds the entire universe in his embrace. We may all slip eventually through the cracks of this mortal life, but we shall never slip from his hands. This I believe."

Nodding slowly, Hældáris says, "Aye...you know I do likewise. Forgive me for my outburst." These are the words that he speaks, but in

his heart he feels a surge of bitterness born of grief and the confrontation with what indeed appears to be both random and absurd.

"There is nothing to forgive," replies Aeyósha. "Feel as you must feel. Lament and cry out, question and even fume in anger if you must. That, too, is held by the same Love that holds all things."

But at this point Hældáris has ceased hearing the words of his friend, lost in a wave of grief and sorrow hardly less intense and suffocating than the waves that had buffeted his men at sea. When at last he looks up after many minutes have passed, he is surprised to see Aeyósha's face stained with tears that escape freely from his eyes as he gazes thoughtfully into the fire. There is no need to give voice or name to these tears. They spring from the same heart that only moments earlier had spoken in faith and in hope, and somehow, beyond Hældáris' ability to understand, they are at one with them.

Chapter 8. The Benaíon: A Story of Origins

Albrýndaer. Vælírian Year 1150

Stirred to reflection by the pain that he witnesses, by the combat and slaughter that are now happening all around him, and by the loss of the person most precious to him in the world, Albrýndaer's thoughts turn inward once again. He also sees cropping up like shoots from the soil tendencies that cannot be called by any name but rebellious. In their desperate situation and in the fear that oppresses them, many hearts turn to anger against the Empire that forced them into this place, and in this anger foment the thoughts of violent rebellion and revolt. But no matter how strong these feelings may become, or how focused these thoughts, how could they ever find expression? How could persons, however great their number, instigate a rebellion when they are held captive in the depths of the earth? Regardless of this impossibility, Albrýndaer is disturbed by what he witnesses, and even as he does not understand either the depth or importance of these movements, they unsettle and frighten him. And so he speaks with his father about the origins of their people, about the people of Vælíria, and about the birth and growth of the Empire. Perhaps, he thinks, in knowing more about these origins, he may also be able to discern more clearly some answers to the questions upon his heart.

"Aba, what has motivated the Empire to become what it is today?"

Albrýndaer asks when they have a moment together in the silence following dinner, while his mother rests in the other part of their shelter.

"What causes you to ask such a question? Is there anything in particular upon your mind and heart that stirs this?" his father replies. "You have no direct experience of life in the world above, and thus are devoid of all direct contact with the political structure or manner of existence in the Empire. So what draws you to pose this question to me? Is it simply the desire to learn?"

"It is that, I suppose. I do desire to learn. But also...I also want to know what is responsible for giving me the life that I *do* have. After all, as you say, you have the Empire to thank for your exile and imprisonment, and thus I too owe it the same."

"I suppose you are right to want to know," sighs Daeran. "And, after all, much of our knowledge in this life is indebted to what we have heard from others. Even I have little direct experience of the politics of the Empire, and most of my knowledge comes from books I have read or conversations I have shared with others more knowledgeable than I. But even then, the Empire saw my knowledge, indirect as it was, as real enough to be threatening. And it certainly was real for me and your mother when they arrested us and cast us into this prison."

"You were truly imprisoned for your knowledge?" Albrýndaer asks.

"I was imprisoned for my convictions, though these were born of knowledge and the discernment that it allows."

"And what were these convictions of which you speak?"

"Well, in order for you to understand that, you must first understand the state of the Empire in which I lived. And thus, the answer to your question." And so Daeran begins, "What is important for someone your age to understand is that, without the ability to govern himself, a man cannot be truly free. Even if another makes laws to which he is bound, laws that he himself has not either made or chosen, he must be free in adhering to these laws, and for this to be the case they must have arisen from an atmosphere of communal discernment, and be themselves expressions of what is good for each and all, insofar as such things can be expressed in law. But whenever the law instead becomes a tool in the hands of the powerful, something that is used in order to manipulate and control lesser men, then a grievous ill has occurred, and one that must be rejected and resisted."

"A man must govern himself in order to be free, and cannot act merely from external compulsion," Albrýndaer reflects. "Yes, I understand this. There is obedience and docility to the wisdom of others, and

of a community, but even such obedience must be free and mature. Otherwise we forfeit something intrinsic to us—as you said, our freedom, but also truth. Without truth we cannot be free, but without freedom we cannot find and adhere to the truth."

"You speak with understanding beyond your years, my son," remarks Daeran. "In fact I am surprised, and touched, by your quick and deep response."

"Yet you spoke of an abuse of law," Albrýndaer continues, his mind latching onto the thread of a thought and wishing to follow it through to its conclusion. "How can we know that this is happening? Cannot law sometimes seem unfitting in a given circumstance and yet still be true and just?"

A slight smile plays upon his father's lips. "A very perceptive question, Bryn. It is true that the law, being as it were general and abstract, can never fit perfectly to every situation, and this is why, in addition to being itself just and true, it must also be applied justly, and with discernment. Of course, certain acts, since they are evil neither by mere circumstance nor mere legislation, but by their very nature, are always to be rejected as incompatible with both the common and the individual good—"

"Like the murder of innocents," interjects the son.

"Precisely," says Daeran, "like the murder of innocents. Protection of the innocent is the foundation stone on which every society stands or falls. But other things of similar nature there are as well. These things are always to be abhorred and resisted, and law rightly condemns them. And yet there are other things that are more variable, in which it is not strict good and evil, right and wrong, which marks out the way for human action, but wisdom and discretion, the spirit of true discernment. And here the law should not be too strict."

"How so?"

"What do you think?"

After a moment's pensive silence, Albrýndaer says, "Either in condemning things that are acceptable even if not universally mandated, or which are rare, or in mandating things that are not truly obligatory for all?"

"Again, you are exactly right. Whenever a society condemns what is good or demands as obligatory what is not truly required of all—and especially if it demands what is evil—then that society is sick and destined to destroy itself."

"But how does this happen? And how does it relate to the Empire?"

Now it is Daeran's turn to take a moment for thought before at last replying, "It happens in a number of ways, I imagine. I suppose any man who does evil for long enough must seek to justify his evil by making the whole world agree with him—in other words, he must make his own blindness a law by which all abide. And thus he will be excused or even lauded for his wrongdoing. Or, if he has the station and the power, he may simply seek to control other men and to bend them to his own ends. And for this purpose he uses the law, and his right to exact obedience and to inflict punishment, as a tool."

"And thus we are in this prison?"

"Yes, and thus we are in this prison, condemned not because we committed acts against the just rule of law, but because we held opinions contrary to those which the Emperor thought fit to allow."

"What opinions did you hold?"

"Simply put, that the people of Vælíria deserve a just society not under the rule of a single Emperor, but rather in a form of governance that respects and listens to the voice of the people and fosters their good."

"I see how that could be unwelcome for such a man as you have described. But how can he get away with imprisoning people simply for thinking things that are unwelcome to him?"

Rubbing his forehead absentmindedly, Daeran sighs. "Now that is a more difficult question to answer."

"Then I have two others, if I may," proffers Albrýndaer enthusiastically.

"You are just full of questions, are you not? Please, go ahead, my child."

"First, what are the unjust rules that the Emperor asked people to follow? And second, where did it all start?"

Daeran laughs softly to himself, not answering immediately. He is astonished by his son's depth of thought and feeling, and he realizes in this moment how much he has taken Albrýndaer for granted, how little he has cherished and esteemed, and therefore fostered, what lives so vibrantly in his offspring. "How late we often are to recognize the depth of what is right before our eyes," he mutters under his breath.

"What did you say, Aba?"

"Oh, it was nothing," says Daeran more loudly, turning again to look at Albrýndaer. "I do not wish to enumerate the ills of the Empire in which I was born and in which I spent the majority of my life—at least not until you are older, though I admit you seem mature enough al-

ready to handle all that I would tell you, or most. I will say only this: for many generations the rulers of our land have been occupied in an all-consuming lust for expansion, the expansion of Imperial rule over all other nations of the world, and the imposition of the Emperor's power over even the most insignificant aspects of life, insofar as they may be ordered to his own benefit. Thus it was in the mandating of cultic worship, in exorbitant taxation, in harsh punishment inflicted upon minor crimes. These are but a few examples. But my confreres and I," the father continues, a thoughtfulness in his eyes as he allows his mind to carry him back to earlier days of his life, "we did not only react against injustice. We dreamed of a better world, of a new world."

"Was it always like this?" asks Albrýndaer. "I mean, was it like this your entire life?"

"Oh yes, things became this way long before I was born. For hundreds of years the Emperors have followed a consistent course. A century ago they conquered and subjugated our ancestral land of Telmérion, from which our own people came over a thousand years past. And we have also waged an exhausting and relentless war in the lands of Tel-Velfána, far, far to the east, in which our sons and brothers and fathers alike are being slaughtered like cattle in the name of Imperial expansion. This is to say nothing of the iron hand at home, which you, my son, have experienced first hand from before your very birth."

"The Empire cannot be all evil, though, can it? Surely there must be some good."

"Aye, I suppose there is somewhere, but it is little and insignificant, worth hardly a thought or a mention. What we ought to focus on now is dismantling the corrupt structure in its entirety so that something new may be born in its place."

These words, as justified as they appear on the surface, startle Albrýndaer, and for a moment he is at a loss for words. Instead of asking the question that he first of all desires to ask, he instead says, "How many years ago lived the first Emperor, and how did he rise to power?"

"It was four-hundred years ago, in the year 748 since the arrival of the first refugees in the land of Vælíria and the birth of our nation as a people distinct from that of Telmérion. As to how he rose to power, much unfortunately has been shrouded in the mists of history or obscured by those who write history to suit their own agenda. Yet even in the face of this, I believe much can be recovered that was lost, and much lives among the common people that no propaganda or false history can erase."

"I believe that too," remarks Albrýndaer thoughtlessly, and his father again smiles.

"You believe that too, do you? Well, good." And then he continues with his answer. "Suffice it to say that the Emperor established a new state only through much bloodshed and the use of a superior military force, though political negotiation and the exchange of wealth also had a role to play in it. I suspect that many were all too willing to acquiesce to the new world he wanted to create because they hoped to benefit from it, or to find themselves in his good graces if they cooperated."

"You think he was wrong to use these means to attain an end that he thought worth pursuing?" asks Albrýndaer, hoping that his father does not recognize that the question is intended to reveal more information about the one to whom it is asked than it might about the Emperor or any historical events of the past.

"To use these means?" Daeran says. "Aye, I do think he was wrong. Or mostly. Sometimes grave means must be used to combat a grave evil. Sometimes one can only fight evil with evil, or, at least, violence with violence. If the Emperor so many centuries ago fought to destroy what was good, to shackle freedom, and if his successors have done the same, then lovers of freedom must fight back to regain what has been taken from us. And if they are truly necessary, any means are acceptable in attaining this goal that is so greatly desired."

"I see," says Albrýndaer quietly, unable to muster anything else, seeing the clear contradiction between his father's earlier words and his later answers. There is a moment of dense silence between father and son before Albrýndaer is able to pose a final question, "The last thing I have to ask, at least at present, is this: What did Vælíria look like...before? Before all of these events took place, and the Empire became what it has been these last four-hundred years?"

"Another fine question," replies Daeran, "and I would answer it at length were it not that our conversation has already greatly fatigued me, and I wish not to overburden your mind. And we both must rest if we are to have energy to work tomorrow."

"Then another time?"

"Aye, another time. And your question also makes me think of a book that I believe resides in this very settlement, one on which you have yet to lay your eyes. I will inquire tomorrow with its owner and see whether or not he is willing to allow you to read it."

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When a week later Albrýndaer at last receives the book, a thin

leather-bound copy hardly larger than his hand, he finds a solitary spot in the corner of the encampment, lit by the light of the glowing ore veins just above his head. Running his hand gently over the cover, which is weathered with decades, perhaps centuries, of age, he reads upon its face the word: *Benaíon.* And underneath, the inscription: *and accompanying material.* It seems that the original text is old, even ancient (and perhaps fragmentary), and in this volume has been supplemented with commentary from another author. This intrigues Albrýndaer, and yet he has no context to make sense of it, and so he simply opens the book and begins to read:

Concerning the origins of humankind upon the earth, be they the people of Telmérion or any of the other many peoples who in the course of time would settle land for themselves and spread across the rich and variegated world from the center-point of humanity's creation, we owe our knowledge to the people whose memory is far longer than our own. Though veiled from mortal sight their wisdom endures, and the long-abiding remembrance, and still among us endure some of their writings. Particularly cherished is the account of the earliest origins, the *Arechaíon*, penned by a hand far older than our own and by a spirit superior in every respect. Think not that it is through pride that we have called our lesser account the Benaíon, for it is not intended as a comparison with the sober majesty and beauteous depth of the original. It indicates, rather, that our account seeks to pick up in some, albeit far inadequate manner, where the former has come to its conclusion, leaving the threads of man's history frayed and as yet unresolved in their great weaving, as they are until this very day. Finding in that account the fabric of humanity still greatly condensed in space but internally torn asunder by strife and division, we seek to follow these threads forward through time, as they progress both in good and in ill. And the account here given can only be partial, and indeed leaves many of the most important affairs in silence—especially the humble life of each man and each woman and the love that is shared between them in the bonds that always unite hearts, and the love too that unites them with the Author of their existence and the custodians, the Anaíon, who enfold them and care for them in his name. Here instead only the broad strokes of history are portrayed before our gaze, seeking to offer to our minds the general shapes both of societies and of their lands, so that all further knowledge, be it broad or particular, may find its home in what is already known.

Before years were accounted and the First Age had yet begun,

emerging from the mists of timeless beginnings beyond thought or memory, in which are many generations of life, begetting, and birth, humankind began to spread across the face of the earth both near and far. However long this uncounted history, and however much has been forgotten by all but the hidden custodians of our past, this history is nonetheless still our own, and we bear its memory impressed upon ourselves beyond consciousness and thought. For from it we emerge and in its current we continue to live, as it carries us forward to ages yet to come. In this earliest beginning of all beginnings, as we know from the Arechaíon, life began for the human race from man and woman, two who reflected one another according to a marvelous design, and who together gave birth to others. Thus from two came many. Such was the origin and growth of the human race upon the earth, from man and woman to a family, and from a family to clans, and from clans to many nations.

But so too, from unity came division and from harmony disharmony. For if our race was once a family, and if indeed a family it remains, it is a divided family, a family at war with itself. From the unity that once existed in the sacred woods in which dwelt the primordial light, now inaccessible to all but the Silióni, there came a division of men upon the face of the earth. Peoples arose with their own customs and ways of life, their own structure and manner, and indeed and indeed many spread even to lands far across the sea. But our account is concerned with the development of the peoples of Telmérion itself, in which over the generations clans arose in greater number, setting themselves apart from others on the basis of blood relation or divergent ideals. And though it is indubitably true that authentic and abiding unity among men can persist only on the basis of the reality that unites them, of their shared conviction in the one truth that binds all men and in binding them liberates them, it is also the case that when this truth dims in the hearts of men, and mere wishes or opinions replace truth, then they become divided from one another and concord is replaced by strife.

Thus the three original clans, the Galrídi, Erulári, and Hyréli, gradually became many, as later generations colonized new lands and marked out boundaries for themselves. Nonetheless, among many of these peoples and clans there continued to exist a degree of harmony and cooperation, and not all was division and strife. For distinction and multiplicity itself, too, can be an expression of the super-abundant unity of reality and of reality's Creator. Trade and mutual cooperation

many times not only existed but flourished, as certain clans excelled in one area of expertise—be it fishing or woodworking, hunting or stonework—while other clans flourished in other areas, and they were happy to share with one another the fruits of their life and labor.

The Rhovánni, descended originally from a branch of the Hyréli, traveled to the south and the east, and they became in large part farmers and fishermen, establishing small villages, or fændi, in the steppe and the plains that spread from the central mountains of Telmérion, and villages too along the coast. The greatest of these were the two settlements of Rhóvas and Ristfænd, founded, each, by one of the two brothers who, with the blessing of their father, Herald, set out from their homes to create settlements that would carry the family legacy to future generations. Gûdric founded Rhóvas while his brother Elric founded Ristfænd, and there existed between the two settlements a friendly rivalry. Situated nearer to the coast, Ristfænd flourished primarily in the activity of fishing, which provided sustenance for those who found their living within the walls of the village or in the surrounding woodland plain. But this also served as an object of trade with settlements to the north and the east. In particular, the village of Rhóvas established commerce with Ristfænd, giving in exchange for fish the grains and vegetables that flourished in the arable lands and farms dotting the hillsides upon which Rhóvas was established. Of course, Ristfænd itself was not wholly bereft of agriculture, since this art is in a profound way the foundation of every economy and society, the living of man and woman upon the bounty of the earth. So too, in the more densely wooded region around Ristfænd, much growth occurred in the development of architectural and artistic skill in the working of woods, whereas in Rhóvas stonework became the preference, considering the rocky crags and stony hillocks that punctuate that landscape.

In addition to the villages where people gathered together in communities of mutual support and protection, there were also many homesteads scattered across the face of Telmérion, usually independent in their daily life and subsistence though subject to both the protection and the laws of the clan in whose territory they made their home. It was only indeed in the early centuries of the First Age that many of these homesteads, with the development of Telméric society, became the locus point of territories ruled by a dæmas, a custodian, who for his part pledged fealty to the hæras of the clan and supported him both by tithe and by willing aid in battle. As for those who pledged their fealty to the

dæmas and worked the land over which he was the custodian—the ûrendi—they too were in the most part appreciated and respected—for if anything endured in the history of Telmérion when so many other values were attacked or called into question, it was the sacred beauty of the humble and hidden, who even more than lords and rulers prove to be the foundation of society and history and the safeguards of its health and wholeness.

While such people received the produce of the land they worked insofar as necessary to support their own families, they were required to give the rest into the custodianship of the dæmas or those commissioned by him, who distributed it to those families who found themselves in greater need or who were devoted, whether by special talent or by request of the dæmas (or even of the hæras himself) to unique tasks—tasks such as smith-work, woodcutting, or cattle ranching. There were a few cases even of someone being supported in pursuit of scholarship and the arts, though this latter was usually pursued only in the larger towns or cities, where such a life was more easily maintained and also found support from like-minded fellows.

Such developments in the structure of society as have been explained above were not exclusive to the lands of the Rhovánni, but indeed occurred with but a few exceptions in all the different clans of Telmérion, though their structures and manner had different coloration and nuance depending upon the given clan. To the north of the lands of the Rhovánni, east of the Teldren Mountains unto the sea, grew the clan of the Erulári, who remained more than any other people unified both in vision and in government. Though smaller in number than any of the other clans, never developing any of their settlements (until the later days of the high kings) beyond small villages, they of all the people of the diaspora most held remembrance of Eldáru in their hearts. They, too, held the Silióni closest in affection, for from a single womb indeed had the founders of both peoples sprung in years long past—before the blessing and consecration of the Silióni people and their setting apart.

Yet if the development of the clans thus far treated until this moment has appeared peaceful and harmonious, this is an exception, the prerogative of the Erulári and the Rhovánni alone. For while the concord between the Erulári and the Rhovánni was indeed a haven of peace for many generations, in all the other regions of Telmérion, both north and west, conflict was the rule, a conflict often accompanied by bloodshed and war. Before speaking of the conflicts of these clans, however, it is first necessary to situate their geographical locations and their

unique contours.

The Galrídi and other branches of the Hyréli, far different from the Rhovánni in integrity and intent, populated the remaining lands of Telmérion over a period of many centuries. The people of the Galrídi split in twain not long after the rending of the earth and the veiling of the sacred woods. Some of them repented of the evil that their people had inflicted, and of the blood- and power-lust of Gálrid their leader. And yet others withheld such repentance and continued on the path of malice marked out by their fathers. From the beginning this conflict expressed itself in bloodshed, and would have threatened the very existence of the Galrídi people were it not that the first group—the Germûndi—refused to wage a war of attrition bringing death and instead withdrew to the far north. They sought in hiding and in refuge to safeguard their future, a future in which the evils of the past could be forgotten, or at least righteousness could be recaptured where wickedness had once flourished. Many years later members of this clan explored the far northwest of the continent and founded the clan of the Bruï, which in time, because of its shelter and remove from the war and conflict of the other clans, and its high level of craftsmanship, artistic work, and seafaring trade, would become the richest and most populous of the clans.

The other group of the Galrídi traveled rather to the west and the south, and became over time the two clans of Mineäs and Onælándis, the latter to the south of the lowest stretch of the Teldren range and the former to the north of it. And with bitter strife they struggled for coexistence, or perhaps more often than not fought for dominance, against the remaining Hyréli clans. These clans of the Hyréli, settled in two places, again divided among themselves though without the animosity that clove the Galrídi asunder. The Winfréyi settled in the center of Telmérion, in a wide swathe of land cradled between the great Teldren range on the east and the south and the lesser branch of the Finistra range on the west. This came in later ages to be called the Valley of Eréssa, reaching from the ocean to the north to the insurmountable cradle of the mountains in the south, abutting upon the lands of the Erulári and the hidden forest of the Silióni. The other branch of the Hyréli were the Oromardë, who settled far in the southwest, along the forked peninsula that looked out over the vastness of the sea, with islands appearing just at the limit of sight on clear days when the sun shone bright and the fogs rolled back. The people of the Oromardë, however, were in later centuries either integrated into the people of the

Onælándi or returned to the clan of their ancestors in the Winfréyi, and the clan itself ceased to exist. And thus were formed, as would endure for many centuries, the seven clans of Telmérion: the Erulári (later known as the Galapteäni), the Rhovánni, the Winfréyi, the Germûndi, the Onælándi, the Mineäsi, and the Bruï.

† † †

In the midst of the First Age a great threat arose that was not of man, but greater than man, and it wrought more evil and suffering than all the wars and machinations of humankind that went before it. The great lieutenants of the fallen Anaía Igrándsil, whose names were Belheróth and Midrôchus, were sent out to the land of Telmérion not long after the parting of the earth worked by the hand of Eldáru, and while they sought to work evil from the beginning, only in the first age did the full extend of their wicked action become manifest. Infuriated by the intervention of the One, they sought to work ill where he had brought goodness, and to stir aflame in the hearts of men the wickedness that already lay within them through their prior infidelity. However, into the forest of the Velási they were not allowed access, and so there they could not bring direct material harm. But elsewhere their reach was longer, and thus there they focused their malice. And they were patient and long-suffering in evildoing, so great was their malintent and hate, a fire that burned and was never quenched, that the full horror of their plan was not manifest for uncounted centuries, until the ages before ages had passed away and, with the consolidation of Telmérion as a single people, time began to be accounted in ages, and centuries, and decades.

Belheróth took to himself pleasing guise as that of a man, old and wise, a weathered traveler, and he found welcome among the people of the Bruï, becoming in time a counselor to the hæras and a sharer in his secret thoughts. Midrôchus rather preferred to stir fear in the hearts of his enemies, whether through open malice or through the terrors of the night and the night's mæres. He sought for himself a domain that he could call his own and from which he could execute his plans. In order to do this he slew many of the people of the southern mountains and burned their settlements, razing both nature and artifice to the earth, and then erected in their place a great forge, the *aïnónnun*, the bowels of which reached deep in the earth, though in appearance it seemed no more than a castle or fortress of blackest stone.

And yet open violence stirred open resistance, and the peoples of the nearby clans of the Rhovánni and the Onælándi gathered what force

they could muster, men at arms and archers and riders on horseback, to lay seige to the stronghold of Midrôchus. A great battle drenched the mountain valleys with blood—shed by both man and beast, as at this time the creatures fashioned of shadow and darkness first took form and flesh, creatures in our own times called the eötenga, the beasts of crippling terror. But vain was the warfare of men against such creatures, as even when they were slain their dread lord, Midrôchus, but gave them flesh again and sent them forth to fight. In coming years containment of the threat alone was possible for the children of men, and defenses against the horrors of darkness, until one would come, blessed by the divines, who could purge them from the earth and thereby limit the power-lust of Midrôchus. The tales of such deeds of both evil and valor are recounted elsewhere, for example in the long account of the anointing and kingship of the one called the "king of light," the "scarred king," Séra Gal'áptes. Here all that needs to be said in their regard is that these ill events and wicked deeds played an important role not only in the fracturing of the land of Telmérion but also in instigating what would become the great departure of men across the ocean to the west. If in the ages before ages many had departed from the lands known as Telmérion, whether north or east, south or west, never before until this time had they departed in such great number, and with such necessity. For in the year 844 of the first age, according to the accounting of the Telméric calendar, men first landed upon the shores of what would come in ages hence to be known as the land of Vælíria. At that time it was a vast and uncharted wilderness, home to many creatures, many unfamiliar and unimagined, with a climate more varied than that to which its new settlers were accustomed. The land was more expansive than the rugged, sea-cradled island of the Telmérins, and so while both had in their bounds verdant grasslands, towering peaks, craggy ravines, and expansive forests, the newfound land brought much greater variety to the eyes of its beholders, and the climate ranged from mild and temperate wooded plains and moors, and even marshy wetlands, near the coasts, to frigid taiga and tundra among the knees of the mountains, and mountains themselves so high and cold as to prove impassable.

It took, of course, many centuries for the land to be explored and settled, and even now, more than a millennium later, secrets still lie hidden beyond the mountains to the west, which no man has yet successfully scaled. A symbol of mystery surrounded in an aura of unknowing, the Cohéloth Mountains stand even to this day as a sign that

as great as man's exploits and adventures may be, the greatest adventure lies beyond the realm of his sight, in the "far west" where a fabled land lies, known only to imagination. How this fable was born is no longer remembered, but remembered it is. However, as the centuries passed, another fable was also born, one of unexpected provenance and import and yet expressing much the same impulse as that signified by the impassable mountains in the west. This was the fable of the sea and of the "far east," not now a place of untouchable mystery, an unknown future yet to be discovered, but of a past shrouded in the mists of time and yet remembered fondly in the deep hidden heart of the people of Vælíria, if not in thought at least in feeling and sentiment. For thence they had come in ages past, and in the hearts of many lived a hidden train of thought or a secret feeling that in that place lay answers that had since been left behind and long forgotten.

But such feelings grew only like a seed requiring much time and experience in order to mature and bear fruit, a time of both forgetting and remembering—forgetting the evils that had beset the people who came across the ocean from the east, and yet remembering, however vaguely, the beauty of the gift of life that in that eastern land was their origin and their foundation. At its earliest beginning the land of Vælíria was a colonial frontier, though those who came to it from the east came not so much as explorers or as conquest seekers but rather as exiles, many penitent and lost, but all bitter and scarred by the conflicts from which they fled. For even more disastrous in its consequences than the conflicts of man against man was the conflict with the powers of darkness that in these years weighed upon the people of Telmérion to crush and eradicate them. After the first manifestation of the eötenga, it was their horrific activity that led many of those inhabiting the land to seek new life in fleeing across the unknown seas to another land that would be free of the threats that here weighed upon them.

And so it was that travelers came into the west. This new land, as has been said, even with a vast ocean separating it from the continent of Telmérion, was not far unlike the latter in its landscape and in its climate, though the differences are enough to be noteworthy. And both were much changed from the earliest days of the world, since the breaking of the first pledge and the betrayal of the primal gift, when the Illûstra was rent from the tree that was its sanctuary. Or so we believe, for the land that would become Vælíria was unknown in these earliest beginnings. Yet after that grievous day the course of history was altered forever, and deeply marred, and the very stars in the heavens above were

changed and appeared to man strange. The universal embrace of warmth, in which even the cool of morn, eve, and night was not a bitter threat to the well-being of man but a caress upon his skin, gave way instead to bitter cold and unpredictable storms. So too the beasts that were his companions began to manifest animosity toward him and toward other creatures of the earth. As when a linchpin that acts as a cohesive center is removed and the whole network comes undone, the same was it when the gift of the light entrusted to man and woman—the center of the universe—was betrayed, and the stone became bereft of light, and the tree no longer held the radiance of the One suspended in its embrace.

Before the birth of the Empire the land of Vælíria was populated with small city-states or clan-lands called nomári, or noma in the singular, each ruled by one who stood in dynastic succession based for the most part upon familial blood relation, though there were some exceptions in the case of power and position seized by violence or political machination. These rulers, known as the harési, held sway over what was usually thirty to fifty leagues of land delineated in prior centuries from that of other nomári by the decisions or upheavals that shaped the political geography of the continent.

Such a governmental and economic structure was highly subsidiary, and most power lay in practice not in the hands of the harés of the city-state as in the hands of the lords, or the dómës, who from house or manor kept custodianship—in mutual benefit—over smaller sectors of land usually of a few thousand acres. It was they who were responsible for the protection and care of the lower and yet most populous class of this budding society, named the ûrandi, who would in turn work the land owned by the dóma and give to him a tribute or tax while also receiving their living off of this land.

While in theory such a living for the ûrandi was fair and unforced, and they were free both to live in the land as well as to leave the land and seek a living elsewhere, in practice such changes were often impracticable. After all, there were few places within the boundaries of Vælíria in which any other life than the one the ûrandi already had was easily attainable, were it not to seek employ as a mercenary, soldier, or tradesman, or to make an even harder living in the lands still uncharted on the slopes of mountains or deep in unexplored forests. But such is the nature of human freedom, which is never unbounded and arbitrary liberty, but rather responsiveness to the gift of life found within the true confines of reality, in which a path is marked out for both indi-

vidual and mutual benefit and flourishing. Such authentic freedom, as a general rule, was recognized as a true and valid right proper to these people, and accepted as of utmost importance, and they were well allowed both to stand up against any abuse of power as well as to flee from it or to seek a more right expression of it elsewhere. All with extensive experience of life, however, know how difficult the pursuit of authentic freedom in a broken world can prove in practice; but such remained in most places the ideal.

All were held by the rule of law, which exists in the service of humanity and its flourishing—being but the expression of what is true, good, and just—and thus it was to truth itself, in law and beyond it, that bound society together. Whenever this system expressed itself authentically, therefore, the relation between dóma and ûrandi was one of mutual responsibility and care, and a sense of reciprocity reigned that, as long as fairness prevailed, neither would think of betraying. And if on the contrary a dóma abused his power in any way, he could be held accountable to the one from whom he had his own benefits, and to whom he was responsible, namely the king or harés of the city-state in whose boundaries his lands lay (and to the norándas who ruled with him), and indeed to his own ûrandi themselves, on whose cooperation he was bound to rely for the fruitfulness and stability of his rule. The harés, for his part, as the prime custodian of a given clan or state, was expected to exercise his power by necessity in dialogue and cooperation with the dómës and the other norándas, who lived in the towns or cities surrounding the castle or citadel, the central governing and protecting structure at the heart of the city-state, wherein were housed and trained both the central military and the scholarly institutions (though each dóma also had his own army for the protection of his lands and the exercising of his own legitimate authority and custodianship). For example, were it the desire of a harés to change a law in his given domain, he would find it necessary to consult and receive the unanimous or majority approval (depending on the given state) of his elected council of norándas, who for their part were intended to be representatives both of the dómës in the outlying lands and of the ûrandi whom they supported.

In this light, fealty given from one man to another was always understood to be reciprocal in nature, and loyalty was given from the lower classes to the higher only insofar as the latter also held faith to the true essence of the just society, a fidelity both to the bonds that united persons and to the law that called them together to a common stan-

dard, a standard inscribed in the very nature of reality itself and facilitating the good of all. This being so, anyone in this system, even the lowest, had the right and duty to oppose someone who arrogated to himself power or acted against the law, and to seek to bring about again in its proper place the rightful rule of law. This understanding of the freedom of all men in obedience to the truth, this understanding of liberty in law, was one of the first things to be dismantled with the corruption of power. This heritage common to the peoples of both Vælíria and Telmérion was thus set for destruction when men sought for a centralized power in the hands of a few, or indeed in the hands of a single person, taking to himself power that claimed to be absolute.

Before its degradation this way of organizing society proved basically humane, rooted as it was in the familial and communal duties of reciprocal care and responsibility that arose at the beginnings of our civilization. And insofar as it maintained this familial spirit in its official procedures, even if not in the full consciousness of its participants, it remained a just ordering, and served justice for all who were held within the orbit of this political order. But as the history of all human society illustrates, no political structure alone, however many protections it may have, is enough to safeguard by itself true justice for all persons. And even deeper than the communal and familial nature of the legal structure was the cosmic, or one might say metaphysical, in which all persons, whatever be their roles and duties in society, were custodians of the law which was not primarily a written or customary code of conduct as the very nature of reality itself rightly understood and lived. In this respect, too, it is possible to recognize the profound truth that lies at the heart of authentic wisdom: that express law alone is not enough for the preservation of justice and the flourishing of humanity upon the earth; what is needed even more than mere law is love and compassion, and what is needed more than mere justice is pity and mercy. And the deepest freedom emerges not from outside of man but from within him, by the truth of his own inner being set free by beauty, goodness, and truth.

Here it becomes apparent that no human society, however well ordered, can usher in a complete or permanent state of well-being, and that man's happiness upon the earth lies beyond what the state itself can offer, indeed beyond what can be found within the confines of the world itself, since man has been born from, and is destined for, a happiness beyond the world. This does not mean, of course, that the pursuit of a just and noble society is a false goal, nor that it is a fading

dream; no, it is a valid and necessary pursuit, both because of the societal nature of man who is born into a communion of persons and ordered to this communion for his very flourishing, and also because the nature of man is marred and broken, because the human community is broken, and needs to be guided and educated toward its true fulfillment and toward the good of all, the great and the small, the strong and the weak alike.

Chapter 9. Ûlfaeng

Hældáris.

Hældáris' sleep is tormented by nightmares, though upon waking they flee from consciousness into the dark recesses of his mind and all that remains is a dull, gnawing dread. When he sits up and looks around, he is surprised to see that Aeyósha is still asleep, curled almost in a fetal position beside the dying embers of the previous day's fire. It looks, indeed, that he tended it to keep it burning through much of the night. The sky is beginning to turn from night's blackness to the light of dawn, and the sun is already above the horizon in the east, though her light is cold and veiled by a thick layer of clouds. The air too is quite cold, though not bitter, particularly considering the fact that neither man has more than the clothes on his back. And though what they both wear, when dry, is adept at retaining heat and resisting the cold—Hældáris a gambeson of linen and Aeyósha a long tunic of the same fabric, with woolen garments underneath—it is little when compared with a cloak and hood and gloves.

Ignoring the pain in his body, which has lessened significantly from the previous night, though still very much present, Hældáris rises to his feet. As quietly as he can, he then gathers some fallen logs and other small pieces of wood and arranges them on the still-red embers, squatting near to them and blowing lightly until the fire reawakens and begins to spread onto the fresh wood. Then, not finding the fire enough to warm and relax his stiff body, he rises again to his feet and, crossing his arms over his chest and cradling his hands in the pits of his arms, he walks to the water's edge and looks out over the ocean, which is now as calm as an ocean can be. The waves whisper as they rhythmically wash up on the shore, leaving trails of white foam as they again recede, only to be replaced a few seconds later with the mark of another wave, in a

cycle that shall not cease for as long as the seas remain.

But he does not stand for long, as both external chill and internal restlessness urge him on, and he walks along the beach toward the south, the rocky sand crunching beneath his boots with every step. The shore is mostly shapeless and uniform, a grayish color stretching as far as the eye can see, though it appears to curve further inland in the distance. Thirty to fifty yards away from the ocean, however, the land rises in rocky promontories or grassy bluffs littered with stones, whose vegetation is austere in the extreme—grasses almost devoid of color and trees bereft of leaf and berry except for a few scattered conifers. This sight draws Hældáris' to recall the date, and—after reminding himself that he missed almost an entire day in unconsciousness—he settles on the fourteenth of Téras, the third month, in the year 29 of the third age of Telmérion, and year 1174 of the Vælírian calendar. The ages of his homeland are counted in millennia, in periods of a thousand years, and he was born almost exactly at the conclusion of one age and the dawning of another—and this is true not only numerically, but existentially, for the world in which he was born and raised is far different than the one known even by his immediate progenitors. And it was their love and sacrifice that paved the way for the peace and serenity, the faith and goodness, which have bathed his youth and his adulthood in their light.

The count of Vælírian Years, however, is not divided into millennia or "ages," but counted simply from the colonization of their land 1174 years ago—in the year 844 of the first age of Telmérion. Thinking of this simple difference in calendar reckoning is enough to remind Hældáris quite vividly that he is now in a foreign land, one that has been developing largely independently from his own for almost twelve-hundred years. And not only that, but he does not know where upon this land he is, nor does he have any supplies other than the clothes on his back and the sword of his father—and most grievously of all, though he resists thinking of it, he is bereft of all those who traveled with him toward this land but one, the man who saved his life. The thought is still utterly inconceivable to him that his wife, to whom only recently he had been joined in marriage and with whom he had yet to bring forth children, is dead. How could things end so suddenly and unexpectedly? And indeed so unfairly? Death is a cruel reaper indeed, cutting down men and women without regard or discernment, almost at a whim and with malicious pleasure.

The anger and resentment boil up within Hældáris before he is aware of it, and only as these emotions spill over does he become con-

scious of his thoughts—that he is replaying again and again in his mind the horrific scenes of the serpent's attack. And he is as it were grasping the evil of the event by the hand—the sheer stupidity and absurdity of it—not to confront and conquer it, but to use it as a bludgeon to batter away the sparks of faith and of hope that remain in his heart trying to stir into flame. And this seems the most natural course of action, the most humane and understandable response to such senseless suffering and loss. In accord with these thoughts the already gray landscape takes on an even more monotone hue, and Hældáris realizes that even were he to look upon the woods of his home in the full blossom of spring, they would appear hardly more than a half-tone trapped between light and dark, and devoid of real color.

And he recognizes that deep underneath this numbness lies an unspeakable pain too intense for him to bear, the grief of loss and the gaping hole in his heart and his life where Relmaríndë should be. But he recognizes this almost as he would if it were in another person rather than in the inner recesses of his own being. And this is a startling realization, an expression of the rupture that has happened in his heart, as if now the life he lives is not his own, but merely a fragment, a dream, or a nightmare of loss. Even so, thinking of the loss of his wife, tears spring to his eyes, and he cannot withhold them from giving voice to his anguish. But they are bitter tears, bringing no relief or ease to his suffering, no sense of meaning to his loss, and no awareness of reconciliation either with his fate or with his own ruptured self. But what does it matter? For the cruelty of the world has stolen her so swiftly and so easily, and she is gone.

If there is any hope or relief for Hældáris, it lies beyond the grasp of his conscious feeling and thought, in the hope that even if she is lost to him in this world he may yet see her again when he too passes beyond the portal of death, and in the trust that beyond the darkness of senseless loss there is yet a greater light that, even if it cannot be seen, continues to hold together threads that to all appearances seem torn asunder.

When he returns to the camp close to an hour later he finds Aeyósha awake and sitting by the now blazing fire, though he has pulled some hot embers to the side and is cooking a small bit of breakfast for the two of them. "A chilly morning," remarks Aeyósha when he looks up and sees his friend drawing near. "But winter is in its last moments and spring shall soon be coming."

"Aye," says Hældáris. "At least we shall not be wandering through a

foreign land in the freezing cold." He sits down and extends his hands over the flames.

"How do you feel today?" asks Aeyósha. "I am surprised you rose so early and walked about with the wounds to your back."

"The pain is not great. I took care not to cause any stress to the wounds."

"Good. We would not want them to reopen now. I shall take a look at them later, if you let me."

"Certainly."

After a moment's silence, Aeyósha says, "Do you have any idea where we might be? You have studied the landscape of Vælíria more than I, as well as its language and customs."

"All three of the ships that set sail from Telmérion were bound toward the port city of Aelthýrin. However, Captain Olándir spoke with me a few days past and said that he intended to stop for a few hours in the town of Ûlfaeng in order to resupply, since there had been some miscalculations regarding stock before our departure. We were in fact drawing near to that town when the serpent struck, and so, unless we were blown far off course during the storm, it must not be far from here."

"As threatening as the storm appeared," Aeyósha adds, "it was not so violent after all. It was the serpent that...never mind." Seeing Hældáris' expression he does not finish giving voice to his train of thought. Instead he says, "The wind was inclining toward the north, so perhaps if we were to travel southward we would come upon the port. Know you how large or small the settlement is?"

"It is a well-established town and a center of trade, so we shall have no trouble finding services there, though how we shall pay for them, I do not know."

"We shall take thought for that if and when we find it, I suppose. Did you walk far? What have you to say about the landscape?"

"All that I saw looks much the same as it does here, though the shoreline does recede inland to the south," explains Hældáris.

"I saw whilst fishing and hunting for shellfish yesterday that it recedes also to the north. Perhaps we are on some kind of peninsula or outcropping of land."

"Perhaps so."

They then begin to eat, while Aeyósha turns to Hældáris and, with his usual intense look, says, "I could have done little to help you if the cuts on your back were deeper. But as it is you were spared much, and

they were shallow—little more than wounds of the flesh—and should heal rapidly. I wonder if traveling soon would risk harm to you."

"It is you who have seen the wounds, but I feel that, with your care and the bandaging you have given, walking disturbs them little. Did we not already agree to proceed without delay?"

"We did speak of it. I only wished to make sure. At least allow me to take care of any the manual activities for the present. In the meantime, I shall rely upon you for the knowledge I lack. As we walk along, I shall pester you with questions about the landscape, peoples, and customs of Vælíria to make up for my lack of education."

"Very well then, I accept," says Hældáris, "but on one condition."

"What is that?"

"We do so in the Vælírian tongue."

"Oy, that is a lot to ask!" Aeyósha exclaims. "But no—you are in the right. Though in years past I would have been more confident in my knowledge of the Vælírian tongue, it has been long since I have given it the attention of either study or practice. I will need much speaking before I feel entirely comfortable with the ins and outs of the language."

"You may have plenty before we finally come to the city of Vælaróma," says Hældáris, "if nothing hinders us from making our way that far."

† † †

Within a half hour the two men set out along the coastline to the south. The morning clouds gradually pass away and the sun shines full in the sky; the air is warm and pleasant, with a hint of a breeze. Aeyósha carries the illoándir over his shoulder in order to give Hældáris' wounds the rest needed in order to heal, but otherwise they are entirely devoid of any supplies. Whatever weapon Aeyósha once had was forfeit during the serpent's attack, and neither of them had on their person either armor or goods, food or maps or tools of any kind, and so they walk hoping that the town is nearby, though even this does not promise to solve all of their problems in this regard. Thankfully they both are well acquainted with the tongue of Vælíria, though Hældáris has had more practice in its speech; and it is a tongue which is a derivative of that of Telmérion and so is not too difficult to learn, even though in the course of its history it has doubtlessly developed many words, rules, and nuances of its own.

A few more trees begin to cloak the inland landscape as they follow the curve of the shore until they find the sea stretching to the south

rather than merely to the east. And even as the day progresses and the shadows cast by the sun lengthen again from midday's height to evening's length, they are surprised to find that the shore continues in its curve, and devoid of any signature of man. By nightfall, realizing that no hope of finding human habitation remains this day, they take shelter in a close-knit copse of trees and littered stone and build a campfire around which they settle to rest.

Not until the end of the next day do they realize without a shadow of a doubt that they are not upon the mainland of Vælíria, but rather ashore an island off its coast. The day is cloaked in a dense fog that lingers even with the full height of the sun, and a light rain falls on and off from a dense roof of clouds, covering the earth with a heavy perspiration and dancing upon the face of the sea in innumerable droplets of water. Only as the fog pulls back in the evening and the clouds break do they glimpse land across the water to the south and to the west, a land looming large at a remove of perhaps three or four miles. Before this they had come to suspect as much, walking round the opposite end of the place of their washing ashore and finding themselves looking out upon water to the west as they had to the east. But only with the sighting of land are they able to situate themselves and, thankfully, Hældáris' memory serves him well in recalling the contours of the map of Vælíria which he had brought with him on the voyage and which is now lost in the depths of the ocean.

And so there is nothing for it: before they retire for the night they begin gathering wood to build a raft and, for much of the following morning, they continue the work. Using fallen logs and branches for the body of the raft and small saplings twisted tight and stripped of bark to fasten them together, they are able to construct something safe enough to brave the waters of the ocean between here and the main shores of Vælíria, though further than that would be folly.

Unfortunately, even while they sit down for a midday rest, the completed raft resting in the sand and rocks beside them, a heavy wind begins to blow in off the ocean and the waves rise high to white crests. The two men have no choice, therefore, but to drag the raft inland and to situate it tightly among some boulders so as to keep it from the danger of being swept away in the high tide. And then they themselves seek what little shelter they can amid the trunks and boughs of the spruce and cypress trees that stand twenty or so yards from the beach.

In but a few minutes wind turns to storm and a heavy downpour of rain is loosed from the clouds above, low-hanging and quick-moving

toward the northwest, accompanied by flashes of lightning and peals of thunder. Unprepared as the two men are, all they can do is nestle close to the trees and receive what little dryness they can provide against the rain and what little protection against the wind. And long into the night does the storm last with no signs of lessening or relief, and the travelers grow both hungry and tired, and cannot sleep for discomfort and cold. But as suddenly as the storm came, so too does it depart, and with a final gust of wind like a last gasp the wind eases and the rain gives way to hardly more than a soft and intermittent drizzle. Relieved that the storm has passed without causing any greater harm than this, both men breathe sighs of relief and, since it is too dark to hunter or gather with any measure of success, and too wet to have any hopes of starting a fire, they dry their clothes as they may and try to sleep. But the first light of dawn greets them before either has slept anything more than fitfully; and yet this light is not unwelcome, for with it comes both warmth and luminosity, and the ability to sail toward a place that shall provide even more than that.

And this they do after a frugal breakfast of raw shellfish (all the wood is still too wet to build a fire), pushing the raft into the water and directing it out against the waves until the shore falls away beneath their feet. Then they use makeshift oars to direct it still further, setting their course to the south. The sky is now clear and blue overhead and the wind is no more than a gentle breeze from the east. Thus, though the rowing is difficult work, it is not nearly so much as it would have been were the weather different. And yet in Hældáris' heart there rages a storm of another kind, one which has been in a tempest the entirety of the night. He cannot cease re-living again and again the moments of the loss of his wife and companions, and in his imagination her voice resounds, calling out to him, and her form appears, a murky shape flailing about underwater and reaching out for him to save her. And he cannot do so.

It takes six tiresome hours for the two men to guide the boat to the opposite shore, whose contours rise ever larger and more defined before them as they draw near. In the distance, quite a ways inland, they can see the silhouettes of mountains in a massive range that stretches from the east to the west, growing more imposing as it does so. Nearer at hand they discern rocky undulating hills and heather rippling out from the mountains almost to meet the waves of the sea, clothed in more trees and vegetation than were present on the island. When they have washed ashore they pull the raft a safe distance from the water in

case of need, though seeing no reason for it. And they set their sights to the east and the south, along the shore, and hopefully thus toward the town of Ûlfaeng. And yet the light of day is failing fast, the rich hues of twilight painting the sky in the west. Before darkness comes upon them completely, therefore, they hasten to make camp as best they can. However, little dry wood can be found on this shore either, as here the rain must have fallen likewise, and so they settle simply for a sheltered place in the midst of a dense brush watched over by a circle of old pines. But soon they regret this, as the wind shifts and begins to blow from the north and the temperature begins to drop rapidly. It is dark now, however, with only the moon and stars above them to give light. In this dim half-light they search under rocky overhangs or among the branches of trees for something dry enough to accept flame. And though it takes some time, they bring to their shelter enough wood and kindling to keep a fire through much of the night—granted that they are able to get it to burn in the first place. And this takes a good half hour, as they must block the wind with their bodies even to get a single flame to hold for long enough to light grass or wood kindling, and it takes even longer for the larger pieces of wood to yield to the flame. But at last they find themselves before a moderately burning fire, and they settle their bodies as close to it as possible, the cold air clinging to them as the moon rises higher in the sky and shows her face, half-full, with a panoply of countless stars all about her. And here they sleep, taking turns tending the fire and keeping it alight.

Morning dawns cold and bright, the trees and grasses clothed in a heavy white frost that shimmers in the light of the early sun before it begins to melt with the increasing warmth of day. Hældáris and Aeyósha depart quickly, not only in their haste to find Ûlfaeng or another settlement but in order to warm their chilled bodies with movement. By midday the temperature is more or less comfortable again, though a slight bitterness lingers in the air from the northern wind of the night before, taking refuge as it were in the shadows or in places where the cool air still blows unobstructed from the high places of the earth. But they walk mostly in a sheltered path cradled between rocks and trees, to their right a woodland of various arboreal beauties, from conifers of all kinds to elms and alders, and to their left rocky cliffs that descend to the shores of the ocean below. The path is not well marked or trodden by human feet, but rather by the animals of the wood in their hunting and traversing; for they make out in the soil the hoof-prints of deer and elk, as well as the soft paw-prints of wolves and even

rabbits.

The walk, with the warm sun upon his skin and the beauty of nature about him, helps to raise Hældáris' spirits slightly, though against such anguish, doubt, and loss no merely external beauty is enough. Aeyósha remains always nearby, as the natural paces of the two men match each other well, both spontaneously and deliberately. And his presence and his compassion is evident even when they do not speak; and in fact even as Hældáris helps to familiarize his friend again with the language and lore of Vælíria, it is the teacher here who is helped. The very speaking and sharing, the very exercise of the mind in communion with a beloved person, helps to loosen somewhat, even if not completely, the stranglehold of despair upon Hældáris' heart.

On the third day, in the late afternoon, they draw near to the town. First, however, they are greeted by sprawling fields stretching over miles of land cleared of forest and tilled to rich brown earth, though lying now fallow, with no crop yet in sight. But even as they walk they see in many of the fields men and women and even children at work, sowing seed in the soil, speaking or singing as they do so. And so Hældáris and Aeyósha hear the language of Vælíria spoken from the mouths of Vælírians for the first time. And they find it beautiful. It is not unlike their own language, of course, coming from the same root and ultimately born of the same ancestral culture, and yet the foreignness of it is enough to open their eyes to the beauty of its sound, and indeed to awaken them to the beauty of their own language as well. One of the songs which they hear, upon the lips of a woman, a mother, who works with four children at her side, is this, with its translation:

Köra mena, siri, sudángë,
átë oïla laíka tara fen,
anfa myka, aftir é uïntas lígengë:
duja gráfas, mæna, et dragas vestën,
anfa hilas, en penna é ena átë lænd,
anúsa nos ilá, átho anadraë kána,
et seyyas, en hænda, vestën ûvæla tuara
illi aupta faleng en átë aslaë.

Little seed, humble, life-giving,
the soil warms to welcome you,
soft now, after winter's resting:
dig deep, little one, and drink true,
hide now, in the one earth's embrace,

while we trust, though cannot reckon,
and then show, in time, your true face
as a plant dancing in the sun.

Ûlfaeng appears before them unexpectedly as they crest the rise of a hillock. It occupies the larger part of an inlet of land cradling a placid bay and rising in gradual slopes on almost every side, creating, therefore, a sheltered haven which must be greatly appreciated when the bitter winds of winter blow. The houses are well constructed, mostly of timber though some are also of stone, with wood-beamed or shingled roofs except for a few stables or workshops which are thatched. There are more trees here, as well, now that the farmlands have ceased, both along the slopes of the hills round about the town as well as nestled among the buildings themselves and providing them shade and at least some protection from the elements.

As they descend the hillock again their feet fall almost spontaneously onto a cobbled road that curls out from the town and winds its way toward the coast to their left. This road they take into Ûlfaeng and soon enter into the bustle of town life in what appears to be one of the main streets or squares of the settlement. Shopfronts open onto the street and many people stand either conversing with those within or standing in line waiting for their turn to order food; hucksters too push their carts along the center of the street plying their trade, calling out to draw in any interested persons, "Meat pies! Get your meat pies here! Only three manés!" or "Fresh vegetables straight from the garden!" or some such words. Considering the narrowness of the street it is full beyond expectation, and yet it feels not cramped but abundant in life, a welcome change after the anguished loss and sense of isolation that has gripped both Hældáris and Aeyósha since they washed ashore upon this land.

One of the most notable things about Ûlfaeng, at least in the estimation of these two Telmérins, is that nearly inexpressible reality called "culture," multifaceted and difficult even to summarize or explain without great empathy of heart and openness of mind. They feel it in the atmosphere and see it upon the face of every man, woman, and child whom they encounter; they recognize it written all over the architecture and layout of the town just as they hear it in the voices of those who buy and sell. In the simplest and most immediate estimation it is obvious that, if Ûlfaeng is any measure, the nation of Vælíria possesses a more technically developed and also comfortable standard of

living than its ancestral Telmérion. The latter, while having achieved great feats of beauty and ingenuity in craftsmanship and creativity, from temples and public monuments of wood and stone intricately carved, to glasswork and smithing and the smaller arts of painting, crafting, and music, and especially a life of rich thought and piety, expressed both in the lore of the scribes and in the tales of the common folk, it nonetheless remains mostly pastoral in the appearance and the substance of its vital life. In other words, Telmérion has never strayed very far from its origins in the seven clans which flourished almost exclusively as communities of small agrarian settlements of simple but sufficient means, with huts and later cabins of mostly felled timber and thatch, with roads of packed earth trod by man and animal alike, cradled round about with woodland or prairie often cloaked in fields of grain. There has always existed a certain frugality to the people and the culture of Telmérion, a certain hardiness and simplicity that has moderated the pursuits of technological development in culture while in no way denigrating them, since the interests of the people have simply been directed to things that they see as more important.

In Vælíria, however, it is evident that a much more deliberate focus on technical culture has occurred, and this can be seen both in the buildings of the town and in the clothing of its people, which are Hældáris' and Aeyósha's first introduction to a strong class distinction based on wealth and status and what can only be termed "fashion." But along with these immediately visible differences, there is a reality even more profound, if more subtle, that they cannot help noticing, though they are uncertain of whether it is something they actually see with their waking eyes or is rather an intuition of a general atmosphere that then plays itself out in their perception. For as they glance into the faces of the townspeople they recognize a trait that is common to nearly all of them. And this trait is sadness, though it seems to be less the lament of loss than the apathy of having forgotten, the emptiness that follows upon the cooling of desire and the hardening of hope.

Having no money or other items to trade, the two men ignore the shops, as hungry as they are, and pass through the street without stopping except for once when a huckster stands in their way and tries to convince them to buy some fresh-caught fish. With courteous apologies they say that they are unable, and extricate themselves from the encounter. They do, however, keep their eyes open for an inn in the hopes that, by some small kindness, they may be allowed to sleep even in the barn or near to the communal fire. This they find, quite hard to

miss, soon after they turn onto a second street, narrower than the first and filled with far less people. A sign hangs out into the road with a crude painting of a black horse with a white rider upon it, the paint chipping after many years in the elements. Nodding to one another, they enter this building and step into an almost uncomfortably warm room; it is wide and with a low ceiling, and seems to be divided into two sections. On the right side they see tables arranged close together and all abustle with people eating, drinking, and talking; and on the left they blazing see a wide and deep hearth with a few chairs, mostly empty, facing it, and, a little closer to the entrance of the room, the counter from which the barkeeper (who, it seems by universal custom, is also the innkeeper) takes his name. Without further ado Hældáris and Aeyósha approach the counter and hail the man who stands there, an individual with skin creased with countless wrinkles too deep to judge and with hair and beard of hoary white, who nonetheless seems both full of energy and attention, washing dishes even while his eyes continually scan the room and vigilantly take in its customers.

Seeing the two men approach, he directs his gaze to them and says, "Welcome to The White Rider. What will you be having? Room and board for the night—or for longer? You have the appearance of travelers."

"We are travelers, yes," says Hældáris, "and from afar."

"Aye. Your accent is rather unusual. Are you from one of those far northern settlements? I hear that the accent and dialect is quite different up there."

"We are actually from the east. We hail from Telmérion and have come here by boat."

Hearing this, the man cocks an eyebrow and looks at the two of them suspiciously. "No other way to come than by boat—leastwise not that I know of. But all things being said, we don't get many visitors from Telmérion. Or rather, we don't get any visitors at all, at least not but on the rarest occasions. What's your business?"

"You may not believe us if we tell you," says Aeyósha.

"Try me."

"Very well," begins Hældáris, well aware of how his words will likely be received. "My name is Hældáris Illómiel. I am the son of the high king of Telmérion. My companion and I are the sole survivors of a shipwreck to the north of here."

"The son of the king, eh?" asks the innkeeper, and then, raising his voice and gesturing with his hand, he speaks to all persons in the room,

"Hoy, everyone, we have the prince of Telmérion here with us, the heir to the throne! Do you believe that?" Clearly the innkeeper does not. Though Hældáris and Aeyósha can almost feel the looks directed toward the from behind, and the shift in the surrounding conversations is evident, they suspect that few others believe it either, and understand it simply as an ill-placed joke. But whether the innkeeper's words are taken seriously or as mere mockery or jest, either way it shall likely become a topic of rumor and conversation in coming days. Lowering his voice again and looking back to his interlocutors, the man now continues, "And fancy that: you were even shipwrecked like your old man! If you want to spin a yarn to garner the beneficence of innkeeps, barmaids, and merchants, then let me give you a little advice: settle for something at least a smidgen more believable. You hear me?"

"You know of my father's shipwreck?" Hældáris asks, surprised by this piece of information and also not knowing what else he could possibly say.

"Aye," says the innkeeper, "we know of it. That man is well known now even in these parts, though half or more than half of what we hear is probably nothing but legends."

"Perhaps so," observes Aeyósha, growing a trifle impatient at this point, "but we speak nothing but the truth. Clearly you can see that we are from Telmérion, if not but from our appearance and our accent, can you not? And you yourself said that you rarely see visitors from Telmérion. Why not then give some credence to our story?"

"Because it is a yarn if ever I heard one."

"That it is not, though I know not how to convince you of it."

"Perhaps some coin would not be amiss, and I'll let it slide and give you what you've come here for," the man says flatly.

"But that is precisely the issue," Hældáris says, "we have nothing but what you see before you. All else was lost to the ocean."

"It is as I expected, then," the man replies. "Your story was given in place of payment. What else could possibly have been the motive?" He pauses then, and, after a moment's thought, he adds, "I see you have a nice sword there. How about that? If you need a room and some food so badly, how about we make a trade for it?"

"No, I am afraid not," answers Hældáris without hesitation.

Hearing the tone in his voice, the innkeeper pauses for a moment and looks at Hældáris intently, and then at Aeyósha, and at the hilt of the sword over his shoulder. "That wouldn't happen to be that 'magical sword' about which we hear tales? The one that can shoot light

from the blade like arrows?"

Neither Hældáris nor Aeyósha can refrain from chuckling at this remark, and they look at one another with a knowing smile. "I am afraid it cannot do that, exactly," says Hældáris. And, unwilling to pursue the conversation any further or to attempt an exhibition of the sword for pragmatic purposes, he says, "Well, we thank you for your time. We shall seek accommodations elsewhere," and he turns away. The eyes of many follow them as they go.

Once in the street again, Aeyósha turns to his friend and says, "Well, that was more or less what I expected. So what do you propose we do now? I fear it shall be little different in most of the inns in this town, if not in all of them."

"We have slept outside until now," replies Hældáris, "so I suppose we can do so again. I do not mind, though fish-meats are not proving to be enough to satisfy my appetite and I crave something more."

"Without money, I don't know—," Aeyósha begins, but he is interrupted by the emergence of someone from the door directly behind them, a person who has followed them into the street as they exited the inn.

Chapter 10. Through the Darkness

Albrýndaer. Vælírian Year 1150

"Father, I have read the book that you shared with me," says Albrýndaer to Daeran one evening, "and I was intrigued by it. Thank you for requesting it for me. I learned much from it, even as it revealed to me how little of our history, and of the history of our ancestral people in Telmérion, I truly know."

"Your education could only be fragmentary, son, given the circumstances of your birth. I hope that you understand that."

"I do."

"But I suppose you have some questions, now, concerning what you read?"

"Too many to count. But at present I wish to ask only one."

"And what is that?"

"Even in what I read it spoke very little of the origins of the Empire and of the Emperor's rise to power. I expected more in this regard, considering our prior conversation."

"So you wish me to recount it to you instead?"

"If you are willing."

"As I said before, much has been forgotten or twisted over the centuries that have passed since then," Daeran explains, "but I will share with you what we know with relative certainty. And no—I see the concern upon your face—I shall not color the facts with my own interpretation. What I share is yours to judge as you see fit."

"I appreciate that."

"Where then shall I begin? It was the end of the sixth century since the settlement of our land, and for decades previously there had been increasing conflict between the various city-states in the heart of Vælíria—though of course our land had not yet come to be called by that name. Some of these were petty trade disputes or arguments over lands and borders, but others were harbingers of the greater conflict that was to come. For many years previously the culture of the kingdom of Vælaróma had become increasingly expansionist and its rulers inclined to extend their rule over the surrounding kingdoms."

"Why would a king desire such a thing?" Albrýndaer asks. "It seems to me that having more to rule would be a burden and not a boon."

"Remember what I told you in our previous conversation. One may rule for others' benefit or one may rule for one's own. There is often hidden in the human heart a lust for power that, when it finds an avenue to express itself, leads to the greatest of evils."

"So that is what happened? The rulers of the kingdom of Vælaróma grew in power until they conquered their neighbors?"

"One would assume so considering what I have said thus far. But no. Things in fact turned out quite differently. It is true that the kings of Vælaróma began to subject with violence the surrounding clans and kingdoms, forcing them to bend the knee either after they had been crushed in martial combat or in order to prevent such a fate. At first the kingdoms of Authringhaem and Elándreä were subjugated, and the clan of the Turínhäs, and shortly afterwards the Ulfäs and Niminhäs. King Ágnar and, after his death in battle, his son Rándulf, were successful in bringing into their domain large swathes of the land, from Dringhaem in the north to Héndra in the south. Then a hero arose on the scene, one who has gone down in history as a legend of almost superhuman proportions: Soldís the Deathless. He was the high thane of the kingdom of Corándis in the far northwest. His first recorded public act was an intervention in what has come to be called the Battle of Mallórna Pass. Being given command over the armies of his kingdom,

he led them into battle without, as far as we know, having received either request or plea for aid from the neighboring kingdom of Elándreä. He ambushed the forces of the kingdom of Vælaróma to the great surprise of both sides. And in a matter of months, joined with his new allies, he had pushed the armies of Vælaróma south to the borders of their own lands.

"During the next two years this legendary warrior and statesman made promises to the other besieged kingdoms that if they were to rally to his banner he would not only protect them from any military threats but also ensure their peace and prosperity through other means. And this was borne out to be the truth, as Corándis had long accumulated great wealth from the rich mines hidden in the mountains of its domain, and it distributed it to other kingdoms and clans in their time of need. Even in the midst of conflict, trade began again to flourish and wealth to increase, and in but half a decade almost all the kingdoms of our land had joined with the kingdom of Corándis against that of Vælaróma. The threatener had now become the threatened, and king Rándulf and his counselors had no choice but to surrender.

"And yet rather than working to maintain the peace and to consolidate brotherly relations between the newly liberated states, something else entirely happened. After a bitterly cold night in the dead of winter, it was announced that the king of Corándis had died in his sleep, though he was but thirty-four years of age. Speaking promises of continued benevolence, Soldís proclaimed himself regent in place of the deceased king until a suitable ruler could be found, the king having no children of ruling age. In coming days, with a speech as elegant and persuasive as his fighting prowess was unbeatable, he convinced the majority of the other states to swear fealty to him and his banner, to unite in one great kingdom, thus receiving the boons both of his protection and of his wisdom, and of the influx of wealth that had rescued the peoples of our land in a time of desperate suffering and lack. And those few kingdoms or clans which refused were soon consolidated by force, being unable to resist their neighbors roundabout, and the pressure placed upon them. So you see, what began as apparent altruism, as an act of intervention and salvation, eventually lead, through the machinations of one man, to the enslavement of an entire people. And so it is so often throughout history, that those who present themselves as the saviors of mankind are a greater threat to its well-being than those who are its professed enemies. Violence is all the more insidious for being more subtly concealed, and the loss of freedom is all the more

grave whenever it is given away freely in response to fallacious promises."

"Soldís was the first emperor?" Albrýndaer asks after his father's voice has fallen silence.

"Aye, he was. Many further things happened, of course, that we do not have time to recount at present, to lead to the situation in which even four-hundred years later we still find ourselves. Most significant of these was his taking possession of the seat of Vælaróma and his declaration of himself as Emperor Supreme, and his renaming of the land as a single empire: that of Vælíria. His descendants have sat upon the throne of Vælíria ever since, and the name that he bore in his time, the Deathless, has lived on in them in surprising ways. Not only have they been unmatched in battle, but they have been exceptionally long-lived. Many say that a blessing of the gods rests upon the rulers of the Empire and that this line of rulers has been chosen by heaven itself. This alone, such people say, explains the uncanny wisdom and prowess that they have without exception displayed over the course of many centuries. And yet I wonder if the blessing is in fact a curse, a curse upon our people, and their rule a blight." Daeran pauses for a moment and draws in breath, thinking, and concludes, "But I said that I would leave the judgment of the facts to you. And there you have them, in as succinct a form as I can manage."

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In the days following upon their conversation, Albrýndaer takes to pacing slowly, head bowed, along the edge of the encampment, though the sentinels who watch its outskirts in vigil for any attack of the ötûnr allow him to go no further, nor does he wish to do so. He is preoccupied with all that his father has shared with him and also with the events of the previous days: with the assaults of the creatures of darkness, with the powerlessness of the inhabitants of the prison to resist them, and with the forced departure of Ílya. As he reflects, he realizes that his increased interest in the history of his land is in part an escape from the desperate situation in which he finds himself. When there is nowhere to turn, nowhere to escape in his present circumstances, his mind has taken flight into the past. And yet at the same time this is not all that is at play, for his questions are valid, as is his pursuit of the truth. And if all that he has experienced raises questions within his mind and heart, he cannot but seek for answers.

He has glimpsed in the accounts of the past the tiniest slivers of light, and yet the impression left upon him has been overall negative. The

amount of human malice and cruelty, trickery and lies, violence and bloodshed, is immense, far more than he, in his childlike innocence, had ever thought possible. And he finds himself caught between the senseless present violence and destruction of the ötûnr and the bloody past of his people, and he sees no way out, neither up nor down, neither past nor future.

His mother too has become withdrawn, silent and still, hardly moving from where she sits in the shadows of their dwelling except to prepare what little food she can for her family. His father, on the other hand, has joined the watch, and has once already returned home bloodied and beaten from an altercation with the ötûnr. Soon he shall not return at all. Even as Albrýndaer thinks these thoughts of death sounds disrupt his thoughts and he looks up to see the silhouettes of ötûnr emerging from the shadows of the cavern as they draw near for yet another assault upon the encampment. Cries echo from the sentinels as they call out their preparations to fend off yet another attack, and Albrýndaer intends to turn and to flee, to return to his home and to bury his head in his hands and wait for the horror to stop. Instead, he finds himself affixed to the spot gazing out at the attack as it unfolds, events happening much faster than he had thought possible. There are not many ötûnr in this siege, a half dozen at most, and yet before they have all been slain by the defenders of the encampment Albrýndaer witnesses what finally causes something within him to snap, the last thread binding him to the light to sever and give way to rupture and to loss. This killing happens before his naked eyes, as a man whom he has seen often since his early childhood is ripped open by the claws and teeth of a wolf-like ötûn as if he were a meal for a voracious animal—though the ötûnr have no need for food, and live solely on violence and death. What he witnesses in this moment is rivaled in the intensity of its effect on him, the numbness and death that he feels invading his heart and his bones, only by the execution that he had witnessed years before, an execution which had gone by the name of justice and yet which had scarred him almost as much as the molestation which he had suffered at the hands of its victim. All of this floods in upon his memory and his imagination now, an overflowing torrent of death and absurdity and loss, flowing like a current unbreakable and unstoppable until it empties into the abyss. And as he draws near to his family's dwelling, almost unconscious of his surroundings, Albrýndaer has resolved to take the first opportunity presented to him to either escape from this place or to throw his life away in trying, however vainly, to

defend his people. He thinks now: it is better to do something, however hopeless, however absurd, than to do nothing at all and to descend, paralyzed and helpless, into nothingness.

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Almost as if in answer to his resolve, it is only a matter of days before Albrýndaer encounters a group of people whose hearts seem to coincide with his own in their questions and their aspirations. Broken in spirit and losing at long last his belief and trust in the goodness of the world into which he was born, and in the goodness of the hearts of men, fickle and deceitful, he is offered a solution, a path that promises an avenue into freedom and clarity. They are a fellowship of fighters, men both young and old, who travel from encampment to encampment recruiting others to join them in their struggle against the creatures of darkness and in their pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. For the strength of their claim, and of their martial resistance against the enemies from the depths, lies in their cult, in the worship of the being or beings to whom they are eager to introduce Albrýndaer.

Of course there is conflict before he agrees to leave his home and to accompany these men to their own abode, to the deep dismay of his parents. For they wish for nothing but to keep him with themselves as if they could protect him, or as if he could protect them. Or perhaps it is simply the bond of familial love that moves them to hold him tight to themselves in the vain hope that, even if they are to drown in the darkness that swells now to swallow everything, they shall do so together, side by side. What does it matter? The time of his parents' sheltering has ended; now is the time for Albrýndaer to mark out a path for himself, to grasp on his own initiative for what has so continually been torn from his grasp by others or by the painful circumstances of life. Indeed, if he desires to have even the slimmest chance of saving even his own parents, then departing from them is his only hope. And he has seen these new warriors fight, almost berserk with strength and fearless of pain or death, slaying the ötûnr left and right with seemingly superhuman ease. It is thanks to them, after all, that his own encampment was saved from an assault of the creatures of darkness. Traveling through the large underground cavern from settlement to settlement, and even through the side tunnels, armed with what weapons they can craft or take for themselves, they raid the enemy wherever they find them. So it is that they come upon Albrýndaer's encampment only shortly before a large group of ötûnr emerge and attack; and all men and women would most likely have been slain were it not for the visit-

ing warriors in their midst.

After the fight one of their number approaches Albrýndaer directly and speaks with him, "You look young and fit enough for battle, though bearing the weakness that afflicts us all." Albrýndaer nods but says nothing, and the man, at the start of middle-age though already with a beard of full gray, continues, "What prevents you from joining us in our fight? We will train you, but even more importantly, we shall show you the path to true strength, to authentic power."

"What do you mean?" replies Albrýndaer, finding his voice, though it cracks in the speaking.

"No longer need you cower in the darkness waiting for evil to assail you, letting your puny heart and flesh wrinkle in fright and cowardice until death takes you and all those important to you. Come with us and we shall show you all that you have ever sought."

Albrýndaer, too surprised and startled to answer in the affirmative, says that he will think on this proposal, but that he is certain his parents shall not approve.

"Would you rather stay and watch your parents die before your very eyes?" the man responds. "Only with us can you hope to find the strength to save them as well as yourself. But we will not press you to answer. We go into the caverns nearby to root out what ötûnr we might find. We shall return two days hence, and you may give us an answer then." And leaning forward and speaking softly, almost in a whisper, he adds, "I see the fire in your eyes, and I am confident that we shall receive the right response when the time comes." And placing a firm hand on his shoulder, he turns away, and the man and his companions depart toward the tunnels while Albrýndaer and the people of the encampment remain to dispose of the bodies of the ötûnr, that they might not be raised again.

Within four days Albrýndaer finds himself in the encampment of the warriors, having traveled with them from his settlement, anxious of what awaits but energized at the thought of finally doing something and taking his destiny into his own hands. Even so, the painful separation from his mother and his father lingers in his mind and heart. He still feels the sting of Daeran's bitterness as he turns away from his son and says, "I thought that you were growing in wisdom, but I see now that you are a fool, Bryn. And I fear that you shall come to a fool's end. But I cannot force you to remain here. I had thought from our recent conversations that you had a good mind within that head of yours and that you saw clearly. But it is evident that I was mistaken." Even though

Albrýndaer knows that these words were spoken in anger and in fear, the scars linger still. But even more deeply felt than the pain in remembrance of his father is the pain he feels as he recalls his mother, Milly, clinging to his garment with tears streaming down her face, almost hysterical with grief and terror, as her son pulls away from her.

But now is not the time to linger on these things. Now is the time to press forward, to throw himself unreservedly into the pursuit of strength, the strength to fight. Now is the time to seek to discover the nature of this "spiritual enlightenment" that he has been promised, and which has been much on the tongues of the warrior company during their trek back to their own encampment. Whatever it is, the way that they speak of it sends jolts of energy through Albrýndaer as if they were offering him a flask full of water while he dies of thirst, or a table laden with food to satisfy his desperate hunger.

The camp, when he enters it with the entourage, is quite impressive in comparison with the other encampments that he has until now encountered in the underground prison. Not only does it seem to give off the same aura of strength as do the warriors themselves, and much strength was clearly needed in its construction, but so too is it different in design than any other dwelling that he has seen. For rather than tattered leather tents or natural crevices in the walls of the cavern, a large proportion of the camp is made of makeshift buildings of gathered stone plastered together with dried mud. Only two or three other buildings has Albrýndaer seen erected in this manner in the whole of his life, and certainly not an entire encampment of nearly fifty men. Have the people among whom he has lived for the whole of his life truly been so overcome by weakness and despair that they could not build their own dwellings to protect themselves from danger and from the elements? For as he beholds them now, they seem the most natural and obvious thing, and he cannot understand why they have not become the standard in every encampment.

The warriors' abode lies nestled in a corner of the massive cavern where the stony roof that arches hundreds of yards overhead finally juts downward toward the floor, and here, in this hidden alcove, is split by a cleft about a hundred or so feet across, creating an enclosure that is all but invisible from a distance. A single path runs through the center of the encampment, abodes to the left and the right, while the ground rises gradually to a crest against the back part of the alcove, completely hidden from view not only to outsiders but even to those in the encampment itself. Here lies the shrine around which the religious life of

the warriors is focused, and wherein their spiritual exercises are performed, though their whole life indeed is strictly regimented with such practices as are ordained toward attaining enlightenment. This Albrýndaer learns immediately upon his walk through the settlement, hearing the monotonous chants of men sounding from within their dwellings, repeated again and again as a mantra seeking to dig deep into the soil of the heart or to pierce through the heavens, he does not know, or perhaps both simultaneously. He hears too, to his surprise, the lashing of a whip, and is disturbed by this, wondering what forms of punishment they inflict upon their members, and for what crimes. His disquiet is not lessened when he sees in passing that this act of flagellation is not inflicted from one man to another, but by each man upon his own flesh. And yet in the same measure that his heart is unsettled by what he sees and hears, so too is his curiosity piqued and his yearning for strength, for a life of vigor and discipline, awakened. He yearns for what he sees, for that virile power that can strip itself of all else, and can cause itself pain and torment, all for the sake of the goal that it seeks. All of his trust, all of his waiting, has led him to nothing but loss and death, and what he thought would come to him as a gift from without, pouring freely into his receptive poverty, has proved both untrustworthy and ineffectual. And so he now resolves to instead seek through the energetic striving of his own will what he had failed to receive in all his previous hopefulness and receptivity.

"A newcomer, eh?" says the voice of a man unseen as they crest the rise and stand a short distance from the shrine, an altar of cut stone that is currently in heavy shadow with no light from any source cast upon it. The roof of the cavern hangs so low here that the area seems almost to be a man-made dwelling with a ceiling, though not far before it the stone is split wide, cleft upward for hundreds of yards above them. Looking around for the source of the mysterious voice, Albrýndaer sees a figure emerge from the deep shadows behind the altar and, when he steps into the light, his face is revealed. He is old in comparison with the other men in the camp, his face lined with many years and furrowed with age and suffering; and his eyes are distant, almost as if even in the moment that he directs his gaze upon Albrýndaer he sees him not, nor cares to see him, so occupied is he with striving to see things beyond.

"You have come to join us, and for this you shall forever be commended," says the man. "But know also that in departing from your home and from the old world you once knew, you have forever forfeit the right to return. Henceforth we alone shall be your family and your

love, and the object of our worship shall likewise be the sole purpose of your life."

"I know little yet of the things of which you speak," Albrýndaer says in response, and it takes effort for him to find the courage to speak in such a manner. "Neither my mind nor my heart is ready for such a commitment."

"And yet you came. The leaving itself is everything, and it allows no looking back. To firm and strengthen this commitment, and to bring you to understand the nature of your devotion, you shall undergo the trial which all new members of our order must undergo. This shall be your introduction into our way, and we are confident with utmost surety that when you come out of it you will never wish to depart from this way again. For it is the only true way of life and of power."

"What is the nature of this trial of which you speak?"

"Worry not, it is something quite simple," the man remarks. "But I leave that, and the explanation of the tenets of our belief, to another. I have many affairs to which I must attend, and, having greeted you, I must now return to them. Please, Vildrin shall take care of the rest," he concludes with a wave of his hand.

Having said these words, the man turns away and disappears again into the darkness as if swallowed up by it and by it hidden from this world entirely. The man standing near Albrýndaer, who had first spoken with him in his own encampment and invited him to join them, turns to face him directly and says, "You have heard our leader. It is up to me now, according to his word, to introduce you to all else you need to know, though your true initiation alone shall reveal the greatest mysteries."

"To speak truly," begins Albrýndaer hesitantly, "I am somewhat unsettled."

"Only somewhat?" Vildrin asks with a raised brow, though Albrýndaer cannot tell with what intent he asks this, whether it is sarcasm or some other thing. But before the latter can say anything more, Vildrin speaks again, "Come, let us find a place nearby to sit, and we shall speak together."

This they do, finding shelter in a narrow structure not ten paces from the base of the rise of land on which the shrine is built, and together they sit facing one another. "I must inaugurate you," Vildrin begins, his eyes bright with a mysterious excitement even in the midst of the heavy shadow that hangs upon the rest of his features in the

dimly lit space. "I must inaugurate you, I repeat, into our way. It is my greatest privilege to do this."

"What, then, is this way?" asks Albrýndaer, his stomach hard with anxiety. The weight of the unknown presses heavily upon him, and even as he tries to silence his own fears, he has seen little yet to console him and give him confidence. Even so, he sets his sights and his desires upon the power that is promised to him, and he tries to stir up in his heart the willingness to do whatever is necessary to attain it.

"You need not even ask," replies Vildrin. "Your questions, be they petty or great, matter little now, though you are free to ask them. What matters is what we deign to bestow upon you—for you are but an ignorant little child before the dispensation of the great mystery. Each one of us is such when we first arrive, preoccupied with our questions without realizing that they matter not. Only gradually do we come to grasp the truth that we must forego understanding so that we might gain knowledge, must forego our curiosity that we might gain penetration of the mystery, must forego ourselves that we might gain power beyond ourselves. This is what lies before you, provided that you prove worthy. So open your heart to what I have to say to you." With this he pauses for a moment, as if collecting himself to say fittingly what he has to say. "What is most important for you to know is also the source of the power that you seek. In other words, the great mystery we revere and the source of our strength are one and the same, identical in our eyes and in truth; what you worship is also that which bestows the power to possess more than any man could ever hope to possess, to be more than he might hope to be: to become an *akafûnd*, a great-man, a man who has truly reached another level of humanity beyond the weakness and pettiness inherent in our kind. For surely that is why you came, is it not?"

Albrýndaer nods mutely.

"Of course it is," continues Vildrin. "And so I introduce to you the great secret, which we call according to a tongue no longer in use the *anári.* It is a plural name, yet only one mystery, for in it lies the multiplicity of all forms of power and knowledge. These deities, these powers—multiplicity and singularity, one—are what we worship, and it is they, or it, who bestow upon us that which is greater than ourselves and yet which becomes so truly our own that with it we may smite our enemies. They give this power in an agreement or pact in which something of ours is offered that we might receive something of theirs, taking possession of their power. How this commerce functions and its

true nature I do not understand, nor do I think it much matters. For in this bond we are the beneficiaries. They, on the other hand, have little need of receiving benefits of any kind. They must either be well-disposed to us or natively generous for granting us such great boons. Or perhaps they care so little about us, and yet have such immense power, that they hardly give a thought to sharing with us what we ask in response for the little we give them—as one would give a candy in order to quiet a child.

"Nonetheless, it is my opinion that they are the ground of every benefit in this world, the true power that moves all things—all real things, mind you. For the things of the flesh, the things seen with the eyes and touched with this frail and faltering skin, these things are mere appearance and shadow. Mere darkness before the coming of the light. They are naught in comparison with what is. They deceive and they lie. They flicker before our very gaze and they fade away before our very touch. But the *ossa ria* endures unbroken even when all else turns to dust; and it is our task precisely to reduce it to dust, at least in our own heart and affection. We turn from the visible to the invisible, from the tangible to the intangible, until we cease to love anything that is known to the fleshly man that we once were. We enter into a great unknowing, into the annihilation of all that we once esteemed, so that we might find true enlightenment on the path to seeing, a seeing that is the fountainhead of true power. But this seeing is non-seeing; it is the realization that there is nothing either to see or to know, and that all is vanity and appearance, and that the only reality that endures when everything has faded is the power of the anári and its inflow into the purified human spirit devoid of all else but this."

"You speak of these anári," says Albrýndaer, "but I have never heard of them. Who are they, and from whence does our knowledge of them arise?"

"It is not surprising that you are not acquainted with them. Or perhaps you fear that they are some new discovery or incipient belief? But I tell you that they are the most ancient of all the gods, and indeed beyond the gods, revealing these latter to be nothing but lies, faces that fearful men and women have painted upon the blank canvas of the universe to give them solace in their weakness. But such 'gods' have no strength, nor do they give strength to those who worship them; rather, this false worship only confirms such people in their own paltry inability, giving them permission to remain too weak even to strive for a life greater than their own. But these anári, no, the worship of them is

both deeper and wider, and more ancient. People, and by this I mean the truly enlightened, have recognized the anári from before our ancestors even came to this land. Their cult was brought across the ocean from the land that was our origin, and their worship has been preserved over the millennium and more that has passed since that time. We seek only to revive this tradition and to allow it to live again, to come to the insight that was granted to our forefathers of old, and which, we believe, is the true foundation stone of our society."

"Who, or what, are these anári of which you speak?" Albrýndaer inquires.

"Such questions are unfitting for them, though your asking is entirely understandable, considering the ignorance from which you come. You see, they are not bound by our logic, by our indefatigable impulse to put names and titles to things, and thus to control them. No, the anári are approached not through knowledge, but through the forfeit of knowledge. This I have already said, though I recognize it shall take you time to adjust yourself to this realization, to approach things in a manner far different than you did before. And if you persevere in this way, a great realization awaits you. For the anári are known not through the feverish grasping of the mind, but through the direct experience of their power. And they *are* power. If anything can be said of them at all, it is this. They are power. Where all other forces fail, they deliver, fulfilling the requests of those who call upon them and granting them abilities far beyond human imagination."

"But I wonder: how do we know of them? From whence does this knowledge, and its trustworthiness, arise?"

"Did you not just ask that question a moment ago?" asks Vildrin, his eyes flaming either with anger or with passion, it is impossible to tell.

"I-I suppose I did."

"But no matter. All of this takes time. Even so, you must be generous on your part. We cannot do all of the work for you. So let me repeat. It is as I said: we know them through the experience of their power. Only in this experience can you know their truth and cease to look for proofs on the level of reason and history, understanding and flesh."

"You speak of the power to defeat that which threatens our people, which threatens my family?"

"The very same."

"This power can defeat the beasts of darkness which come from the depths and which bring death to our people?"

"The very same. You have seen it already."

"How shall I experience and receive this power?"

"Oh, you shall experience it, though the manner of its reception only you can say, when your heart is made pure," Vildrin says. "But perhaps you have tasted it already, in rare moments of your life, when you were restless for a life more than the one you have always known."

Thinking for a moment, Albrýndaer takes the risk to say, "There is something—someone—whom I have known since I was a child. However, I do not think I would explain it as 'power.'"

"From childhood, you say?" Vildrin asks. "In what manner did you know this reality?"

"I sensed, in a way I cannot quite explain, that it was all around me, indeed, within me, and that it upheld all things even while being always beyond them. It was not until recently, of course, that I explicitly thought of this awareness, or even became fully conscious of it. But it was always there, as the horizon of all my feeling, thought, and act. In truth," and at this he pauses and lowers his eyes, "it was not until I lost its consolation and light that I fully realized how deeply I had experienced it before. Not until it was too late did I recognize this presence, for then it had already departed from me."

"If you experienced anything at all, it was the anári. Of that I can assure you. But what in your prior experience was a true glimpse of their power, I cannot say. Only a new experience of them, one according to their measure and not according yours, in a break from all your prior knowledge, can reveal this. And the anári are a mysterious energy that permeates the cosmos. You can never be without their presence. You need only learn to tap into it once again. It is they who are the source of all power—that is, all true power. There are many forms of false power, as we see, for example, in the gods who are but facades of human imagining or in the creatures that now beset us from their abode deep within the earth. They would rule us, subject us, and even destroy us through fear, and not liberate us through strength. The only way to combat this falsity is to tap into the true power, to harness it and make use of it."

"And how do you gain access to such power?"

"Through sacrifice. No power is gained without sacrifice," explains Vildrin. "We give to the anári something, and they in return bestow upon us a portion of their power, the greater in proportion as what we

sacrifice is greater. Do you not feel powerless when left to your own devices? Do you not wish to be able to prevent more death and destruction? The anári can give you such power."

Both confusion and longing grip Albrýndaer's heart as he tries to mentally and emotionally sift through the words that he hears. Among the more opaque things he has been told, much also seems to him to have a foundation in truth; and yet it also feels a hair's-breadth off from truth's center, a perversion that he fears conceals a far greater divergence underneath than he can yet see. Also, something about power being given in exchange for sacrifice stirs a deep unease within him; and yet at the same moment he cannot deny that he does desire greater power, the power to protect and to fight, even to make those who harm the weak and the innocent pay, be they beasts or men. This thought that stirs within him frightens him, as until this moment he did not know that it lay hidden within him. But there it is, as if looking back at him from the darkness. Suddenly, raising his head and looking deeply at his interlocutor, he asks, "What if these powers are given to you by the very same energies that give life to our enemies, to the ötûnr?"

"What a foolish question," Vildrin replies almost without thought. "If an army is arrayed against itself, how could it possibly be victorious? Why would the anári fight against themselves? That is like a man slaying his own kin or for no reason plunging his knife into his own vital essence. No, the ötûnr are creatures of the dark, creatures born of the false powers of the universe, the ones that for many centuries have been called 'gods' by men. They demand worship and obeisance for which they give in return nothing but heavy burdens, shackles, and suffering. That is what those who parade as 'gods of light' offer. No, it is the anári who are the true heart and soul of this world, and its true vigor."

"Did you not say that these gods were but imaginings from the heart of fearful men?" asks Albrýndaer. "Yet now you speak of them as demanding worship and obeisance. Which is the truth?"

"Perhaps both are the truth," Vildrin remarks with a careless shrug of his shoulders. "Such contradictions can be taken lightly. There can be yet other forces in the universe arrayed against the power of the anári, and yet in truth they are nothing but shadows and imaginings, for it is the latter who alone *are.* All else is but dust and ashes." Pausing, Vildrin looks over him for a moment, and then continues, "I see it in your eyes. You still ask: 'How can I know this?' How can you know? You can know only through the direct experience of their power. When you have felt this in your own bones, when you have experienced their

energy surging within you, then you shall doubt no longer. But first you must offer sacrifice, for unless the deal is sealed, unless the bond is forged, no power shall be granted. And if you refuse such sacrifice and fail to receive such bond, it would have been better for you to have stayed with the doomed people of your encampment, eking out a pitiful existence until the last flickering light of your life is extinguished."

"You really think they are doomed?"

"We are all doomed unless something is done," says Vildrin with emphasis. "You know this as well as I. And that is precisely our aim: to do something to stop this spiral into death. Shall you not join us?"

"I...I shall join you, though I have been given little choice. But I want to know more of what you speak, to understand more of this mystery. For at present my mind stands as before a wall of blackness that I cannot penetrate, and I feel only confusion."

"That is a good sign," affirms Vildrin. "Passing that wall of blackness is your only way forward. But you must leave the stubborn efforts of the frail mind on the outside, and let only the naked spirit pass beyond. Let your confusion be a sign for you of your own fear, of your own stubbornness, and learn to renounce yourself for the sake of the greater knowledge and power that lie beyond."

† † †

Albrýndaer is led now to what can only be termed a cave-within-the-cave, carved by nature into the wall of the great cavern. For tunnel it is not, nor is it a structure fashioned by the artifice of man, though it is recessed a good twenty feet into the wall, narrower at the opening than it is at the back, where it spreads from the breadth of extended arms to two or three times that size. Inside this alcove there is neither furnishing nor lamp, nor in fact anything at all but rough and naked stone, and both darkness and silence complete and undiluted.

"Total deprivation shall teach you to be strong," Vildrin remarks at Albrýndaer's side, his voice seeming surprisingly near and loud in the enclosed space. "Take this," his voice continues, and at first Albrýndaer is confused as something is pushed into his hands. He realizes that it is a flask of water. "Drink this now—all of it. For you are not allowed to keep it with you, to keep anything with you at all."

"What do you mean? Am I..." but his voice trails off, for somehow he knows what is expected of him. And the thought scares him. And yet even as he fills his stomach with the contents of the flask, the fear recedes a bit to leave in its wake a profound unease and, buried deep under this unease and almost entirely inaccessible to Albrýndaer's

consciousness, the resolve of a will ready to undergo whatever is expected of him.

"Now strip off all of your clothes," says Vildrin, turning away. "When I said nothing, I meant it. Cast them out of the cavern, and then we shall seal you in."

"I..." Albrýndaer begins to speak, but his voice again dies in his throat. He does as he is asked. And then, without another moment's time to speak or to think, he is left alone in the darkness and the entrance to the alcove of stone is sealed with a thick wooden frame to forbid escape. All that he is told is, "Many days you shall remain here, and you shall be provided, at our discretion, with enough to stay alive. You must know not how long or short it shall be. Indeed, only the gôdi himself shall decide when your trial is complete. Without food your body shall hunger and shall cry out; but it is water above all that you shall need, and which shall drive you nearly mad with the desperate clamors of the flesh. Overcome them and you may truly be a man worthy of the name, and one of us."

That is all. The only thing that crosses Albrýndaer's mind as the entrance to his new home—his prison—is sealed is that not knowing the length of his trial is more maddening to him, and scarier, than is the certainty of going without food and water for the same span of time. Not knowing the length of one's trial increases its burden profoundly. But surely they would not leave him to fade away in the darkness until hunger and thirst weaken him beyond repair? Certainly, therefore, his confinement cannot be too long? With this frail and self-made hope, Albrýndaer paces the alcove, trying to still the restlessness and agitation of his heart, trying also to make some sense of the events that have led him to this place, grasping to find some clarity through the heavy fog of confusion that fills his mind and his heart.

But now is not a time for fruitful thought, as the terror that only minutes before Albrýndaer had buried with all the energy within him (even beyond his own awareness that he was doing so) surges again to the surface. And when he has exhausted himself in his frantic pacing, added to the stress and fatigue and fear of the previous weeks, he collapses to the hard ground, breathing heavily, his heart sick within him. Curled up with his knees to his chest and rocking back and forth, he lets the tears flow freely from his eyes—tears of grief and frustration, of fear and anxiety, of the utter feeling of hopelessness and, already, if he were honest with himself, of regret. And after these bitter tears have drained the last of his stamina, he slips at last into sleep.

When he wakes, his mind is flooded with the thoughts and fears that tormented him in his restless dreams. But now his fear is awakened not so much by the time that he knows he must spend in solitude and need, as rather by the wider plight of his people. In comparison with the situation in which the entire community in the underground prison finds itself, a handful of days, weeks, or even months confined in solitude seems to be nothing. But this does not make it any easier to bear. For he cannot help but torture himself grasping for answers and seeking to regain some semblance of control in a situation which utterly surpasses his capacity for control or comprehension, which tears him utterly out of his depth.

Pacing back and forth in the narrow space between the rock walls of his cell, or sitting in the corner with his knees drawn close to his chest to hold in warmth, or lying down and trying to sleep but unable to truly rest, he is unaware of how much or how little time passes. Soon indeed he has hardly any concept of time at all, and is unsure whether it is still the first day of his enclosure or the third or the tenth. The only sense of connection to the world or to time that he is granted is an occasional tiny sliver of light and the soft thud of a wooden plate being set on the hard stone by the entrance to the cavern. Crawling to it in the refreshed darkness after that moment of light, he feels a bit of hard bread and a small cup of water—just enough to sustain life, and no more. Other than this, he has nothing, no nourishment, no occupation, and no sense of either space or time, be they anything but the cramped and fearful spaces of his own heart and mind. And even as he suffocates in the narrowness of his own interior world, lost to time and lost to connection, this very loss opens up within Albrýndaer an ever more profound sense of vulnerability and exposure, as if the foundations of his life and his understanding are pulled out from underneath him. What he finds instead is a gaping abyss of unknowing. Never before in his life has he known such uncertainty and such fear, like slipping down into nothingness without even the hope of a handhold to halt his descent. He feels the utter fragility of life, his own life as well as of everything that lives. It all appears to him as a profound question, a question uncertain of ever finding an answer. Indeed, even the voice of the question seems to fall mute, unintelligible, before the profound uncertainty and fear which preclude not only an answer but even the possibility of an answer. And in this state he remains for a long time beyond measure and thought.

Little by little, and imperceptible to himself, as the timelessness car-

ries him onward and his mind passes in and out of thought and of silence-beyond-thought, something begins to change at the heart of the abyss. He realizes, almost in passing—almost apathetically, as if noticing it from a distance—that this "unknowing" is the place to which the members of the cult desired to lead him. And yet it seems so small and narrow now, so cramped. It is not a liberation or a dilation from the prison of his narrow self, but at most a sinking into resignation or acceptance. And in this very recognition, this recognition that in his own heart alone he can find neither rest nor freedom, neither wideness nor depth, Albrýndaer tastes the first breath of freedom, the first drop of living water upon his tongue, not of flesh but of spirit. For he is carried further, beyond the unknowing, beyond the letting go of all things and the utter nudity of thought and affection that it brings, to a place where both thought and affection are born again within him, all the deeper and wider for having been pruned in the darkness and awakened at the heart of loss. In this thought and affection, he remembers first his earliest memories: those of love and warmth, of tenderness and kindness, of kisses and caresses and words softly spoken. And he remembers the blossoming of his friendship with his beloved Ílya. He recalls her beauty both of spirit and of body, the radiance of her person so unique and so special, her laughter and her tears, her playfulness and her sobriety, the lightness of her heart and the heaviness of her pain. He sees in his mind's eye all those whom he has known throughout his life, those who have been kind to him and those who have not, and those who have hurt him profoundly. And he sees himself, too, in this current of thought, woven into the fabric of the world even if buried under its surface in a prison made of stone. And in all of these things, all of these persons and experiences, he sees with a vision beyond sight and a knowledge beyond uncertainty, the presence of the One whom he has known from his earliest days to be infinite and eternal Love.

In this remembrance something is unsealed deep within him, and the solitude which before was torturous and anguished, filled with fear and desperation, is now bathed in peace and security, joy and gratitude. For a light dawns upon his interior vision, and he sees. He sees a figure approaching him as it were clothed in light, wedded to light, indeed a figure composed entirely of light itself. And yet the figure is also unmistakably human, emerging before his vision in the flesh and the form of a man. As the figure draws nearer Albrýndaer beholds his countenance, his face, which is directed upon him with a gaze of unutterable tenderness and breathtaking delight, with a kindness before which all

human kindness pales, with a love before which all earthly love is but a tiny spark before a blazing furnace. This figure stands before him in all of his spiritual nudity and yet is not exposed, for the light enshrouds him in a manner that is both revelation and veiling, both vulnerability and security. And Albrýndaer, attracted by this gaze and by this nudity, steps forth into the light himself, reciprocating gaze for gaze, heart for heart, gift for gift. And even as he does so he feels himself lifted up and mingled together in the light with the figure of light, joined to him in a way that reveals both his own most singular truth as beloved of the light and also the truth of the Other, this Ineffable One who is so transcendent and yet so near.

And in the blaze of this radiant glory, the vision shifts. In a sight that is both of the eyes and beyond the eyes, Albrýndaer finds himself joined to the gaze of the One who first looked upon him, coming to see with his own vision. And he gazes thereby, with the One who has first looked upon him, upon the Origin of all things as this Origin pours himself forth in unbounded love and tenderness, delight and predilection. And this gift from the Origin of all, to his surprise and wonder, pours forth neither into nothingness nor merely into finite creation, into the bounds of the cosmos, but rather into the very One whom he first encountered, the figure of light, who can only be described as the perfect reflection of the splendor of his Origin, who is boundless infinity even as he is a delineated figure of radiant and glorified flesh. Albrýndaer beholds the gift given from the Giver, the One from whom all giving springs, indeed who is the very foundation of Being itself, the very definition of what it means to *be*; and he beholds and experiences in himself this gift eternally realized and received by the Other who is as a mirror-image of the First, and yet is distinct and unique as Beloved is distinct from Lover or Child from Parent. And in receiving the love and gift of his Origin, this Beloved exists forever as reciprocal gift back to the Giver; the One Given is also Gift to the Giver. And in this reciprocal gift a Third exists, the very union that they share and the abundance of their mutual life. And Albrýndaer also experiences the mystery of this Third, the union of the Two, of the Lover and the Beloved. He feels in himself that this Third is the flow of gift between Lover and Beloved, the circuit of exchange that has always been and shall always be, before all the ages of the world ever came to be, and in which these ages are encompassed as a drop of water in a boundless Ocean—and this flow of gift and this bond of union between Lover and Beloved is so radiant, so true, so beloved too, that he reflects the

Two who are his origin and exists, also, as a Third, as One in relation, as One who receives and gives love, who is everlasting communication, dialogue, gift, and belonging, and who is thus unending and uncontainable joy and gladness.

For as the Beloved is eternally born of the gift of the Lover, from the womb of his everlasting delight and predilection, his tenderness, his loving outpouring, finding in this love his own identity, so too the Beloved becomes for the Lover all that the Lover is for the Beloved. And yet he is so in the unique contours of belovedness: he is reciprocal delight, predilection, tenderness, reception of the gift and its giving-back, with all that he is, to the One who has first loved him. Albrýndaer witnesses this reciprocal giving as an abyss of infinite Love pouring into an abyss of infinite receptivity to be loved, and the reciprocal gift of Love back to its Source. The Lover is as an infinite waterfall of boundless fullness and intensity forever pouring out in love to the Beloved, and the Beloved is infinite and boundless receptivity and responsive gift, being in himself equally infinite: the Abyss to the Abyss calls and the Abyss responds in love, and all is love and the unity of love. For the Third is this shared Love of the Lover and the Beloved, the current of their mutual gift and delight and seeing and predilection: the mutual communication shared by the abyss of Lover and the abyss of the Beloved. This Third is the vibrant atmosphere and the sweet fruit of the shared love of the Lover and the Beloved, the silence in which the everlasting word of truth, goodness, and beauty echoes, the music of eternal harmony, the breath of shared life and indwelling, the kiss of complete mutual surrender. And he is loved in his own right by the Lover and the Beloved with the same love with which the Lover loves the Beloved and the Beloved loves the Lover, and he is toward both Lover and Beloved what they are toward him. And this total mutual possession of love—or rather this total mutual belonging of love—allows the Three to reciprocally inhere in one another completely, to live each in the other, forever without end.

And Albrýndaer finds himself held direct in the center of this everlasting embrace, utterly permeated with the surging currents of this life which vibrate through him and cause him to tremble as strings of a harp under the master player's fingers. And indeed, in beholding and experiencing this Three-in-One unity of everlasting and consummate Love, a Love that is permeated by wonder-filled delight and lighthearted play, Albrýndaer knows that he beholds also the origin and consummation of the whole creation. For as the Second pours forth in

love from the First, and receives and reciprocates in this love both his very own existence and also the love of his Origin, so too is the whole cosmic order both born and carried to its fulfillment. Conceived as it were in the womb of the shared play and intimacy of the Three, the cosmos is brought forth as an expression of such love and such activity, such gratuity and such delight, meant to be as it were a "playmate" of the Three, sharing in the belovedness of the Beloved and in the fullness of his life. And as this reciprocal love is consummated in a Third at the heart of the Threefold life, so too is creation brought to its highest and fullest realization in the reception and reciprocation of love, in the sweet kiss, embrace, and breath of unity that is the fulfillment of all being by drawing distinction into unity without dissolving distinctness, but rather affirming and fulfilling it. For the cosmos exists, from beginning to end, cradled in the intimate space of the shared love of the Three, in the outpouring of One into the Other and in the Unity that they share. And the world, thus, abides according to its purpose and intention insofar as it remains in the stance by which the Three always live in relation to one another, allowing itself, thus, to be integrated into their own life and to become thereby a sharer in their endless bliss, abundant play, and everlasting happiness, the happiness of perfect Love.

Three-in-One and One-in-Three: this is what Albrýndaer beholds —*whom* Albrýndaer beholds. And though his limited earthly mind cannot grasp it and contain it, he beholds its splendor and its beauty, the splendor and beauty of Being who can only be called God. Bathed in the light of this vision, Albrýndaer knows now with a certainty whom it is he has encountered. This is a certainty born from the crucible of his experience of the abyss of loss and yet it builds a bridge over it, a bridge so firm that in the moment of its realization in him, he almost laughs out loud with delight. For he has encountered, he has found—or rather he has been found by—the God who is himself an eternal Abyss of Love and everlasting Communion.

Chapter 11. Îsáric

Hældáris.

The man who stands before them appears hearty and hale, whether through manual labor or some other exercise they do not know, about late middle-age, his light brown hair flecked with gray tied back in a long braid and with a tidy beard ornamenting his jawline and chin. His sea-colored eyes sparkle as he takes them in with his gaze, the curiosity behind it almost unnerving in its unabashed intensity. Even with over a thousand years separating their peoples from one another, they can see in the contours of his face his ancient Telméric ancestry, though it is different too, changed after a millennium of developing apart, more narrow, with higher and more prominent cheekbones. If, for lack of a better analogy, the Telmérins tend to look akin to bears, the Vælírians tend to compare more easily to wolves, though each is both more fierce and more gentle than their animal images, and far more subtle and true than any animals is the difference between man and man, woman and woman, for a living human being is immeasurably more than any beast can ever be.

"Greetings," says Hældáris, seeking to break the awkwardness of the silence.

"Hail, and well met," the man says in response, with a wave of his hand. "I heard of your 'plight,' and my interest was aroused."

"It seems that everyone heard of our plight," sighs Aeyósha, remembering the commotion caused by the innkeeper. "But what interest do you have in us?"

"I assume that you are seeking lodging for the night, and would appreciate a meal on top of it?"

"That is correct," Hældáris admits, warmed to the man's demeanor and his apparent care, though still cautious.

"Then allow me to treat you in my own home," the man offers. "It is not far from here, only on the edge of town."

"What do you gain from such an arrangement?" Aeyósha inquires, more suspicious than his friend.

"I offer it primarily for your benefit. Rarely do we have travelers arrive in such dire straits, and from so far away. However, if anything for myself, I hope to gain some information, and perhaps to impart some."

From the tone of his voice and his bearing, the man seems to all appearances to be telling nothing but the truth, and with good intent as well. "You are welcome to refuse my offer. It is given freely. But it may be a boon for you if you were to accept," and, pausing to look around as if to insure that no one is eavesdropping on their conversation, he concludes, "I hail from Vælaróma and I might know something that could be of assistance to you in your quest."

"Did you know anything of our coming?" asks Hældáris.

"Nothing whatsoever," replies the man, "for it has been long since I was occupied with matters of state. Please, I would say no more here."

"May we at least have the name of the man who offers us shelter in his home?" Aeyósha asks.

"I could ask a similar question," replies the man, "though I can guess at least one name. As for me, you shall have my name, I assure you, once we are indoors."

After sharing a glance, Aeyósha and Hældáris both nod and allow the stranger to lead them through the town to his home. It does indeed sit at the edge of Ûlfaeng, one of the last houses along the northwestern border before the slope of the hill rises again to the surrounding farmsteads, forest, and pastureland. There are a few outlying houses built even into the slope of the hill, yet these tend to be abodes—if appearances are any indication—of the wealthier and more well-to-do citizens. The house of the man who leads them, on the other hand, is surprisingly small, hardly more than a thatch-roofed and waddle-daubed workshop or barn for animals which has been repurposed, though as they step through the door they realize that its interior is homely nonetheless, furnished and decorated with nobility of spirit if not with nobility of class. The stranger places two woven chairs before a clay hearth and gestures for his guests to sit while he himself kindles a flame in the hearth and tends it until it grows to a blazing fire. Then he situates himself facing his guests, sitting not on a chair but on a bundle of firewood, for there are no other chairs in the small dwelling.

"My name," he says at last, "is Îsáric Stendä, first son of Leif, though my father has since passed, as well as my younger brother, and I alone carry on the Stendä family name. I was at one time a soldier in the army of the Vælírian Empire, though that was long ago, when I was young. When the uprising swelled to a boil in our land I sided with the rebels and broke my oath, and then pledged myself to the new government that established itself in the wake of the Emperor's death. But eventually I learned, as many in our land are now doing, that new is not always

better. For while what has replaced the tyranny of the Empire is different than its forbear, and in many respects more just, it carries great evils of its own, and an injustice of a more insidious kind for its being more subtle. Hence I am as you see me now, a man of no station, and indeed a man of no identity. For here in Ûlfaeng I am called Bairn, son of Ólfa, though never have I met a man who has gone by either name."

"Greetings, Îsáric son of Leif," replies Hældáris. "My name, as you seem to have guessed, is Hældáris Illómiel, and this is my companion and friend Aeyósha Hasilómë."

"So you are Telméric indeed," Îsáric says with a gentle smile. "Of this I have no doubt. If anything, your accent gives you away more clearly than a bird's call gives away its kind. Nor do I have much doubt that you are who you say you are. Too many times have I trusted duplicitous men, and too many times suffered the consequences. I have gained a 'nose' for it, you might say. And I smell nothing of the sort in either of you."

"With that we are pleased," says Aeyósha, with a surprisingly nuanced and fluent use of the Vælírian language considering his earlier comments regarding the paucity of his practice, "for we have weathered much in coming to this place, and, did you doubt us, we would feel little inclination to try and convince you otherwise. But if you are a man of no loyalties, how in turn do you expect to gain our trust?"

Îsáric nods to this question knowingly, as if he has both expected it and understands it. "You are right to ask. For I have betrayed professed loyalty a number of times, and this is something that should never be done unless the one who receives one's fealty has himself first fallen from the rightness of his state. Then one must at times betray the trust of a man to remain faithful to the cause for which he once stood. Indeed, one must stand against this very man in order to remain faithful to his trust, even when he has broken it. For then it is not the betrayal of an oath but standing for its truth in the face of one who has already betrayed it. So it is that in times of conflict and darkness it is often the little people, the humble and hidden, who remain faithful to the truth when the mighty themselves scorn and reject it. But I regret that I too have been one of the great and the blind, and only now, far too late in my life, have I begun to see and to act differently."

"In what way do you serve the truth and the good of your people now, Îsáric?" Hældáris asks, and there is no accusation in the question, but only empathy and curiosity.

"The story of what has led me to take up abode at the very fringes of

Vælíria, in the town of Ûlfaeng, shall have to wait for another time, but suffice it to say that I had no choice but either to seek refuge or to lose my life. And so here I came, and here I have sought—under a different name—to rekindle the true spirit and ideals of our people. I have also simply sought to be of benefit to the citizens of this place, whether that be distributing my wealth to those who need it more than I or serving upon the council of elders or simply in my words and relations with the people of this town." In saying these last words Îsáric unintentionally lowers his gaze, as if abashed to speak openly of such things. He seems too aware of his own frailty and his countless infidelities to give even the slightest hint of casting himself in a positive light. This becomes even more apparent when, looking up again, he concludes, "I regret that it is little in comparison with the evil which I have myself either accomplished or allowed during my lifetime."

Glancing again at the austerity of the one-room dwelling, Aeyósha asks, "What were you doing in the inn of The White Rider? Usually such establishments are only for travelers and wayfarers, and not for citizens of the town."

"Aye, that too is a good question, but one with a simple answer. The proprietor, a man by the name of Hédrin, whom you have met, is a friend of mine. Though, as you know, he has a prickly side, he can also be generous with those to whom he takes a liking. And so the simplest answer to your question is that he allows me a free meal every evening in exchange for 'keeping the peace' in the inn during the twilight hours. Though I suspect this last is but a pretense; it is his way of avoiding shaming me or making me feel indebted to him for his gift."

"So should you not be 'keeping the peace' now?" Aeyósha asks.

"As soon as I saw the two of you depart from the inn," replies Îsáric, "I spoke with Hédrin and requested leave to follow you. He gave it willingly."

"You acted quite promptly," remarks Hældáris. "What moved you so strongly to speak to us?"

"You must understand how significant it is to hear word that the son of the king-father of Telmérion is present in our own lands? Indeed, to see the selfsame man standing before you. And it is particularly significant for myself, being one who has long awaited and hoped for a renewal in our own lands, and among our own people, as has happened in these last thirty-five years among you, our ancestral people."

"Do you truly think of us, the Telmérins, as your ancestral people?" asks Aeyósha incredulously.

"Aye, that we do," says Îsáric. "Or some of us do, at least. Perhaps indeed even more than we should, though I would say the point is debatable. In my estimation, nearly everything we have of value as a culture and a nation comes from our heritage in the land of Telmérion. And most of these very things we have willingly and thoroughly betrayed, and even desecrated. Perhaps only from an outside intervention can healing come for us. That is my thought and the judgment of my heart, the fruit of long and painful experience."

"Be that as it may," replies Hældáris, "while I do not deny that much of what you say may be true, I cannot believe that nothing good or of value has developed and grown over the many centuries of your people's existence. Nor do I believe that your culture does not bear within itself a capacity for self-reform, for inner renewal."

"I do not deny that either," agrees Îsáric. "Perhaps I spoke too strongly or with too little nuance. All true transformation and rebirth comes from within, after all. Or rather it is the growth within of a gift that is received from without. Thus it comes about not merely by improving upon what is one's own—not in the narrow and deadly sense of the word 'mine'— but rather through fidelity to the truth, which is just as equally one's own as well as the truth of everyone. It is what is done within us, interiorly, by what is nonetheless greater than us. And my point is that we Vælírians, as a people, have largely severed ourselves from the wellsprings of this truth, from the heritage of beauty that was once rightly ours. And just as the soil of the earth or the womb of a woman cannot bring forth new life except through the gift of seed from the outside, so it is now for our culture. Only an unexpected gift from without, an act of grace, can save us."

"How mysterious a circumstance," Aeyósha says, obviously surprised and touched by the words that Îsáric speaks, "that we encountered you of all people, and so soon after coming to Ûlfaeng. I did not expect to find a man like you, and even less upon our first encounter."

"I could say the same," Îsáric affirms. "Indeed, I could have waited ages for the fulfillment of my hope and never found its answer. But here it was practically poured into my lap."

"I would not say that we are your hope," Hældáris corrects, "and I am even more uncomfortable with being thought of as an 'answer.' Nonetheless, I can wholeheartedly affirm that we are driven by the same purpose that is dear to your own heart. We wish for the healing and renewal of your people, and that is why we have come."

"I sensed as much," says Îsáric. "Why else would the king send his

own son to a land that only a generation before had waged war against his people?"

"We come in response to a plea for aid," Aeyósha explains, "though this does not mean that our desire is not true, nor our intentions toward your people abiding and complete. They are; but we would not have known enough about the need had we not first heard of it in the manner that we did."

"And even now," Hældáris continues, picking up his friend's train of thought, "we know very little. We will gladly tell you more about ourselves and the purpose of our journey, but we are also deeply desirous of hearing all that you could tell us of your people and your land."

"Then let us do that," Îsáric concludes. "However, first let us begin the preparations for supper, for I imagine you are quite famished." Upon receiving their confirmation of this fact, he rises to his feet and, with their assistance, prepares a large pot of stew, filled with potatoes, vegetables, and barley grain, which he hangs on a wrought iron hook over the fire. And so Hældáris and Aeyósha relate their tale to the pleasing smell of cooking food, though at the most grievous moments that they have to relate, all senses are forgotten in the vivid memory of pain and bereavement. When they have finished, Îsáric says, "I am sorry for the loss that you have suffered. Indeed I could not have imagined a worse fate for you than the one that you have endured." He sighs after saying this, and it is evident by the look upon his face that his sorrow and compassion are genuine. Then he continues, "And yet it seems almost a miracle to me that the two of you have survived. Your words about this great sea serpent are terrifying, and I can hardly imagine the horror of the beast itself. An entire ship splintered to fragments and a whole host of men and sailors cast into the sea... Forgive me, I do not mean to linger more on what you have already had to revisit for my sake. I must say, though, that my hope is that your survival, as unlikely as it was, may indeed prove a harbinger of hope and light for our people."

"To be honest," retorts Hældáris, "I do not see how my presence, even as the king's son, could be of any more significance for your people than that of any other man."

"Neither do I," says Îsáric, "though there may perhaps be something you can do that no other can. Regardless, I take it as a sign for myself, at least, a sign that the time of hiding has ended and the time of action has come. For hearing word from you about the message sent to Telmérion is enough to direct my course and to show me a path for-

ward, even if only the very first step."

"What do you mean?"

"In order to answer that question, it shall be necessary for me to tell you more about my story. That is what was expected, though, was it not? After your account I was to give my own." Îsáric then pauses and leans forward to stir the stew. "Yet it appears," he says, "that our meal is prepared. Let me grab some dishes and serve you. You shall eat while I relate to you what I have to say." And so he does. "First you must understand that I grew up in close contact with the forces of the old Empire, for my father was one of the legal deputies of Emperor Maríndas. He did not have counselors, you see, or if they were called by that name they little functioned as such, for he listened to the counsel of no man. My father was rather an executor of his will; I experienced firsthand, therefore, the corruption that stood at the fountainhead of our society and that led it on a path of destruction. For if we flourished and spread as an empire, even traveling to other lands to take them under the sway of our ever-growing power, internally we rotted and decayed even as we drew breath. I therefore knew a great deal that led me to join the rebellion when it burst into flame, though at this point my father had died and I was a grown man."

"But did you not say," interjects Aeyósha, "that you were once a soldier of the Empire? Why did you choose this station if you saw the evil firsthand?"

"That is a good and just question. First of all I chose it, in the folly of my youth, because it was expected of me," replies Îsáric. "It is also often a long road from the recognition of an evil with one's mind to the true rejection of it in one's heart and life. So it was for me. Perhaps we shall speak more of such a time later, but what is important now, I think, is to explain to you the sickness of our Empire before the rebellion, for the sickness that spreads among us now is surprisingly similar, even if on the surface it appears far different. Rare is the man who finds in his hands absolute power who is not corrupted by it—or rather, any man who believes he has absolute power to fashion either his own fate or that of others is embracing a lie, and this lie shall corrupt him. So believed the Emperor and his ancestors all the way back to the Empire's founding; and so, sadly, believed the 'reformers' and 'architects' of our culture after the destruction of the Empire. So in a sense it was inevitable that we would come to this point, facing the same evil under a different guise."

"What is this evil of which you speak? What are its contours?" asks

Hældáris. "Do you speak only of the false use of authority, of a government that becomes the use of power rather than the custodianship of love?"

"The way that you ask your question already illustrates the depth of your understanding," Îsáric says. "But to answer your question: that is certainly a trait of this sickness and of the pain it brings to our people, a consequence of the hubris that makes our leaders blind and deaf to the desires and fears, the hopes and dreams, of the people, of the little ones who are truly great, and for whose sake alone any man can rightfully accept the authority to govern and to guide. But the roots of this evil lie not only in the abuse of authority or in a government that serves its own interests rather than that of the people. No, the roots go deeper, both in the history of Vælíria and in the contours of our culture. For, you see, we have long undergone another 'rebellion' of sorts—a kind of revolution—not in the realm of statecraft, but in the realm of thought and belief. But for that you shall need a bit of background.

"For you probably know only that the Vælírians have long worshiped the same deities as you—minus one—the six divines: Nerethion, Hiliána, Meléngthar, Telmoth, Mornwyn, and Toroäs. Yet these are but figureheads and symbols for most; long years have passed since they have been a vital force in the lives of the people or a true conviction in their hearts. An allegorical, political function alone do they now serve; in other words, they have become hardly more than a tool of propaganda in the hands of the ruling elite. Under the guise of this religiosity, now emptied of all meaning, a new order grew up among our people—and from the top downward, from those who considered themselves 'enlightened,' and granted a new form of knowledge inaccessible to the previous centuries, which were seen as blind, superstitious, and incapable of the rational thought necessary for true freedom and for the realization of human potential. There were, however, two different 'strands' of this revolution, if one may express it so. First there was the irreligious one, which in all of its desire to throw off the mantle of religious conviction—of man's innate longing for the transcendent, for the discovery of his origin and his destination, and the establishment of a relationship with the author and sustainer of his life—became in large part defined precisely by its insistent rejection of such conviction. It sought the death of the gods and the liberation of man. This was the new religion of the elites, of the rich, powerful, and influential, but it had little standing, at least at first, among the ordinary classes, among the workers and the poor. Thus the second

form also grew up, though I know not whether it did so spontaneously among the people as a response to the void that the 'death' of the gods left in its wake, or whether it was implanted from above. Either way, however, it introduced a popular and widespread alternative to the traditional religious belief, one that focused not upon adoration and worship, nor upon the pursuit of the beauty and goodness that lie at the foundation of this world and of our own lives, the wellspring of happiness, but rather upon the pursuit and attainment of power.

"For man is religious of his very nature. This I believe. He is so radically filled with longing for the divine, for an establishment of communion with the invisible realm—for the Beauty and Goodness whose face is beyond our seeing and yet whose glimpses we see at every moment from our earliest days to our last—that when man supplants the object of this longing he necessarily replaces it with another. Even the man who presumes to live 'beyond the death of the gods,' in the realm in which the human person at last is the sole arbiter of his own destiny, will find himself living constantly against the very gods whom he has rejected. But if they have been supplanted, indeed if they had never truly existed but in the naïve minds of the populace, then why does he feel it necessary to be continually waging war against them? Yet so it was for many years, even as this war was not enough to truly eradicate the longing for the divine from the hearts of the people. And this is why an alternative was offered in its stead. If people needed to lean upon the crutch of belief, then they should have a belief that served the purposes of the nation, and not a useless belief ordained toward invisible realities.

"So rather than worshiping the Anaíon whom we share with you, the Telmérins, the faith in whom we brought with us over the sea from our fatherland, the worship of the anári was instead introduced. I see it in your faces. You are surprised. How could you never have known or even have suspected this? How could the Empire of Vælíria have appeared so similar to your own nation in this regard when it had in fact replaced its very heart with another? But was not the difference in fact obvious? Look only at the radical divergence between the actions and the values of the two cultures. The actions of Vælíria over the last few centuries could not be further different than those of Telmérion. We became an imperialistic superpower, spreading our tentacles as far as they would reach and taking control of the peoples of other nations. And if we did not then spread our views and beliefs along with the firm hand of our rule, this was not because of a respect for the cultures of

the peoples whom we subjugated, but because we thought of them as less than ourselves, undeserving of such a condescension. After all, if one believes himself to have been touched by the truth, to have found the truth, how can he not also yearn to share and communicate this truth to his fellow man? So this was for us neither a matter of sharing the truth with others nor of respecting their freedom, wishing not to crush out what is uniquely their own; after all, the revelation of the truth, when it is given freely in a spirit of authentic dialogue—of both listening and speaking—never hinders the uniqueness of individuals or of a people, but rather enriches precisely this uniqueness. Rather, we as a nation refrained from revealing our own 'interior reform' to others because it was to be a tool of dominance over them. We had succeeded in replacing truth with power. Our new truth was power and nothing but power, and we believed our supposed knowledge to be right because it gave us strength over others. At the appropriate time, of course, all would be brought to heel, all would understand and share in our 'illumination,' in the wisdom of our people.

"That at least was the intention with which the conquests began, being both ideological as well as political—motivated, in other words, both by national and intellectual pride as well as by the desire for wealth, gain, and power. But things changed as the years passed and emperors died and handed on the rule to others. Our people began to decay from within, particularly those of higher standing. And eventually hardly anything remained but the empty shell of lost belief—belief in anything at all, and not only in the divines. What we as a nation came to seek, at least the mightier of us, was an increase in power, wealth, and political well-being—a life that would endure without needing to look beyond itself to any other source, at least one that was transcendent or spiritual in nature. At the same time, however, the 'new' form of spiritual belief that had been introduced took yet deeper root among the populace, particularly among the uneducated or the poor, though it was also espoused by some of the elite for reasons of their own—or perhaps even from real conviction. And the surprising thing was that the anári, rarely acknowledged in truth or even in name, became a real source of power, of effectiveness, thus offering a promising bridge from supposed private, irrelevant belief to actual productivity in this world. Cult became something almost exclusively functional, ordained toward specific results, and rarely did those who related to the anári have any sense of who or what these entities might in fact be, or an interest to pursue deeper devotion or commitment. There existed, however,

strands that were more extreme or radical in their pursuits, and often these were given greater power as well. For, beyond what one would expect, it became apparent that, if the old gods had been incapable of answering prayer and intervening in human life (or did not wish to do so in open, tangible ways), the new gods nonetheless actually brought results. How then could we ignore that these were beings of true power? Thus the religious impulse came to birth again among many in the very context of the widespread loss of belief; and yet it came in 'backwards,' you might say, centered upon man's pursuit of power over nature and all the mysterious forces in his life, rather than centered upon the journey of man beyond the narrow limits of his selfishness and fear and toward the beauty of the life and love that call him."

Here Îsáric falls silent as if reflecting on the import of his words, as well as allowing them to resound in the minds and hearts of his hearers. Aeyósha is the first one to speak and break the silence, asking a question, "These anári of which you speak, what are they?"

"We do not rightly know."

"But you said that they have power? In what way? For in Telmérion we are well acquainted with the experience of divine power, whether it be of the creatures of light or of darkness. However, we would say in this regard not 'divine' power but 'anaïc' power, or 'draïc' power, for we have learned to distinguish the Anaíon and Draíon, the pure spirits of light and darkness, from the One who alone is deserving of the title of divinity. For we recognize him alone as divine and deserving of worship, even if toward the Anaíon we have deep reverence and devotion. Nonetheless, despite the hiddenness of the gods and the subtlety of their presence, our history is interwoven with the experience and the intervention of these supernatural beings, and its most dramatic expression has marked even our most recent history. The light has come to us as a whisper that has grown into a song, confronting and at last surpassing the darkness which for countless ages has been oppressing our people as a cacophony of shouted noise."

"You speak quite poetically, but I believe I understand what you say," says Îsáric. "We too have been acquainted, at least, with the loudness and violence of the Draíon, and with their horrid creations. Regarding the other thing of which you spoke, this sole divine, I would hear more sometime. But to respond to your question, I say: I myself have not had direct acquaintance with these anári, so it is difficult for me to say precisely in what their power consists or its manner of operating. But my personal supposition is that they are hardly more than a

cloak for the Draíon, a pleasing guise. For as you have indicated, even the intervention of the ones you called divines, or gods, whom our shared tradition has named the Anaíon, has about it something of subtlety, of delicacy, which the work of the evil beings does not. And the anári are more the latter than the former."

"That is an apt description," says Aeyósha. "It often seems that the forces of evil are stronger than the forces of good, not only in the powers at work beyond the heart of man but even in the heart of man itself. And so it is in the intervention of our beloved Anaíon, and their nemeses, the Draíon, in our world: the good beings always work with such, to use your term, subtlety, for they profoundly respect the freedom of man and seek to uphold it, to affirm it, to perfect it, and not to either replace it or to turn it into something it is not. But the beings espoused to evil have no qualms about this, and they are more than willing to use force and violence—and to incite it—to achieve their goals."

"Precisely," agrees Îsáric. "*Who* are these beings called the anári, and in *what manner* do they exercise and bestow power? I believe the latter reveals the former."

Having heard this summary, Hældáris then speaks, changing the trajectory of the conversation by directing it back to its earlier course. "You have spoken to us of the political and religious dimensions of the development of your nation. But how does this relate precisely to your own experience of the evils of the Empire? And even more, how does it relate to the tendencies of today which you discern to be so unjust?"

"That also is a good question, and an appropriate avenue to continue our converse," says Îsáric. "In fact that is where I have intended to lead all along. It was important, though, that you understood the context—the wide view—of what I am now to relate. One other fact is also important to keep in mind, namely that by the time I was born the Empire was already old, having existed for close to four hundred years. And earthly things, unless they discover an interior principle of renewal beyond themselves, grow old with age. No, I do not say that to be humorous. It is the simple truth. Unless renewal comes from beyond man, man and all his works are destined for death and dissolution. And if he insists on their ceaseless endurance regardless, in the exact form in which he has found them, they become dealers of death, bound to his own false desire for immortality, for a timelessness in the midst of time which neither understands or accepts the journey that all time implies, looking as it does both within itself and beyond itself to something

timeless, which alone can be the measure of time and the source of its renewal and its lasting youthfulness and truth. In other words, things of this world, including the works of man, shall endure forever to the degree that within them lives something timeless and eternal.

"The desire for a static, self-enclosed timelessness, for power and control, marked the institution of the Empire and the exercise of the Imperial power, centered almost exclusively in one man who claimed nigh absolute authority. Yes, we had a senate composed of the various harési and the college of the dómës, but they could little exercise any effective authority apart from the Emperor himself. They were for all practical purposes merely an extension of his own authority, whom he could with a simple veto oppose and whose deliberations held little weight without his blessing. Now I do not deny that every social organization for its endurance and its unity calls for a central authority, but this authority must be one of custodianship, a witness to the one truth and goodness that unites all persons, and a custodianship exercised in brotherhood with all men, the great and the small, whether they be senators, collegians, or the common man who has never left his family homestead. Your father, the king of Telmérion, is to me a beautiful witness of such authentic authority in custodianship and conciliation, in obedience to the truth and brotherhood with all. Such is the case, at least, if all that I have learned even at such a great distance, not having visited your nation myself, is true.

"But I digress now and fail to make my point. And the point is this: that we, the people of Vælíria, had for many years all but entirely lost our heart. After the colonization of our land and the establishment of the various city-states, each independent and yet existing in a cooperation with the others, we remained for the most part at peace. For almost seven hundred years the people of Væliria flourished and grew, building settlements—be they farmsteads or villages, houses of the dómës or hovels of the poor—and spreading across the land. But over time the different city-states grew and expanded both in wealth and in influence, and even those that were content to remain with their inherited lands and resources still had to contend with their greedy and power-hungry neighbors. And among these one in particular grew to prominence over the years, that of Vælaróma, situated centermost upon the land in a rich and fertile basin between the mountains, with abundant farmland as well as woodland, with rocky slopes and deep caves for mining ore and gems, and also, in its furthest borders on the east, access to the sea. Vælaróma, because of its location and its expanse, thus became a

nearly unavoidable stop on the roads of trade between the different states.

"Yet its prominence and its growth were due not only to this, but to the ambition of its kings, who exercised all their power and skill to increase the wealth and the rule of their estate. Even so, it was a ruler from another kingdom who eventually usurped the rule not only of the clan-lands of Vælaróma but of the entire continent. He assumed the throne of Vælaróma and, not without conflict and bloodshed, brought into existence the Empire. I assume you are educated in the history of this genesis and it is not necessary for me to recount it here." Receiving silent nods and affirmations from his two interlocutors, Îsáric continues. "This Empire brought a unification to the lands that we have come to call by the single name of Vælíria. Many indeed accepted this unification, perhaps most, though the form of this unity was a betrayal of the very spirit and heritage that was ours, and which we carried in our hearts from our first home of Telmérion. It was a unity of a nature as different from the unity safeguarded and fostered by the king of Telmérion as fire is from water. It burned what did not seem to belong rather than affirmed it—corrected, purified, and healed if necessary—and integrated it into the harmony that all men desire. But the process of the dying out of our heritage was so gradual, and done under the promises and indeed the experience of such growing wealth and national power, that we hardly noticed it occurring.

"And great was the shock that I received whenever, in my youth, I began to read the documents of the past, not only those recounting the birth and growth of the Empire and its power—and its conquests in other lands—but also the years before, the earliest beginnings of our nation in this land. And yes, I read even further back with voracious appetite any words that I could find. I became fascinated with our origins, with the ancient history of our still-united people in the land of Telmérion. And I began to see and to feel the folly of the Empire, and its betrayal. I began to yearn for something new, for a rediscovery, a renewal, a rebirth. But long did it take for the knowledge in my mind and the desire in my heart to impel me to effective action. I was actually stirred to it from without, finally breaking my inability to do anything about what I believed, when the rebellion was kindled into flame. And thus I threw myself wholeheartedly into it, supported it, and acted with such enthusiasm that I now regret many of my actions during that time. For in my longing to create a new order of life for our people, to bring about our restoration, I did what no man should do: I judged

that the end justifies the means. I believed that if the cause is just, then any means to its attainment is just. And such is folly. Such a way of acting not only corrupts the heart that commits it, but also dooms the effort to failure at its very start.

"And I see it now; indeed many of us see it now. You yourself have received word from the haléndi—some of them at least—that our 'new society' is already beginning to degenerate again into tyranny. For we did not build on adequate foundations. We did not build upon the truth, upon faith, upon the brotherhood of all men and women. We built rather upon our own enthusiastic belief in ourselves, in our ability to establish a republic that would be its own safeguard, forgetting that the only true safeguard of man and his communities is the truth. And now the very ones who claimed to wield power for the common good, to represent the interests of the people in throwing off the yoke of the age-long Empire and establishing a new form of governance, now these very people are taking power to themselves beyond their allotted place. I already witnessed this when I was in Vælaróma, and I opposed it. And such opposition nearly cost me my life.

"I am glad, therefore, to learn that others also of high rank oppose those who seek to fashion our nation according to their own imaginings, driven by what madness I do not know. Your message, however, also comes to me as an accusation, an accusation telling me that I have remained idle and safe in hiding for too long, and that action is again required of me. Until now I have heard the reports of battle and bloodshed spreading from the capital like tendrils reaching from a poisoned tree spreading through the entire woods, and I have done nothing. I suppose I thought my initial opposition was enough, and that having stated my resistance I had done all that was required of me. Now I see what a foolish and self-serving thought that was. For if men from across the ocean, men living in a land of peace—indeed the son of the king himself—come to our land at their own peril in hopes of aiding us, what excuse have I to remain in the narrow security I have created for myself? Yet even in resisting this evil, I would wish to avoid war at all costs and to seek a peaceful solution to this matter. Such too seemed to be the aid that the haléndi were requesting of you, was it not?"

"That was the impression that I received," replies Hældáris, and Aeyósha nods in agreement. "Nonetheless they left their request open, saying that if this failed other avenues were to be considered. Armed resistance was not excluded from these. But it seemed to us clear that

they wished, if their words were honest, to find another solution to the ills of this land than open war. That also is obviously our wish as well, and the prime reason we have come. And regardless, any armed might that we might have hoped to bring has perished in the ocean—or at least one of the three ships that set forth from Telmérion, and we know not what happened to the other two."

"I for my part trust the men who speak of such things and do not doubt their intentions. Nonetheless, war threatens us whether we would wish it or not, and all we can do is respond to it as best we can," says Îsaric sadly. And then, as if becoming aware of himself and of his surroundings for the first time, he adds, "But it is late, and you have traveled far, and we have spoken much. Let us therefore retire for the night. On the morrow we can continue our converse in whatever still needs to be addressed, though my heart already longs for action. But let us deliberate first, let us listen and look, that such actions may be guided aright."

Chapter 12. Discovery

Albrýndaer.

Albrýndaer hardly notices whenever the blockage is removed from the entrance to the alcove of stone. For he has ceased listening for it, ceased glancing over anxiously in its direction as if the looking would make time pass more quickly. Part of this is the natural consequence of the passage of time: for one can only wait fretfully on the surface so long before the natural atmosphere of timeless solitude beckons one deeper. The other, more significant, reality is the grace that touched him so beautifully and unexpectedly in this, the darkest of places. For now, having encountered in a depth and clarity far deeper than he ever expected or imagined the Love at the foundation of all things, he feels safer here in solitude than he does facing the cult members who are outside. For while this Love would never harm him, never forsake him or abandon him, those men who before his trial Albrýndaer had so readily—though so fearfully—joined are dangerous indeed.

It is a voice, in fact, which first stirs him from his thought and restfulness and causes him to turn his gaze to the doorway, "Young man, your time in preparation has passed. The time has now come for the crucial test."

Albrýndaer rises to his feet and takes a slow and hesitant step toward the speaker, whose figure is nothing more than a silhouette in the dim light that shines behind it. He does not recognize the voice.

"What test is this?" he asks, knowing already that it is a test in which he does not wish to participate, and which he shall most likely fail. And why would he wish to pass such a test if its only boon is being granted access to this "power" that comes, not from the true Source of all power, but from creatures whom Albrýndaer does not know, and yet whom he can now affirm with a deep-seated confidence to be forces neither of goodness nor of benevolence?

"You shall see soon enough" is the reply. "Come, walk with me." They begin moving forward out of the small cave of testing and into the wider cavern. "You have faced the abyss within. Now we shall see if you have learned the lesson that leads you to true power, the sole remedy by which man may surmount the absurdity that is around him and within him."

"I have...I have learned that," Albrýndaer says quietly, though he means something far different than the men around him would expect. His legs are now shaking beneath him in fear, though weeks with very little food have surely contributed to the weakness he now feels. "And that is why—and that is why," he continues, trying to find his voice and to let it express the conviction buried in his heart, "I have decided not to go forward with the test. I desire to return to my home settlement."

The man stops suddenly on hearing this and turns to look back at Albrýndaer. The latter now sees his face for the first time, and its expression sends a chill through his bones. "That is most unfortunate," says the man. "We do not take kindly to those who learn the secret of our ways and then wish to depart. In fact, it is not allowed."

This Albrýndaer had expected, and feared.

"What then shall happen to me?" he asks. "Please, you must let me go."

"Must I?" the man's voice drips with sarcasm. "Even if I wished to, I could not. That authority is not mine. Follow me. I shall bring you to our gôdi, and you can plead for your escape from him."

Albrýndaer, seeing no other option, follows, hoping to find a means of escape whether through mercy or through flight. Wishing to do nothing that would betray or compromise the Love that has been revealed to him, he yet knows his weakness and his fear. If he let himself, he would simply run at this very moment, run in any direction as fast and as far as he can. But that would be merely to flee into the hands of

those who would force him to remain here and would also likely punish him for seeking escape.

And so he allows himself to be led, though his heart refuses to follow, to the altar at the height of the encampment. And as he draws near he hears many voices chanting rhythmically a mantra growing with every repetition in both volume and intensity. All have gathered around the altar and are beginning to stir themselves into a frenzy of devotion, offering ablutions one moment and raising up their arms another, leaping up and then falling down to the ground. So distracted by this, Albrýndaer hardly notices that he has reached the altar now and stands in the midst of the company, and that words are being addressed to him.

"From the past we have learned many lessons, and toward the future we walk, unto the victory granted to us by the power we are given, a victory over all weakness and all petty seeking. We have come to believe that the anári desire not the spilling of blood unto death, for such is an abomination when done neither in the heat of battle nor for the purposes of vengeance upon those who refuse to offer faith when they have already set out upon the way of enlightenment. But blood willingly offered in sacrifice, by a victim who in this gift seeks power from the ones who receive the shedding, is pleasing and good." So speaks the man who had emerged from the darkness behind the altar upon Albrýndaer's first arrival, whom he assumes is the gôdi. He stands now before him shrouded in black, extending a hand to receive him. Albrýndaer's skin crawls when his cold and clammy hand wraps itself around his arm and draws him, with subtle force, to face the altar—as if saying to him without words, *Come now, whatever happened in the time of solitude, you must follow this through to the end.* But was not this time meant to be a personal test of one's willingness, a preparation intended to awaken fidelity and the gift of oneself to these "gods?" Where then is the freedom to choose, to offer one's assent or refusal?

"You have undergone the trial, and you have emerged. Speak now in the presence of these witnesses the fruits of your interior journey. Acclaim your conviction and give us strength and encouragement in your newfound resolve." And as if noticing that Albrýndaer has no intention to do any such thing, the man, after only a brief pause, continues, "Or if you are too moved for speech, or if you have found yourself wanting and in need of purification, then let the silent spilling of your blood speak for itself."

The hand around his arm tightens painfully, and even as Albrýndaer

attempts to pull away the man, with surprisingly strength, draws him forward until he is pressed against the altar. And in a single swift motion a long and jagged blade is drawn from his cloak and run along the length of Albrýndaer's exposed arm, from elbow to wrist. The blood pours out and splashes full upon the altar. Crying out, Albrýndaer tries to pull away, but the man's strength is incredible, and two more men approach from behind him as if to offer support in completing the ritual, each laying a hand upon one of his shoulders. But as the blood hits the altar it hisses and steams as if poured upon a fire or a stone hot from the hearth.

At first Albrýndaer assumes that this must be normal, that this is the expected thing, a sign of the anári accepting the sacrifice, even if unwillingly offered. But the responses of the men all around him reveal otherwise. They begin to cry out as in anguish, and the man grasping his now wounded arm releases it without thinking and stumbles backward. "What abomination is this?" he cries. "Never before has this happened, that the stone rejects the blood and finds it displeasing! This offering is incapable of acceptance. Woe betide the one who makes such an offering! Woe betide the one who spills blood such as is unacceptable to the gods!"

"He must be punished!" comes a cry from the crowd.

In the frenzy and the fury of the company, Albrýndaer seizes his chance, more by intuition than by thought. He leaps away from the altar, startling those near to him, and, without a moment's pause, weaves his way through the crowd and away from the place of sacrifice. At first everyone is too surprise or stunned, both by the steaming of the blood and by the sudden flight of the victim, to hinder him. And this is all that he needs, at least at present, to make his escape. He hears voices behind him and almost feels them rousing themselves to follow him and capture him, but he refuses to turn back. Despite the dizziness threatening to overwhelm him from the excitement and the fear, combined with the lack of food and the loss of blood, he runs forward as quickly as he can, through the main passage of the settlement and out into the darkness of the surrounding cavern.

When he is at last hidden in the depths of shadow, and not knowing what better to do, he removes his shirt and wraps it tightly around his injured arm in order to staunch the bleeding, though tying it satisfactorily in this manner is impossible. Voices continue to sound behind him, crying out in enthusiasm for his capture, but the massive space of the cavern and its almost complete darkness work in his favor. His first

instinct is to make his way to his home, to return to his parents, and yet he realizes even as the thought crosses his mind that this is unwise. For the worshipers of the anári know his family abode and will surely search for him there. To return would be to endanger both himself and his parents.

What then can he do? He glances back over his shoulder and sees points of flickering light—torches—as some of the men spread out to canvass the cavern for the escapee. The cavern is large, but not large enough to give Albrýndaer the hope of going unnoticed from such a wide and well-organized search. The best thing to do now is to find a side passage, a narrow shaft or tunnel, in which to lose his pursuers. And so he directs his steps to the arching walls of the great cavern and, coming to them, follows along them with the hand of his uninjured arm lightly pressing against the stone as he walks, feeling for when it gives way. But after only a few minutes he feels weakness coming upon him with a vengeance, and he fears that he will give way long before does the wall. His legs quiver and shake beneath him and lightheadedness almost overtakes him, even as the sharp pain of the cut on his arm turns to a deep throbbing that seems to pulse with each beat of his rapidly pounding heart. Yet even as he is at the brink of letting himself sink to the ground and yield to unconsciousness, the wall gives way and he feels his hand grasping at empty air. There is nothing else to do now but follow this passage, wherever it might lead and whatever dangers await within it. At this point Albrýndaer is hard-pressed to imagine anything more frightful than the danger that currently pursues him.

The passage is hardly wide enough for him to pass through with his shoulders turned side-to-side, but after he has gone but a dozen or so yards it widens again to a comfortable width. Yet at this point he hardly notices, so disoriented is he becoming, stumbling forward as fast as he safely can even as his awareness is on the brink of slipping away. And as he does this, an event from his childhood comes to mind, his flight into the narrow tunnels following on another traumatic encounter. And yet even in the similarity of the two events, there is a significant difference, one that is by no means lost on Albrýndaer even in this state. How could he not be different after having been touched so deeply by ineffable Love in the place of his greatest poverty? Now, even in all the anguish and anxiety, he is held by a deeper and wider peace, a serenity and security born of the certainty that however dark his life may be, however dark indeed the state of the world, there is yet light beyond it and within it, holding and permeating all things: the One who is Three and

the Three who are One.

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Eventually Albrýndaer collapses in exhaustion and weakness and slips from consciousness, uncertain of whether, in this state, he shall wake—and if he does wake, whether it shall be in the hands of those from whom he flees. Yet when he does return to consciousness he is greeted not by his violent pursuers but by complete darkness and all-enveloping silence. And never before have darkness and silence been so consoling to him. He feels in this place, even with the loss of all other senses and bereft of every other security or consolation, the tender presence of infinite Love pressing upon him and enveloping him. And even though this Love is for all the world and envelops every person who is, was, or ever shall be, Albrýndaer experiences it as if it existed for him alone, as if its only care is to be present to him now in his place of need, upholding and cherishing him. How blessed this poverty that allows him to receive all things.

Pushing himself to his feet, he tries to get his bearings in the blackness, to find some sense of where he might be located in relation to the main cavern and the numerous encampments within it. And yet all he is able to surmise is the direction from which he has come. Is it even safe to return hence? Regardless of this question, there is something even more pressing that presents itself to his consciousness at this moment: the need for food and drink. Little extra energy does his body have to sustain him in the lack of food, and he feels his whole body descending into a state of weakness and fatigue that could soon cripple him entirely, drained as he is also by the blood he has lost and the adrenaline of his flight. But water above all does he need now, his lips cracked and his mouth so parched that his tongue nearly cleaves to his palate.

He decides, therefore, to continue along the tunnel that he followed before losing consciousness, knowing through experience that there are many underground pools of water in such tunnels and that he is not unlikely to happen upon one. And at the edges of these pools also grow edible mushrooms, bitter when uncooked but still edible in such a manner.

Within ten or fifteen minutes he finds exactly what he is looking for, but he also finds something else besides, something that is far beyond his hope or expectation. At first he encounters the pool, still and silent in the dim light cast upon it from the veins of ore weaving their way through the low ceiling above, even as the ceiling both recedes higher

and opens out, as if the narrow tunnel is opening to yet another wide cavern. But Albrýndaer pays little attention to this latter fact for a long moment, as he drinks his fill of the water and eats what his stomach can reasonably handle of the raw mushrooms. Though at present he little feels any energy from either of these things, he is grateful to ease his parched thirst and to give some nourishment to his body. Only then does he turn his attention to the widening tunnel ahead of him.

As he proceeds down the tunnel the light gradually increases, and though at first he thinks he must be coming upon an especially rich vein of glowing ore, he soon realizes that the light has a different quality and texture than the light that until now in his life he has known. As the full breadth of the cavern becomes visible before him, he sees the source of the radiance: a narrow shaft of light splitting the cavern down the middle with a beam so intense that it appears almost solid, motes of dust glittering in its midst. Its source is a fissure in the stone of the ceiling of the chamber high above. It can be nothing else but sunlight.

Touched by the beauty of its radiance as it pierces the darkness that Albrýndaer for his entire life has known, it is a few minutes before he realizes that this fissure is not only a source by which light enters the underground cavern, but also a possible route out of the darkness and into the land above. And this changes everything. Stepping into the light and allowing it to shine full upon him, the realization dawns upon him that this is a chance for his people, perhaps the only chance, for them to escape from the death that awaits them at the hands of the ötûnr and to find hope for life anew.

As this realization sinks into his heart and spreads as though into his very bones, he feels reinvigorated, and he lingers little here before letting his enthusiasm to share the news with others spur him onward. But he does take every care that he can think of not to lose the path of return to this cavern of light. This makes his journey slow and difficult, as he drags a sharp rock against the wall of the tunnel while he makes his way forward in the direction he hopes will lead him back to the encampments, and as he makes a mental note of every turn and bend in the path that he follows, hoping this will be enough to help him find his way back again.

Unfortunately, all of this care seems to little benefit whenever he realizes that he is lost in the tunnels and wandering what seems to be aimlessly. He walks for half an hour, an hour, and then for more, and discouragement begins to tug on the fringes of his consciousness, born

of the fear that he will lose his way, or at least lose it for so long that return is impossible. In response to this fear he cries out interiorly to the One in a plea for aid and guidance, that the path may not be lost. And though he receives no audible answer and no visible sign, eventually he does come to the exit from the tunnels and stands before the massive expanse of the cavern from which he had originally come. Unsure, however, of where he stands in relation to the encampments—and in relation to the members of the cult whom he desires to avoid at all costs—he walks cautiously and attentively straight ahead into the center of the open space. All the while he looks and listens for any signs either of human life or of landmarks that might stir his memory.

Eventually he comes upon an encampment that awakens in him no recollection, foreign in every respect except those traits that it bears in common with other encampments that he has seen. He enters it and casts his gaze about, ready to share the good news with the first person whom he sees. And her figure emerges from the shadows and into the torchlight in the same moment that her voice sounds, "Albrýndaer? What are you doing here?"

Chapter 13. Words from the Heart

Hældáris.

Hældáris rises early, before the sun, needing little sleep because of the Velási blood within him, but even more so unable to find repose because his heart is restless and tormented. As quietly as he can he pushes open the door to the house and steps outside, drawing his blanket over his head and tight around his body, a functional cloak to replace the one he has lost. For the air outside is quite cold, its chill bitter and uncomfortable, although not quite freezing. It is still so early that not even the slightest hints of color or light have yet begun to appear on the horizon, yet Hældáris does not take thought for this. Night or day, it matters little to him, and in fact he has long had a preference for the night, for its stillness and silence, for the veiled solitude and hidden quietude that it allows. Around him, the buildings of Ûlfaeng are hardly more than shadows and silhouettes, as all evening lamps have been extinguished and those of morning have yet to be lit. The only lamps are the stars, and the waxing moon, and the light invisible. He walks slowly through the silent streets, listening to the slumbering

quiet and feeling the nocturnal stillness, even as the countless stars continue in their soundless dance and ceaseless revolution above him, following the music that is deeper than ears of flesh can perceive. When he comes to the easternmost edge of town he stands upon the quay at water's edge, the glistening of the countless celestial lights reflecting visibly upon the waves of the sea, as they roll in their ceaseless rhythm, sounding their rumble and whisper as they collide with the awaiting land, still as a sentinel.

But his heart neither sings nor glistens, neither dances nor abides in stillness. It roils in turmoil and boils even to overflowing in anguished questioning, reaching out with pained longing into the dark depths of the ocean, as if its very life has been lost therein. And there is truth in this, for his wife has been so intimately woven through love into the fibers of his own being, into his own existence, that her loss can do nothing but tear him open and leave him bleeding. And so he reaches out toward her in a way deeper than awareness, though this same reaching out wells up continually into his consciousness and grasps it again and again. He thinks of her almost continually, and even when she is not consciously in his mind the sense of her absence is upon his heart, and he aches with longing for her. He remembers her presence, the contours of her face, the tenor of her voice, and all of this is like an absence amid presence, like a shadow among the trees, like a dark cloud in a starry sky. And the remembrance presses on toward fullness of presence, yearning to find her again where she has been lost, to discover her invisible face, to embrace her lost figure, to hear her and to see her, to touch her and to receive her anew, with love and with gratitude, with cherishing and with care. But she is not here, and he encounters only a gaping void of absence.

And it is not only the loss of her that tears Hældáris' heart in twain; it is also the loss of the men entrusted into his care, and the failure of his quest before it has even begun. It feels to him that he lost himself in the waves of the sea, not only in losing Relmaríndë, but in losing the sense of security and purpose, in losing the very confidence of love and goodness upholding his life and giving it peace. And now he feels naked and exposed before the bitter winds of life, naked before every breath of evil, be it deliberate malice directed at him for ill or the seemingly random absurdity by which all things descend into nothingness despite their longing for being and life. He shivers at the thought of this and pulls the blanket tighter around himself, though he knows that the cold he feels comes not from without but from within, not from the cold-

ness of earthly temperature but from the invisible realm of the spirit where the true conflict of love and apathy, care and hate, security and insecurity, meaning and meaninglessness occurs. Or perhaps this conflict has already resolved itself, and absurdity has won out in the end. Such does he in this moment feel, and, even if he does not believe it, even if he rejects it as a temptation born of pain and despair, the feeling makes him sick.

And in this bitterness and this grief, in this pain of his heart, he cries out to the All-Giver, to the Father of all, the silent witness of all this evil and suffering, who nonetheless in this witnessing continues to hide his face: *You are the light and joy of my youth, the hope and gladness of my people, the home in which we have found true rest and peace beyond measure. But now look—look upon my life and the lives of my men! Look upon the life of my wife! What has happened, and why? I heard your voice speaking silently in my heart, inviting me to depart on this journey, to step into the unknown trusting in your goodness and your plan. And all that has awaited me is death and loss. How is this compatible with your goodness and your justice? Our quest has been destroyed before it even had a chance to begin, and their lives were cut short in an act of incomprehensible evil. So many innocent people have perished in the ocean to no cause or purpose. What did they do to deserve such a fate, and why did they perish and not I?*

After voicing this cry of the heart, he sinks into silence, a silence that feels to be not life but death, not vigilant waiting but numbness in loss; and yet he also knows from long life experience that what man feels is never the whole story, and that much happens deeper than he can either see or feel. And so he stands, the cold breeze off the ocean cutting through his blanket and his clothing and chilling his body, and yet also keeping his senses and his mind alert. And time passes like this unnoticed, in what seems almost an instant, and when Hældáris raises his eyes again, he sees that the sun peeks over the horizon far in the east and sends glimmering rays across the surface of the ocean. But this light is cold, and the splendor of the colors and the shimmer of the light do not pierce through the gloom that Hældáris feels. But neither does he reject them. He simply nods his head as if in greeting to the rising sun, and then turns away, walking slowly back to the home of Îsáric once again.

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Aeyósha and Îsáric are both awake when he returns. The hearth blazes brightly in the center of the room, sending slanting light and

dark-bodied shadows across the floor and the walls, though the cooler light of dawn also mingles together through a window open out onto the street facing east. Their host busies himself over the flames, stirring something in a pot—their breakfast—while his companion stands in the corner cleaning his teeth. His hair is still damp, a clear sign that he recently washed his body as well, something long-needed and desired since they washed up on the shore. Back home, no matter the grime, dirt, and sweat that might cling to one at the end of a long day's work, it was always possible to wash up. But the coarseness that has clung to their skin and roughened their hair as a result of the harsh salt water of the ocean, the only source also by which they had been able to bathe, is finally replaced with a cleanness that truly feels as such. For after a simple morning greeting Hældáris himself washes, and by the time he is done their food is ready.

"I fear it is only a bit of bread boiled in milk and dried berries," Îsáric says to his guests, "a kind of grain meal, you can say, for I had neither oats nor flour. The bread was too hard to eat dry and this was the best solution."

"It is more than sufficient, and indeed I find it appetizing," remarks Hældáris. "My life has accustomed me to nothing more than simple fare. Rarely, indeed, do Telmérins seek or expect more, except in rare cases or among certain kinds of personages. Such has always been our way."

"In that respect, as in many others, I believe that despite our many similarities our cultures are quite different," says Îsáric. "For in our land the wealthy and powerful keep lavish tables with food enough to feed an entire hamlet. And it is not only a matter of quantity; rare and exquisite foods are considered a sign of status and prestige, setting the lofty apart from the low, the well-to-do apart from the wretched and poor."

"Our land too has known injustice," Aeyósha interjects, "though perhaps not in the exact manner as has yours. After all, wherever upon the face of the earth he may be, man is man, and his heart remains always the same."

"That is true," agrees Îsáric, "and yet this heart is capable both of evil and of good, of degradation and of nobility, of descending to the depths of darkness worse even than the beasts or of ascending to a goodness that is a breath of the divine itself."

"What you intend to say, if I understand you correctly," Hældáris begins, "is that among your own people the evil and injustice within

the heart of man have been codified in institution and in law. Unlike in our own land, where for the great majority of our history evil and lawlessness have always gone together, and faith and goodness, law and nobility, have been wed, in your land law has become a cover and a bastion of wickedness, and religion itself has become a vessel of the abuse of power."

"Yes, that is precisely it," remarks Îsáric, his expression showing surprise. "How you were able to perceive that in the little that I said, I do not know, but it is what lay underneath my spoken words."

"It is a shift for us, a shift in thinking," Hældáris continues. "This you must understand, even as we ourselves must strive to understand the mind and heart of your people, their life and experience, and the structure of their society. We Telmérins have known aberrations, perversions of law and order, of the impulse toward the divine, and of the use of authority, certainly; but never on such a scale or to such an extent as have you and your people. We have known cults that worship the Draíon or other elemental forces of the universe; we have known wars over territory or succession or peoples, and we have known corrupt office-holders who use their authority not for good but for gain, or are so blinded by their own narrow vision that the common sense of goodness that unites all men is crushed under the weight of fanaticism. But considering what you shared yesterday, and the import of your words today, it is clear that even more can be said about the people of Vælíria. Why our cultures have developed so differently and have had such radically diverse histories, I do not known. Why one seed grows and matures into a full-fledged tree and bears abundant fruit while another dies even in the soil, I do not presume to understand. What are the forces that have led your people through so much suffering and loss, so much oppression, so much perversion of what is right and true? I know not. But I think that perhaps the seed that never sprouted—or rather, the tree that has become gnarled and twisted through what it has weathered both from within and from without—still bears hope of flourishing and of bringing forth good fruit."

"I hope so," says Îsáric. "What worries me though is that what seems to await us instead is another war drenching this land in blood. For if the revolution of thirty-five years ago brought conflict mainly between those who rose up against the government and those whom they sought to overthrow, I fear that the conflict that grips us now is more far reaching, and its consequences more heinous. If what we have heard of the growing conflict spreading from the center of the republic is any

indication, the artificers of this new war are more than willing to bring the weight of the sword to any town or settlement that they encounter."

"Have the rulers and the people of Ûlfaeng done nothing on hearing of these things?" Aeyósha asks.

"We have spoken, thought, and deliberated," replies Îsáric, "but you are right: we have done nothing. They fear getting involved in a conflict that is still distant and whose nature is so difficult to understand with any great clarity. We know neither the true face of our enemy nor whom we may trust as our allies. I myself tried to urge some intervention, but my plea was not accepted and the council, in almost unanimous agreement, chose to wait for things to further develop."

"An unusual thing, is it not," Hældáris says, "that one can hear of conflict in one's land, and yet ignore it even as it grows and spreads?" And, seeing Îsáric's expression, he corrects himself, "I do not mean this as an accusation. Not at all. It is merely an observation. The hand of war spreads across this land and yet the people stand ignorant of the poison in their midst, turning their eyes away to other things...and I just fear that it shall be too late when they finally realize the threat for what it is. So it almost was for us under the rule of the Empire. They played the role of our benefactors for many years, for generations, until even our memory of the ills of their conquest were replaced with a white-washed version, causing us to accept this unnatural state of affairs as the natural one. And so even if some of the means of the Stûnclad Rebellion were ill-conceived, perhaps the intuition beneath it was correct: oppression cannot be allowed to fester and spread until it stands before the remnants of peace like a grown man clad in armor threatening a small child with hardly more than a stick to defend himself."

"But this raises the question of the right use of violence in resistance," Aeyósha says, turning to his friend. "There is also the question of seeing and acting with true judgment, rather than cloaking one's own wishes or goals in the name of justice and truth. Nonetheless, I agree with you that we must resist that which would destroy what is precious to us, the inheritance of light that we children of this world have received. But it is also true that no man, however wise, is the final judge of this world. We cannot take it upon ourselves to excise all the evil from our midst. It is rather our humble part to foster and protect what is good."

"You speak wisdom, Aeyósha," agrees Îsáric. "But I also think that

the king's son has a valid point. The inner journey of the human heart is different than the external conflict of nations; for there are many things within us that no human hand can touch, even less change, and only a greater hand can accomplish this within us through our own trust and surrender. But in the conflict of men and men, if one is too passive in the face of growing evil, then perhaps the evil will grow too great to defeat—or at least not without great suffering and loss. Regardless, we stand here before a great mystery: the mystery of the perennial conflict between light and darkness, between good and evil. And perhaps as long as this world lasts in its present state, marred as it is and cast into shadow, we shall indeed feel like nothing but weak children trying to protect ourselves against an evil that is larger and more powerful than we."

"So it was for my father and for our own people in the War of Darkness," Hældáris says, "and if possible I would like to prevent such a dire situation among your own people...if it is not already upon you. So whatever course of action we discern, I insist that we do not delay."

"And in that, my friend," says Îsáric, "we are in agreement."

"I concur with that as well," Aeyósha says. "That is the entire reason we have come. We have come not to sit and watch but to deliberate and to act. And forces stir that demand a response. Our role as messengers and delegates of Telmérion will be a small one, but we wish to support your people, Îsáric, in whatever way we can."

"You have my thanks, and I hope someday also shall have the thanks of many. I wanted to ask you a question, though, before we deliberate about our course of action—though in my mind there is only one course."

"By all means," replies Hældáris, and Aeyósha nods in agreement.

"Very well," continues Îsáric. "It is this. I wanted to speak about the foundations of your people, about the solid bedrock of Telmérion both as a culture and as a nation. For it seems to me that what binds your people together, and what stands as the cohesive force even of your political structure, is faith. And therefore what you can bring to us is a rediscovery of a political order, of a structure of rule, that is in accord with the dictates of this faith. Is this true?"

"I understand what you are expressing, and it is true insofar as it goes," replies Hældáris, "and yet it should also not be understood in the wrong way. It is true that there is a deep and intimate alliance between the high kingship of Telmérion and the faith of the All-Giver, for so it has been given by the intervention of the One himself, who

through the mediation of Hiliána manifested himself to the king who was to rule and entrusted to him power and authority. But he remains merely a man, and he is neither a religious leader nor does he exercise his office in strict cooperation with those who stand as guardians over the worship and life given by the All-Giver. The great-father of the temple, however, is a dear friend of his, and they both discovered the beauty of the One together; yet this is not an institutional association, but an intimate, personal one. What the future of the Telméric kingship may be in days to come, I do not know, and whether there shall be a longstanding spiritual alliance between the political state of our people and the faith that we have come to know even after centuries of loss, I cannot say. I do hope so, in the sense that I bear the complete conviction that the inheritance of our faith, faith in the one Fashioner of the world, is simply the foundational truth about reality, illumining all else in its gentle, deep, and broad light. However, also do I know that the faith is so much greater and freer than any nation or political institution, for it is but the revelation of the truth that is common to all men, and which binds them alike with the cords of goodness, of beauty, and of love that are the path to true freedom.

"Even if Telmérion were to collapse into the sea, therefore, this truth would endure. And even so, true faith and religion cannot be forced upon a person, nor merely absorbed like dew upon cloth. Though the truth of faith may illumine a nation, indeed every nation, a nation is not an adequate safeguard of the truth of faith, nor should it takes its dictates directly and solely from religion in the sense of being a religious authority itself, or an arm of such authority. As in all truth, it comes to us in freedom, and it elicits freedom, binding us together cohesively in a single reality, but also needing the personal sanction born of the heart of each person. For a man comes to faith not simply by being raised in a nation in which this faith surrounds us like the air we breathe. Rather, faith speaks to each one of us in the inner mystery of our conscience, where the voice of the One resounds. For this truth is not an ideology, and certainly not a myopia; it is not even a philosophy, even if it illumines all philosophy, gives it order, and sets it upon a new foundation. It is a relationship of trust and of love, giving birth to communion between man and the One who made him and loves him, between the human and the divine, and bringing forth in the world actions that are right and true, beautiful and good.

"Mere political structure therefore cannot be an adequate safeguard of the integrity of faith, and of the worship and life to which it gives

birth; nor yet can faith replace the right and reasonable discernment of political life in the sense that the authority of the priests and clerics would cast a shadow over the authority of the kings and jarls and counselors. The current atmosphere that has blossomed in the rebirth of Telmérion is an encouraging thing, and a good example: all occurs in the freedom and trust of a dialogue of love. And this dialogue occurs within the truth that shines the deepest and broadest light upon all the issues of human life, from the intimate relations of the family and community to the very unity that makes up a people, a nation, and humankind itself."

"What about the exercise of the high kingship? Does he not hold absolute, or at least final, authority in the governance of the people?" Îsáric asks.

"Absolute authority? Certainly he does not, nor has he any right to exercise that. And as for final authority, I suppose if it is ever necessary, he shall indeed be the custodian and safeguard of the unity of our people by speaking as their last voice when discordant voices would silence them and their true good. But in ordinary circumstances he always seeks to act along with all others who hold custodianship of the people alongside him.

"Even here my father does not intend, in fact, to uphold or expand any form of aristocratic primacy among our people, be it that based upon wealth or even upon merit. Rather, he seeks to foster its giving way to a more equitable sharing of power and a common responsibility for the material well-being of all members of our society. We do not seek to grow in wealth and power either as individuals or as a society—and I speak here of our cultural attitude, for avaricious men always exist, as do prideful and lustful men as well. Rather, a great movement has been born among us, starting with the king, to seek to give landholdings and the opportunity for individual ownership, responsibility, and care to each man and each family. We see this as the best avenue toward material prosperity, and an impetus toward a spirit of custodianship, even as it is also a curb on the instinct toward acquiring more and more wealth beyond one's measure. Each person is given his own domain in which to exercise his right and duty as a custodian of the one Creator, responsible to the One who made him and responsible also to all of his brethren to seek the common good even in his private actions, be they working the land to bring forth its fruit, or raising animals, or exercising some trade or overseeing and fostering it as a leader of a guild, or devoting oneself to the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom and its

sharing with others, or any other manner of work.

"So too, in his own rule, even if my father has embraced kingship in obedience, he recognizes his role as one of pure service to the common good of our people—indeed of all men—and the fostering of the just use of power in all communities. He recognizes that all power is but an entrustment from the Creator even if it has been allocated by the will of the community and according to their own human discernment and deliberation. When he ascended to office, he did so very much at the insistence of the people who saw him as representative of a dawning light after decades of darkness and loss of identity, and after the anguish of a war that threatened the very existence of our very people. But the first thing he did on taking office was to emphasize the freedom and responsibility of the people, from the common laborer in his field to the officials who stood in custodianship over others, be they guildmasters or trainers in the crafts, or the hærási, council members, or other bearers of office.

"So if you are hoping for the birth of a monarchy or other political structure to solve the griefs and pains of your people, to bring some resolution and stability to the chaos that has afflicted your people for so many years, I am afraid that is not what we can offer you. You must find your own path, among your own people, to the form of government, as of trade, commerce, and labor, that is appropriate for you. Of course we shall be happy to walk hand in hand in this discernment and to aid you in whatever way we can. The one gift that we can offer to you, and which it is our deepest desire to offer, is our witness to the truth that is our inheritance, and which we ourselves, through no merit of our own, have received from those who are his living memory in the world: the truth of the All-Giver and his design."

"You give me much to think about, Hældáris," replies Îsáric. "Long have I assumed that the only answer to our ills was replacing the false religion of the state with a true religion of the state. In this I have placed my hope. But now I see that there might perhaps be more nuance to the matter than I first thought."

"What you thought is true as far as it goes, however," Aeyósha says, adding his voice to that of his friend. "It is true insofar as truth alone is the safeguard and custodian of freedom and justice. But it is also the case that when a religious man or institution tries to be more than it ought to be, it does no good for anyone, but rather harm. For our true religion, our communion with the One who made us and who has promised us dawn's light even in the darkest night, is not something

merely institutional and social—such as an ideology for change or a revolutionary outlook or a program for justice. Rather, it is more akin to the very air that we breathe, permeating everything and giving it life, while also allowing everything to be what it is. Yes, it is not intrusive in the manner in which your people have so sadly experienced it; it is not exercised in power and the abuse of authority, but by the gentle, effective persuasion of truth. Like the breath of life it enfolds and fills all things, cherishing them and protecting them even as it grants them their very being and life. And this means that we can never be anything more than humble custodians and servants of this truth, this truth that is so far beyond us even as it makes itself intimately close to us and to all of our cares, concerns, and desires, both as individuals and as a community. This, and this alone, is the reality by which we can judge the right response to the evils that beset your society today, and can discern the way toward their healing."

"I only wish that we knew more about the precise nature of such evils," sighs Îsáric, running a hand absentmindedly through his hair. "Yet I have no one but myself to blame for my ignorance of the true state of our land. Rumors of war and echoes of conflict are hardly enough to guide our steps. And if light alone can mark our way, it is nonetheless true that I have no idea how to combat an evil unless I know the nature of that evil. As long as the darkness remains but a whisper at the edge of consciousness, or a shadow on the corner of vision, our hands remain tied and our feet unsteady."

"Perhaps so," remarks Aeyósha, "but I suspect that soon we shall know more than we ever wished to know, and shall yearn for the days when the weight of such darkness did not weigh so heavily upon us."

Chapter 14. Against the Powers of Death
Relmaríndë.

A presence of unutterable evil and strength of will presses itself into her consciousness, invading her, and even all of her resources are not enough to keep it out. The feeling of oppression far surpasses any sense of evil that she has felt in years past at the proximity of the eötenga, and even of the Draíon themselves, for now she feels it not at a distance but in direct contact, indeed in a battle of minds and wills locked in mortal combat. But even as this presence floods her being and her consciousness she does not yield in despair or defeat; rather, she calls out to the only One great enough to protect her in such a situation, and whose immense love is so wide and deep as to swallow up such evil as a drop of water in a boundless ocean. And so Relmaríndë finds herself caught in the conflict of two oceans—two very different kinds of oceans—the one of death and the other of life.

The one engulfs her spirit and her body with malice uncounted, and she feels the hatred and malintent, feels it so deeply that it seems to press through every fiber of her being and to become in some way her own, insinuating itself into her thoughts and feelings and attempting to unseat her very identity, her identity as a child of the Father of all, and to replace it with alienation and loss. And one of the paradoxical things about this force is that, even as it seeks to depersonalize her, to invade her very sense of self and to suffocate it, it does so as something itself impersonal. In this sense it seeks to make her as it is, to force her and mold her into its own image, the image of a being that was once a person, once even beautiful and good, and yet which has long since forfeit the seat of its own identity, the center of its own belovedness, and become alienation, become a lie in setting itself in opposition to its Maker and Sustainer.

Even so, this invasion would not threaten her or enter into her to such an extent, except that the latter ocean, that of world-cradling love, withdraws from her consciousness and leaves her to bear the pain of the former evil in its direct ferocity, to feel it in herself, tearing at her heart and flesh, surging into her body to suffocate her even unto death. And why this must be so, why she must suffer the brunt of the attack without the shelter and shield that could, did Eldáru will, so easily de-

fend her, she does not know, except in the deep sense she has within her that she must bear and suffer this evil in its full measure, for only thus can it be confronted at the root, and overcome. And perhaps it is simply part of the limitation of human consciousness in this world that one cannot experience to the full and simultaneously both the utter darkness and the utter light, and that even when one is called to bridge the distance between the two in reconciling and atoning love, the mystery that one lives surpasses consciousness and lives fully only in faith and in trust.

And so she stares the darkness in the face, even while her eyes never cease to look beyond it, to look beyond it toward the imperceptible light for which her heart yearns, even while this selfsame light sustains her from behind and from within even without being felt or seen, the luminosity in which all things, even darkness and evil, are seen as they truly are, while the light itself remains unseen, too pure and undiluted to be grasped in such a way, while all things are grasped in it.

And she feels the pain of countless individuals, fallen men and Draíon alike, ringing in the ears of her spirit like a deafening cacophony, and she experiences herself to be one of them, to be one of the lost and the damned destined for an eternity of isolation and despair. She feels the collapse into the narrow confines of a self that has betrayed its very impetus outward into love and relationship, and through grasping selfishness has become instead imprisoned in its own self-made security, which now reveals itself to be nothing but a facade cloaking over the nakedness and vulnerability of a heart that was made for more. In this pain she feels two threads distinct but interwoven. The first is the apathy of human hearts who have clung to this self-made security so firmly, and with such rebellious insistence, that they have ceased to see their prison as a prison, ceased to have even the slightest openness to the saving light that would set them free, and thus have become incapable of salvation. They have care now only for themselves, and yet this care itself has degenerated into an apathy in which the vestiges of self fade away into obscurity and the very impetus of longing, of desire, and of action that impel every living heart forward descend rather into inertia, a state of motionlessness which is not repose, but its very opposite, the nihilism of death, which is not the rich fullness of silence echoing with meaning and purpose, but the silence of absurdity in which nothing is heard since the heart has long since forgotten how to listen.

One the other hand, she feels an evil and a lack of a different kind

and tenor, which can only be that of the Draíon themselves and of the minions whom they fashion and control with the shadowy substance of their own malice, insubstantial as it is, a mere mockery of the creation of the One, and yet filled with all the hatred and evil and desire to destroy which the Draíon bear within. Yes, what she feels above all else in such loss is the arrogant pride that fuels itself with envy and hate, and which makes itself an enemy of all that is good, light, and true, as if somehow its own wretched darkness, its own destructive power, were necessary to balance out in the universe the harmony between darkness and light, good and evil. But this in fact is not its intent, and has never been, even if such lies has it used continually to seduce and betray the hearts of feeble men and women; for this pride desires only to rule, to spread its own darkness until every last vestige of light has been snuffed out, and every savor of goodness and beauty has been swallowed up in its own dominion, and it alone reigns as lord supreme and unquestioned.

And the depth with which she bears both of these forms of evil is so intense and so complete that she is unable, in herself, to even pronounce an explicit "no" against them, or to turn her attention to the light for which her heart yearns, to take refuge in the arms of the Father who is her refuge and her strength. At these far reaches of the mystery of bearing, in which she carries within herself the darkness and evil of the world, such conscious prayer is impossible—at least for a mortal heart in all its limitation—and only the faith that is within her while also being beyond her sustains her through this darkness. And so all she can do is endure, in trust beyond trust and hope beyond hope, letting the voice of her heart sound in opposition to the darkness and in consent to the light even beyond her own feeling and awareness. And here she abides in the loss of all things, naked and poor, bereft of all goodness and descending from lament in the loss of the One whom her heart loves—and of all that is beautiful, good, and true as, in the loss of him, all else descends too into nothingness—she tastes the despair that lies beyond lament, the despair that can hardly even remember what it has lost. And yet even here a movement grips her heart, a movement from beyond her even as it works within her. This is a movement that takes this poverty and this loss, that enfolds this utter nakedness and vulnerability of heart, and carries it forward, carries it beyond its own loss, and yet in it, to the place where lament is reborn as longing and despair is transmuted into a hope deeper than all reckoning and surer than all understanding.

And thus the light enfolds the darkness, the light holding her heart enfolds through her, as she herself carries it, all the pain, evil, and loss that she has welcomed into herself. Pouring into every pore of her being, subtle but true, the uncreated light of eternal love confronts the darkness and shines through it like the dawn's rays dispelling the blackness of night; and thus she knows and feels that even the deepest bearing of darkness, that even the holding of the most violent rebellion against the light, need not eclipse the light that holds her and that shines within her, pouring through every fiber of her being into the world to heal it and make it whole, to touch the lost hearts furthest from salvation and to mediate to them the hope and the gift of new life. After all, it is this light alone, the eternal light of the One who alone has fashioned the universe from nothingness and who gives it being according to his own Being, whose everlasting Love is the Origin, Sustenance, and Consummation of all things—it is this light alone that conquers the darkness. It is this light alone than saves the fallen heart and opens up for it anew the path to salvation and light, to the love and intimacy, the play and the wonder, the abundance and joy and overflowing delight for which it was created and yet which in the darkness it had lost.

And thus her own voice now emerges anew from the muteness into which she had descended, and Relmaríndë cries out in song in the depths of her heart, letting her song mingle with the song of the Anaíon, with the song of the All-Giver, the Father of all. Or rather she allows this eternal song to reverberate within her and to awaken her own deepest and most intimate voice, her own most authentically personal song, joined together with the song of the One who in love created her and in the same love forever sustains her in existence. She sings forth in him and through him by the very love that he sings forth into her, and this joint song together spreads out through the surrounding ocean of darkness, loss, and hate, permeating it and changing it. And even as this process occurs, Relmaríndë becomes aware of her body again, of her surroundings, and she knows that she is in the ocean off the coast of Vælíria, the body of the mykkëvéngr coiled about her and dragging her into the depths of a watery grave. But even as she becomes aware of this she also knows that the same serpentine body is dissolving into nothingness, that the mykkëvéngr is no more.

Kicking with her legs as consciousness returns to her, she tries to swim upward toward the surface of the ocean, to bring her body above the crashing waves and to breathe again the air that her body so des-

perately needs. And even in this effort at swimming, at safeguarding her earthly life just as she faced the great battle for spiritual life, she feels a mysterious presence, an intimate personal presence, enfolding her and buoying her up, and in this instant she knows that she is not to die this day, and that more yet lies before her in this world before her life's journey is complete.

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She awakens to the touch of something scratching upon her cheek and, brushing her hand over the spot, she feels a hard object move and shift and then move away. Opening her eyes she sees drop back onto the sand and scurry away a small crab with an ornate shell encompassing its body. It seems it was drawn to her in curiosity only to discover to its surprise and fear that she was a living thing. Relmaríndë lies upon her side, her shoulder and her head resting against the sand while the rest of her body still lies at least partially in the water, though the waves are calm and quiet. With a groan of pain and exhaustion she pushes herself up into a sitting position and drags herself out of the water and higher onto the beach.

Before she moves any further she simply sits, drawing her knees to her chest, shivering in the cool air and looking out over the waves of the sea and trying to remember what happened to her people, to her husband and the delegation of men sent from Telmérion. But she remembers nothing. From the moment that the mykkëvéngr—or rather the force that inhabited it—entered into her mind she had lost consciousness of all things outside of herself. She does not know even how much time has passed; it is clearly different than she would expect, for it is not night time after the setting of the sun, but mid-morning with the sun shining high above the ocean and sending silver sparkles across the face of the waves. How long has it been since the mykkëvéngr approached the ship? And what happened to it? But even as these questions and many others flurry through Relmaríndë's mind, she feels the dreadful fear that she was too late to save them and that the ship floundered in the ocean, and all of them—even the one she loves most in the world—have perished in the waters. How else, after all, did she end up herself in the ocean to wash ashore in this manner?

But this she does not know for sure, and stirred by the hope that she may yet find the ship safely brought to dock or anchor, she rises shakily to her feet. Uncertain either of where she is or of where she might find her companions, she looks around to study her surroundings for some hint of either; but she finds only indeterminate shoreline stretching in

both directions, to the northwest and the southeast, and open sea opposite it. The landscape inland appears rugged and difficult to access, with stony cliffs undulating up to higher ground cloaked thick with tawny heather and grasses and trees of spruce and pine and birch growing even over the edge of the cliffs as if leaning to get a glimpse of the shoreline below. As for the beach, its rocky gray sands stretch for about ten yards from wave to cliff, almost entirely devoid of vegetation, though it is teeming with life. Tiny crustacean creatures crawl or dig through the sand, and, in places where the sand has created something of an alcove from the ceaseless undulation of the waves, and the water stands still and placid, fishes swim.

Relmaríndë sees all of this and acknowledges it, but her mind is preoccupied with the question of which direction may hold the greater hope of finding those whom she has lost. She settles on southeast, since the waves of the night before—or whatever night it had been—were turned northwards, and thus likely carried her in that direction. The ship, on the other hand, would have sought land as quickly as possible to escape from the threat of the mykkëvéngr, and thus have landed further south. She doubts the decision even as she makes it, however. And it is only upon experiencing this stirring of doubt and fear that she feels for the first time the depth and seriousness of her plight. She fully realizes now the uncertainty and anxiety of the fact that she is stranded with little knowledge of her location and with little hope or means of finding anything to guide her to civilization except good fortune itself. And her heart reaches out to Hældáris, wondering with a piercing pain born of doubt and fear whether or not he still lives. This fear of his loss weighs upon her heart far more than the insecurity of her situation or the concern for her own safety, and she casts about with her mind and spirit seeking to feel the reverberations of her husband's presence, the echoes of his being making contact with her own. And yet she feels nothing.

What is she to do whenever she does not even know the direction in which to walk? Reflecting on this, she decides to cease walking for the moment and instead to set up whatever kind of makeshift camp she can to give herself time to rest and to listen. She clambers up the slope into the trees and grasses overlooking the shoreline, and searches for a sheltered place. She finds an ancient willow tree with its leaves hanging down low like arms to embrace and gathers together underneath it whatever fallen or broken branches she can find from the surrounding area, weaving them together to make a protection from the wind and

the elements. It is not particularly cold at the moment, though the chill in the air is very noticeable to her without any possibility of changing her garments or throwing a heavy cloak about her shoulders. When she has done what she can, she curls up in this shelter and tries to rest both her body and her heart, allowing her spirit to repose in the All-Giver and there to find in him both safety and refreshment, as well as light for her path.

The hours pass and then she is stirred back into awareness of her surroundings and her plight by a distant sound coming to her through the trees. Pushing herself into a sitting position, she inclines her head to listen, and then she rises to her feet and steps out from the enclosure under the tree. The sun now hangs low in the sky to the west, soon to dip below the horizon and to bid farewell for the day, and the air is already becoming uncomfortable with the cold of early spring. Taking a few steps, Relmaríndë listens intently to the sound that had drawn her attention, and she hears it growing both nearer and more audible: voices, voices carried on the breeze. She attempts to close the distance between the sound and herself in order to make out their tenor and their words, and she notices a break in the trees ahead—yes, a section of road overgrown now but still in use if the wheel tracks rutted deep in the earth are any indication. At the same moment that she comes to the edge of the road and looks about, a large wooden carriage rounds a bend from the southeast, followed by a number of others of the same kind, and with them the voices too echo across the space between them and become fully comprehensible.

"Aye, up to Bornstad next, and then on to Aelthýrin after that," says a husky male voice. "Our contact there expressed great interest, and at this rate we will have no cargo left to carry to Vælaróma, which, to be honest, is fine by me. I despise that city. They always seem to complain about the quality of our selection, both before and after purchase."

"We do everything we can to find suitable stock," replies another man's voice, higher pitched and more youthful in sound, though the pitch does not give impression of tenderness but of snobbery and haughtiness, "and yet it seems they always prove inadequate in some way. How difficult can it be to find good specimens? You would think that there would be more hearty ones around."

"You would indeed," says the first voice. "Perhaps the problem is that the weak are easier to attain than the strong, even though the strong are ideal in every respect."

"Almost every."

"Aye, you are right. There is *that.*" And then after a pause, "Wait! Look over there! Hey you, what are you doing out in the wilderness like this?"

Relmaríndë takes a step back into the shelter of the trees, sensing that these men are neither welcoming nor safe, but in the same moment she knows that it is too late to withdraw or to flee. She attempts it nonetheless, though within a few seconds she is overtaken by men who have leapt from a carriage and rushed to her side. And now faces give flesh to the voices. Looking past the two men, she sees a few people, both men and women, emerging from the carriages, some stretching their arms and legs and others pacing about, evidently taking this opportunity to ease the burdens of the road. Many of them wear armor and weapons.

"She's a beauty, ain't she?" asks the husky voiced man, a crooked smile showing yellow teeth on his pock-marked face.

"What do you want?" Relmaríndë asks the men. "What kind of traders are you?"

"Traders? What makes you think we are traders?" asks the other man, his long and youthful face hardly made more mature in appearance by a scraggly beard. The childishness of his demeanor seems incapable of matching his age in years, and creates a bizarre impression of discordance.

"I heard you speaking as you drew near," says Relmaríndë, taking another step back. "I only wish to be on my way to the nearest town, thank you. I wish you all the best on your journey."

"Ah, but we haven't even answered your first questions, lady," says the same man.

"Forget I asked them."

"No, I think not."

"She's a good pick, right Trygvë?" asks the other man.

"Good indeed."

She turns again to flee but only makes it a few strides before she is caught, the larger of the two men tackling her to the ground and with his superior strength subduing her with ease. There is little she can do to resist him.

"Come on, Stagrímur," says Trygvë. "Bring her. Let's get back on the road without wasting any more time."

And so it is. With hardly more ado than if she were an abandoned sack found on the roadside, Relmaríndë is taken into captivity, made another's property for no other reason than that she was encountered

alone in the wilderness by the wrong persons and does not have the physical strength to resist them. After grappling in mortal conflict with the seemingly unbounded strength and evil of the mykkëvéngr and surviving, the apparent absurdity of this situation is not lost upon her. But little time or attention does she have now for thoughts of this kind, or, indeed, for any other. Forced in the back of one of the carriages that has followed behind the first, she finds herself thrust into a barred cage concealed beneath a heavy canvas tarp. The metal door clangs shut behind her and keys jangle while the lock is fastened.

Looking about in the dim half-light that filters through the canvas, Relmaríndë sees that she is not alone. Two other women sit crouched in the back of the carriage, one hardly more than an indistinct figure in the corner, head buried between knees, and the other looking up at the newcomer with eyes that seem to gleam with both life and sorrow even in the darkness. After sharing a reciprocal gaze with the woman, Relmaríndë sinks down to her knees and tries to still the anxious trembling of her body. And to her surprise a hand is placed upon her shoulder.

"I wish I had something to say in this moment that might be of encouragement to you," comes the woman's voice, touched with a tenderness that Relmaríndë has only heard in those whom she trusts most in the world. "All I can say is that you shall find no help from man in the path that now opens before you, yet you need not for that reason lose all hope."

Relmaríndë exhales slowly and places her hand upon the hand that rests on her shoulder, though she cannot keep it from shaking. "No man in this world has any power except what is allowed him from beyond this world. Long have my people faced hopelessness and loss and found hope still. Shall I, however, when I am tested, stand up to the task?"

So she speaks, but her heart trembles and questions. *Ta, is this the answer to my prayers? Is this truly the path that you have opened before me? If so, why? How could this in any way serve your purposes or the purposes for which we set out to this land?*

Chapter 15. Through the Woods

Hældáris.

Over the next few days the three men prepare for their departure by gathering what provisions they might need and also by purchasing new clothing to replace those ruined or lost during the shipwreck. In addition, they simply think it wise to have more than a single outfit, which surely shall be soiled on the long road, with little chance of being adequately cleaned or mended in the wilderness. Hældáris decides to keep his gambeson despite the tears in the fabric where he was wounded by the serpent, for it is a garment that is not widely available, at least fitted so to his own body. Rather, he leaves it with a tailor for a day for a simple mending to close with stitching the tears which severed the fabric. He does, however, allow himself a couple pairs of new trousers and undershirts, as well as a long tunic of heavy dark fabric—its fibers of wool and flax that are naturally water and flame resistant—that reaches to his knees and is tied at the waist with a leather belt. Aeyósha's clothing is still in good form so he accepts only a couple undergarments to replace those he lost in the sea along with a padded vest and matching pants designed for their hardiness. And finally Îsáric insists on giving to both of them heavy cloaks and matching cowls to ward off the cold, wool lined inside with fur, the only garment in their attire that can be called expensive, though in fact a heavy cloak is not an option but a necessity in the land of Vælíria, just as it is in the land of Telmérion. Îsáric himself is similarly outfitted, though his clothing is not newly acquired but old and weathered with many years. He also still has in his possession some simple armament which he intends to wear as part of his attire while they are on the road: a mail hauberk of tight and expertly crafted rings with a coif of the same quality and make, and hardened leather vambraces that reach from just below his elbows along the length of his forearms to his wrists, with gauntlet-like gloves of the same material, both plated with strategically-placed sheets of metal woven into the leather to protect the most exposed members during martial combat. For weaponry, Hældáris carries only the sword of his father, Aeyósha a studded mace that Îsáric had on hand from forgotten days, and the latter a sword and shield that are clearly of standard military-issuance and long since used.

As for acquiring horses or mules, it is simply an impossibility, considering that the shipwrecked men are destitute and Îsáric himself lives in poverty and expends what little he has on the above mentioned vittles and garments. They do however meet with some traders with whom Îsáric is acquainted, making inquiries until they find one who is sending a small caravan to the west—though only as far as Turholm and Fiándris—composed of two laden wains and a small guard of the same number of armed men. After receiving their word that they shall, for as long as they travel with the caravan, do what they can to see the goods safely to their destination and to aid the guards in their task, it is agreed that they may travel with the caravan along the length of its journey and ride upon it as they may to ease their way and speed their progress.

They also meet with both the reeve and the marshal of Ûlfaeng, informing them of what little knowledge they have concerning the plea of the haléndi and the danger described in their letter to the rulers of Telmérion. Îsáric, well known to both men, speaks to them in some detail of his hopes in traveling toward the heart of the nation and also repeats again his fear that the conflict that there exists threatens soon to spread even to these far-flung fringes of the nation. Though they are unable to confirm the truth or falsehood of this latter claim, they well know the word of bloodshed and battle spreading from Vælaróma and its surroundings, as do all but the most isolated on the continent. They therefore listen respectfully and take Îsáric's words to heart, though it is evident that at least for the present they shall refrain from taking any action in response to these warnings. After all, this is not the first time that they have heard that dreaded word, war, and their understandable wish is to remain apart from it as long as possible, in the hopes that it shall pass them and their people by. Nonetheless, the word of Hældáris and Aeyósha lends credence to the word of Îsáric, though none of them has any proof of his claims beyond the strength of his own witness, and both reeve and marshal seem deeply affected by this threefold witness.

Having done what little they can to prepare, the three men take a final night's rest in preparation for their departure shortly after the break of dawn on the morrow. When they rise all three of them feel a sense of anticipation that is both anxious and hopeful, even if simply through the fact of being a movement into the unknown and uncertain, which always bears within itself both danger and promise. They gather their few travel provisions and walk silently to the westernmost edge of town and up the slope of the surrounding hillside, where a well-paved road

juts through cut stone and packed earth before it levels out at the crest of the rise and stretches into the distance, farm and pasture land hedging it on either side until, at the far limit of sight, it is lost in the trees of the woods. These woods, named Hûle Forest, cover a wide expanse of land along the easternmost reaches of the Vægo Moorlands, through which the company shall travel, until the moors themselves give way to the wide stretches of the Vollrænd, the "Region of Plains."

They arrive before the tradesmen, though they have not long to wait, as these draw near within five minutes, leading the two wagons tethered each to a pair of shaggy mules with ruddy brown fur and wide, bleary eyes, looking out curious but uncomprehending at the landscape growing in clarity as it is gradually revealed under the light of the rising sun. The tradesmen, on the other hand, two brothers by the names of Édvin and Égill, focus upon their traveling companions and introduce the guards who shall be accompanying the caravan.

"This is Dágra and this is Astër. They are well-trained swordsmen and experienced mercenaries," says Édvin, gesturing to the two men, both of whom wear expertly wrought mail under breastplates of iron or steel with pauldrons and gauntlets of similar kind and make. The former, however, is of a much larger build than the latter, and he looks to use this to his advantage, a disproportionately large greatsword, or two-handed sword, cradled in his left arm and leaning against the earth at his feet. The latter has at his waist a normal length longsword and, slung over his back with a leather baldric, a round shield of wood and hide. Édvin concludes the introduction by saying, "They shall be guarding the goods, and our persons, for the length of the journey, though your aid also, should it come to it, shall be appreciated."

"And you shall have it as agreed," replies Îsáric with a courteous bow of his head, and his two companions do likewise. They then make introductions of themselves to all.

The merchant brothers seem to all appearances to be twins, as they are of the same height and build and their faces bear a striking resemblance to one another, distinguishable at ease only because Édvin wears a long and bushy beard of graying black hair and Égill is clean shaven but for the hint of a mustache and goatee upon his lip and chin. The mercenaries, on the other hand, could hardly look more different. Dágra seems almost like a wild man who has spent his years living alone in the wilderness—not only because of the shaggy hair that surrounds his head and face like the mane of a lion but also because of the untamed ferocity that glimmers in his eyes. Astër, on the other hand, is small and

unassuming in appearance, and even his wide, high brow and his close, intelligent eyes encourage thoughts not of warriors but of scholars or clerks.

"Hey ho!" shouts Égill, busying himself with the mules, patting each one as he checks its harness, "get ready for another trip, my boys."

Looking at the others, Édvin says, "Do not mind him. It is just his way. He does this every time we prepare to depart." There is no shame or embarrassment in his voice, nor in saying this does he aim to dismiss his brother or his particularities; at most they sense in his voice only a certain self-consciousness, or rather a certain protectiveness, over the mannerisms of his brother. But such is really not necessary, even when the latter begins to sing softly. For in witnessing his childlike unself-consciousness the others experience nothing but wonder and delight.

> "Listen, my darlings, littlest of creatures,
> beasts of burden, one and all, we see you;
> but in my eyes you are precious, good, and true,
> so carry your burdens lightly, if you can,
> though I have little idea how to rhyme."

And with this, in a matter of moments, they are ready to depart. Placing their packs on the back of the carts, the five guards of the caravan walk alongside the mules while the two brothers ride in the carriage-seats behind them, spurring them on. As Ûlfaeng disappears behind the descending ridge at their backs the forest thickens and reaches out its arboreal arms to enfold them, enclosing them in an embrace which almost imperceptibly, instantaneously, hides them and makes them feel as though lost in the depths of the woods and not merely at their fringes. How much more hidden and concealed shall they feel when miles upon miles lay behind them on their journey and these selfsame woods remain to enfold them still.

Regardless of the expanse that lies before them, their travel itself is as it always must be: moment by moment and step by step. The three tag-alongs and the two mercenaries take turns riding on the wains at intervals and, at other times, all walking, so as not to tire the mules. The forest is calm and cool, sheltering them from both sun and wind, though more sun in fact they would not mind in order to counteract the early spring chilliness that lingers in the air throughout the day. Its dappled rays reach them through the canopy of trees overhead, playing upon the undergrowth below and upon the narrow trail which has now passed from paved stone to simple packed earth, hardly wide

enough for the carriages to pass single-file between the trees on either side. Because of this the sun falls full upon them only for short moments when through natural causes there is a widening or slight clearing of the trees. It is in one of these that they stop for a short midday rest and repast.

After eating a bit of food, Hældáris lays back against a soft bed of heather and closes his eyes, letting the momentary warmth ease and invigorate his tired and aching body. Even as he does this he begins to slip into sleep, only to be interrupted by a voice near to his side. Opening his eyes he sees Astër, the smaller of the two mercenaries, seating himself and looking intently and kindly upon him. "Where are the three of you headed?" he asks. "You are clearly not accompanying this small caravan at the request of the traders, I assume. Two swords should be enough for such a trip."

"You are right in that," replies Hældáris, turning his body slightly to face the man. "But we are glad to be of assistance in that way, though hopefully such assistance shall not prove necessary. It is just better to travel together rather than alone."

"That is true," says Astër. "The traders mentioned that you were foreigners, and now I know by your accent that you are, though you speak our language quite well. Better perhaps than many of our own people." There is a question implicit in this observation, just as his earlier question remains unanswered, hanging in the air; and yet Astër does not seem particularly adamant in seeking answers. It appears that his mind is indeed simply inquisitive, and that his manner and his bearing reveal the dispositions of his heart, which is rare in one who works in a capacity such as his.

Seeing this candor in appearance if not in speech, Hældáris does not hesitate to give at least part of the answer, "We intend to travel a long way, hopefully to the capital of Vælaróma itself. Though the journey from Telmérion was even longer, in it we walked little, and while in leagues we have already traversed most of our way, it seems in thought and feeling that our journey has just begun."

"A fine answer," remarks Astër shortly. "So the caravan shall only accompany you part of the way. And for the rest?"

"We shall discern when it comes to that how best to proceed," and then, as if to anticipate the gradual string of questions leading up to the mercenaries' real query and curiosity, Hældáris says, "We travel to the capital because of the word of war that we have received. Know you anything about this conflict?"

"You come all the way from Telmérion, do you? It must be serious indeed, at least in your estimation," says Astër. "Aye, I know a little. But it seems to me, to many of us in fact, to be a local affair and of no concern to us."

"What makes you think that it is merely of local concern?"

"Because it is, as a fact, merely a regional matter. It is the squabble of a few new 'lords' vying for power over the right to sit on the tallest seat. And that is hardly something new or particularly concerning. In my opinion, indeed, the rebellion that overthrew the Empire did not put in its place something especially new, but rather the same thing wearing a more pleasing face. So what is happening now is not unlike what happened in the past, and little does it concern us ordinary people who, regardless of which man sits on the throne, shall go about our daily lives as if nothing has changed. For nothing has changed, or very little."

"But what of the bloody battles occurring in the cities and settlements around the capital?" asks Hældáris, sitting up now and turning completely to face Astër.

"Such is merely the domain of power for the two vying lords. Vælíria, after all, has long wanted to see itself as the ruler over all the other states on this continent, but since the fall of the Empire it has lost its hold upon us. And the Republic explicitly encouraged us to assert our independence again—within the unity of the whole, though they said—as a return to the structure of our land before the rising of the Empire."

"So you think that regardless of whoever wins this struggle for dominance over the city-state of Vælíria it shall impact you little?"

"Yes, I do think so," replies Astër. "The days in which an Imperial rule is viable have long since passed. And the rulers who wish for more power than their own local governance shall be sorely disappointed to learn that we the people of this continent, we the members of the many clans, have found ourselves again and shall accept no encroaching upon our autonomy."

"It seems more likely to me that this newfound autonomy shall result, not in the disappointment of those who seek power, but in warfare and bloodshed," Hældáris remarks with a sigh. "For those who truly want to rule over others shall seek this at any cost, even be it the loss of innocent life. Surely you know this. Your people have a communal memory, rooted in generations upon generations of life, of this kind of oppression and this kind of violence."

"Life under the Empire was not all that bad for us in material terms," Astër retorts. "But who in their right mind would fail to recognize the

lack of freedom and the quelling of our unique heritage as people? Nonetheless, I am tired of all the squabbling, and I wish things would simply settle down so we can enjoy our freedom."

"It is true that you lost much because of the centuries-long reign of the Empire. But it is also true that however great your diversity might be, and might have been if left untouched by Imperial rule, all of you in fact share a common heritage and are more alike than you would warrant," says Hældáris. "But I agree with the desire for independent governance and the fashioning of life according to your own unique regional and historical heritage, although that too could become revolutionary in expression and harm life rather than safeguard it. But it is also true that we all belong to one another, and are united, whether we wish it so or not."

"I do not agree with you," Astër says. "I believe that the severing of bonds that tied us in the past is the only way to asserting our own freedom and the true flourishing of our state. In anything other than this, it is the little people who are forgotten. We must insist on as few bonds as possible tying us to others outside of our own immediate domain. In the other direction lies the perpetual danger of a resurgence of centralized power and the curtailing of freedom that it brings."

"As much as I empathize with your desire to affirm and defend the autonomy of your way of life as a state, it is also impossible to ignore your responsibility toward—and your deep rootedness in—the entire nation that has for long ages called itself Vælíria, and of which even now you remain a part. For this is not a mere political farce, but a matter of the roots of people's stories intertwining together over many ages, and of their blood itself conjoining, blood of the flesh, but also of thought and life and aspiration."

"You talk too much for one who does not know either our history or our experience of life," says Astër, and it is apparent that his friendly tone has now reached its end. It seems that he was not looking for, nor expecting, anything other than friendly discourse and some bits of information on his mysterious travel companions, even though it was he who broached this difficult topic to begin with.

"Very well," Hældáris concludes softly, startled by the abruptness with which Astër has sought to bring the conversation to a close. "Then I shall say no more."

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"Hældáris, we are moving out again," sounds Aeyósha's voice from where he sits.

"Very well. I will walk if you wish to ride," he replies.

"Why do we not both walk? After a rest such as this, I say we give the mules a smaller burden for a while."

"I agree."

And so the caravan continues through the thickly-laden forest for the afternoon and into the evening until the sun dips low on the horizon and is hidden by the northern edge of the mountains hinted in the distance, at the limit of sight. Just as they are about the stop for the night and set up camp in the wilderness, Édvin calls out, "Look! I have found the sign."

"It is about time," remarks his brother. "I feel as though we should have come to it hours ago."

"Odd how distances seems to shift and change depending on the dispositions of the heart."

"True, true..."

While the two merchant brothers continue their converse, Hældáris, Aeyósha, and Îsáric draw near out of curiosity and inspect the sign that Édvin mentioned. Its wood is weathered and cracked after years exposed to the elements, but symbols etched into it are still easy to read:

Hinstad – One League

And so it is that at the end of their first day of travel they find refuge in a small inn-and-taberna in the hamlet of Hinstad, hardly more than a dozen houses nestled tightly in the densest part of the woods.

While the merchants stable the mules for the night, the mercenaries and the three travelers secure their goods in a locked stone room at the back of the inn (clearly traders passing through the hamlet is a common occurrence). They then take advantage of the warmth and comfort of the main room of the taberna to sit and rest from the long day's journey and to give sustenance to their bodies. Since Hinstad is so small, there are only three other persons in the room, not counting the owner who himself sits by the fire with his legs propped up almost in the flames themselves, drawing slowly on a thin curved pipe. The acrid odor of the smoke causes Hældáris to cough, though he tries to hide this. Tobacco-smoke is not an invention that has come to exist in Telmérion, and this is his first encounter with it—and an unpleasant one.

The same is true of the strong ale that the two mercenaries begin consuming in copious quantities, until the sound of their boisterous voices and merriment echoes through the room. Seeing the looks on his companions' faces, Îsáric says to Hældáris and Aeyósha, "The cul-

ture here is quite different than your homeland, is it not?"

"Aye, it is," replies Aeyósha with a soft smile. "Inhaling smoke is not one of our past-times. What is it that he is burning?"

"It is called tángrin," Îsáric explains. "It is a common herb used also in medicinal remedies, though as a topical analgesic and not in this form. When inhaled, however, it has a relaxing yet invigorating effect on the body. Unfortunately, one also comes then to crave it regularly, and to experience ill effects when it is not available."

"And the drink?" Aeyósha asks. "I assume it is an alcoholic beverage."

"You assume?" Îsáric asks, eyebrows raised in surprise. "What else would it be? Do you not have alcohol in your land?"

"We do have fermented liquids in Telmérion," Hældáris observes, "and yet by long custom they are consumed only at sacred ceremonies. For us these have a liturgical, sacral significance such that they are a part of our culture only in cultic settings. In all of our taberna, on the other hand, we drink mostly tisane in countless forms. It has become something of an art for us."

"Our cultures, it seems, are even more different than I had imagined," says Îsáric. "I did not know it was possible for a culture to exist without the proliferation of smoking-pipes and pots of ale. To us in Vælíria, they are trademarks of the taberna. You would be hard pressed not to find a taberna filled with pipe-smoke and raucous with drink."

"And what of yourself, Îsáric?"

"I had my 'glory days' long hence. In the army such things were customary. But I am an aged man now, almost sixty years of age, and I desire a simple and quiet existence." Îsáric's expression become distant for a moment as if he is caught up both in memory and in thought. "And I have come to love the beauty of ordinary life too much to either desire or appreciate such things."

"Then it is all the more unfortunate that the events of the present stir you from this simplicity and set your feet upon a long and difficult journey," remarks Hældáris.

"Unfortunate?" Îsáric asks with raised brows. "Aye, that it is. But it feels petty to be concerned for my loss of simplicity whenever the very well-being of our nation is at stake. And, after all, simplicity, quiet, and peace lie within a man more than they lie outside of him. If he does not have quiet within himself, he cannot find it anywhere else, but if he truly possesses it, or is possessed by it, then nothing can take it away from him."

"Well spoken," says Aeyósha with a smile. "But speaking of quiet, I am quite tired and shall now seek our chambers in order to sleep." And looking to his friend, "Hældáris?"

"Yes?"

"You will be retiring soon?"

"I will. Even if I do not need much sleep, my body is fatigued, and I prefer the early morning hours for my sleeplessness to the lateness of night, though both are good."

"Sleeplessness?" asks Îsáric. "Do you have trouble sleeping?"

"Oh no, it is not trouble," responds Aeyósha on behalf of the king's son. "He has ancient blood flowing in his veins, blood of a people of wakefulness and vigil. It seems he is meant to keep watch while the rest of us sleep. Though this was difficult for me at first, seeing myself as responsible for his protection, I have long since become accustomed to it."

"Interesting. I would like to learn more of this," Îsáric says.

"I shall leave you both to it," Aeyósha says, and then he takes his leave.

The two men who linger in the common room of the taberna speak for another hour or so before they too retire for the night.

When Aeyósha rises in the morning and enters the common room, he finds Hældáris seated before the hearth, his face illumined by the flickering light of the fire while the rest of him is shadowed in darkness. The room is otherwise empty.

Seating himself by Hældáris, Aeyósha at first opens his mouth to speak but then instead resolves on silence, joining his friend in his own quietude during the early hours of the morning before the break of dawn. After a long time passes in this way, it is Hældáris who speaks. He asks quietly, "Aeyósha, do you think it was a mistake for us to come to Vælíria?"

"You ask this because of the loss that befell us and our dear companions?" replies his friend, turning to look at him with tenderness and understanding, though Hældáris, reciprocating his glance, cannot help seeing a deep and personal sadness in his eyes as well. Clearly this question has weighed upon him also, and grief has gripped his soul, even if he has borne it differently, and indeed if for him it has different contours.

"Why else?" answers Hældáris tersely. "If I had known beforehand what would befall us, I do not know if I would have had the strength to consent to the call I heard."

"You asked if it was a mistake," says Aeyósha, "and yet you still speak in the awareness of the call that you heard. It remains with you even in your questioning."

"I...I suppose you are right. But perhaps I am just grasping to the last semblance of order and unity when all else seems to have crumbled into disorder and the thread of continuity seems to have been broken. How do I know that it was the voice of the One that I heard, and not the voice of my own desire or even a voice far more insidious?"

Aeyósha sighs deeply, saying, "You know as well as I that such a question can only be asked in the very act of living, and that such 'what if's,' when juggled ceaselessly in the mind, bring not clarity but confusion, not peace but anxiety, not commitment but weakening of resolve. In order for light to be born in your heart once again, and surety in the path that you walk, the question itself and the very asking must be born of faith and trust. Do not take back, therefore, even in your mind, the gift you have once given. Do not return to Telmérion even in your thoughts, but ask rather now, from the depth of your own living, from the heart of your pain and from the reality of where you now stand, for the light and truth of the One who loves you. For here, too, into this very same heart, the answer shall come."

"You believe light shall return if I continue to ask for it?"

"Light always comes when we seek for it. And yet whether or not you shall receive tangible confirmation of the path that you walk, I do not know. Perhaps your original assent must be enough, and going forward you are asked to walk in the darkness, clinging in faith without external consolation or easy clarity."

"Why would that be asked of me?" asks Hældáris softly.

"Perhaps your journey through the darkness, precisely thus, is meant to bring light to others," answers Aeyósha.

"I hear you," responds Hældáris, and his voice is surprisingly hoarse. "But what of you? Certainly these events have shaken you profoundly as well. And yet you do not show it, or at least you do so very little."

"Forgive me if I do not express my pain externally, and if I do not voice the lament of my heart," says Aeyósha. "It is one of the tendencies that I have, and not necessarily a good one. You, on the other hand, have a gift of honesty and vulnerability with others that I find quite beautiful and remarkable. Like a child, almost, you share what is on your heart, and you rarely struggle to give it voice before others, or before the All-Giver himself. It simply lives there, viscerally with you, and you relate it outward without a second thought." With an awkward

smile and a shrug of his shoulders, he concludes, "I, on the other hand, tend either to ignore what is within me so that I can focus on the well-being of others, or I share it in such a way that I might not burden them in the sharing."

"Then know that I want to receive from you too, Aeyósha, as you receive from me," says Hældáris, "whatever might spontaneously arise within you. Shared pain is better than pain borne alone, even if the sharing makes things seem more messy. There is a time for silence and there is a time for speech. And I would rather be with you in the unfiltered journey and struggle of your heart—to walk together with you—than to bear my pain alone. Allow me to bear your pain with you, as I wish to allow you also to bear mine." For a moment he lapses into silence before concluding, "And the words you have spoken are true; I know it. You understand my tendencies well, and I understand that I must journey forth from what has happened, from where we stand now, rather than taking refuge in lost possibilities. So let us lament together, and let us journey together. I do not think anything else is possible now, unless we are to collapse under the weight of what has been lost and before the mystery of the unknown that lies before us."

Chapter 16. A Song in Captivity

Relmaríndë.

The rocking of the cart as it bumps over the unsteady roads at first nearly makes Relmaríndë sick, though she recognizes that this is due more to anxiety—to sickness of heart—than to any amount of vertiginous movement. After all, she bore the rocking of a ship on the waves for more than a month with little problem. But then she was free. Then she had her husband by her side, the confident remembrance of the past, and hope for the future. Now these things are so far removed that she can barely call them to mind, and she is left with hardly more than a sense of profound desolation, of being cast to the gutter and forgotten, and being taken up instead by those who neither see nor care for her, but strip her of her freedom and intend to cast her into a place of misery as yet unimagined. And her prayers for light and consolation are met with silence, a silence to which she has long become accustomed and in which she has learned to hear a deeper voice; and yet now even this she cannot hear, her mind and heart too filled with the buzz of

anxious questioning, an interior cacophony that she cannot seem to surpass or bring to quietude.

Day passes into night and the caravan stops in a wooded clearing a couple dozen yards off the road. A few crusts of bread are passed in through the bars of this portable prison, and the three women share them as equally as they can. After this, a skin of water is given which is only half-full, hardly enough to satisfy the ravenous thirst of a single person, nonetheless all three of them. Now that the rocking has ceased, Relmaríndë takes a moment to look around the cart; the woman who when Relmaríndë had first entered had her face buried between her knees, a petite woman small in both stature and build, appears young, hardly at the beginning of adulthood, and she grieves at this. The young woman also seems to have no interest in conversation, or even little capacity for it, as she responds to Relmaríndë's words, when she addresses her, with no more than a sigh and a nod of the head.

The other woman, however, who appears older than Relmaríndë by perhaps ten or fifteen years, is more than willing to talk. Her demeanor is indeed an evident contrast not only to the reticent woman but to Relmaríndë herself. While the latter desires to sink into silence and to process everything that has happened to her, to pray and to seek light and clarity in the face of the maelstrom within her, the older woman seeks companionship. Recognizing that the two can exist together, the silence and the word, the prayer of the heart and the sharing of hearts in speech, Relmaríndë accepts this companionship and is relieved to experience it.

Her graying blonde hair matted and dirty, her pale skin beginning to wrinkle with care and age, and her clothing hardly more than rags, the woman nonetheless still has a presence that is markedly intense, as if she refuses to yield to the apathy that her situation seems to demand. "It appears to me that you do not hail from the land of Vælíria," observes the woman, turning her body toward Relmaríndë as she speaks, her figure only subtly visible in the dim light of the fire that burns a dozen or so feet away from the cart and filters in through the rough canvas fabric covering them.

"How do you come to that conclusion?" asks Relmaríndë. "I have hardly spoken."

"Words are not alone in revealing one's origins. Your appearance is far different than all those I have met in my life until now."

"You are right in your assumption. I hail from Telmérion," says Relmaríndë.

"Do all of your people look as you?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"The glow in the eyes, and the youthfulness of flesh and face."

"You are very perceptive. Though I recognize my looks are notable, I do not make a habit of paying any attention to them myself. And little either do others have cause to remark on them."

"So they are out of the ordinary even for your own people?" the woman asks.

"Simply said, yes. Though I belong simultaneously to two people."

"And you receive these looks from one people and not from the other?" The woman's enduring curiosity and questioning surprise Relmaríndë, though they do not make her uncomfortable.

"That is the case."

"A special people indeed they must be," says the woman, and then, after a moment, she adds, "If we are to be companions in bonds, is it not fitting that we share our names with one another?"

"Verily. My name is Relmaríndë, and though among my ancestral people we do not use surnames, my name in marriage is Illómiel." An expression of subtle emotion passes quickly over the woman's features at the mention of Relmaríndë's marriage, though it is unclear precisely what emotion thus expresses itself. "And what is your name?" asks Relmaríndë, when the moment has passed.

"My name, in your language, is Lily," she answers. "That is the first question that you have asked me, and it was but a response to my own suggestion. What I wonder is why you answer my questions so patiently without the slightest reference to the miserable situation in which we find ourselves. If I were you, I would be pestering me with all kinds of questions: Who has captured me? Where are we coming from and where are we going? What kind of bondage is this and what am I to expect?"

Nodding in understanding and a little puzzlement, Relmaríndë manages to say, "That would be the most ordinary response. But I suppose I am too preoccupied at the moment in order to voice those questions."

"What could preoccupy you apart from the questions that I mentioned?"

"It is those very questions...among others of a more interior nature. And I also think that part of me is afraid of the answers were I to ask. I did not realize it until this moment, but a part of me thinks that the less I know, the better shall I feel. I see now that it is probably foolish

to think such a thing. But deeper than that, another part of me simply feels defeated...like there is no point in asking. I have been preoccupied trying not to suffocate in my own thoughts and feelings."

"Even in speaking of your pain and confusion," Lily says, "you speak with remarkable reserve. You speak quietly of feeling a sense of defeat when others would cry out and weep in despair."

"Do I? I do not mean it that way. For me they are the gravest words that I can use. For in a mere matter of days I have lost the very trajectory of my life and all the bonds that once held me; I lost my reason for coming to this land, and I lost my husband and all of the other companions with whom I set sail from Telmérion many weeks ago. And this last turn of events has set a seal to all the rest: now I have lost my very freedom." Relmaríndë falls silent and exhales deeply, as if speaking, after all, has helped to ease her burden a bit or at least has given it some external expression, allowing her to bear it with greater interior freedom. "So forgive me if I do not seem much inclined to ask questions of you in this moment."

"No, I understand," says Lily. "Each one of us deals with grief in our own way. Some of us rage against the injustice, crying out and protesting; some of us grasp anywhere we can for the possibility of understanding or of fighting; and some of us sink into silent reflection, seeking a deeper peace and clarity under the tumult of events. You are simply one of the latter."

"It seems to me the most important thing to do at present," remarks Relmaríndë, "though there is certainly place for the former two as well." And then after a pause, "And what good would protesting bring about? Is there even a way to resist? If there were a way, perhaps I could embark upon it."

"I have seen many fall into darkness of this kind throughout my life, and I have known many in bondage of other kinds as well; and it is my conviction that there are only two options in such a situation: either one resolves to resist, externally or internally, or one is utterly defeated and loses oneself in the darkness. It appears to me that you are already resisting, whether you know it or not."

"How long, may I ask, have you been in such bondage as this?" inquires Relmaríndë hesitantly, not sure she either desires to know the answer or shall benefit from its knowledge.

As if intuiting precisely this fact, Lily says simply, "Long enough to have learned a thing or two about resistance."

At this, the young woman who has until now remained silent raises

her head and says, in such an unexpected way and with such intensity in her voice that the two older women are startled, "I thought we were all newly taken. So you have been in this situation before? Tell me what I can do to get out!" And with this it seems that her energy is entirely spent, and without even awaiting an answer she buries her face again in her arms and pulls her knees closer to her chest.

"Poor dear," begins Lily, taking this momentary opportunity to at last attempt a gentle step beyond the young woman's defenses, "we shall do everything we can to get you out of this predicament, and ourselves as well. You can be assured of that. But first tell us your name, that we may be with you now, as we can, even in your captivity."

"It does not matter anymore," remarks the young woman.

"Quite the contrary. It matters more than ever. Above all things, do not allow them to strip you of your name, for then they have already won."

"I-it is Vanya."

"Vanya. Thank you. I am Lily."

"And I am Relmaríndë. And she speaks the truth. We are much older than you and have had more experience of life; thus, if an opportunity arises or if we can seize upon one, know that we shall first of all seek to aid you in escape. What we can do, we will do."

The woman looks up again, directing her gaze first upon Lily and then upon Relmaríndë, and then, as if unable to hold their reciprocal looks, she lowers her head again. But even so, she speaks, "You would help me escape even if you were to remain behind? I find that hard to believe."

"There may yet be a way for all three of us to find our freedom," says Lily. "And until then, let us take some small measure of courage in the fact that we are together and not alone. It is the lonely heart that is broken, but together it may be saved."

"Your words mean nothing to me," Vanya retorts. "Console yourself with truisms all you desire, but the reality speaks for itself."

"Aye, that it does," Lily replies. "I apologize if I made light of our situation."

"I..." Vanya sighs, rubbing her eyes as if to dispel unwelcome thoughts. And then, in a different tone which is hardly more than a whisper, she says, "Thank you for introducing yourselves. It is good to know your names."

"And it is good to know yours."

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Close to two weeks pass as the caravan travels to the northwest, and, if the subtle sound of the waves is anything to go by, they never depart far from the coastline. The women are not allowed to leave the cage for even a moment, and they are forced to relieve themselves in a bucket which is then passed to one of the slavers on their next stop, though in the meantime they must live with its stench. The women take to abstaining as they can from taking care of such matters until the caravan stops, though such stops are infrequent, only once or perhaps twice a day. But considering the meager food and water they receive, there is little for them to pass nonetheless, and soon the body's urge has all but completely disappeared. Yet far worse than the physical frailty that they experience due to the lack of nourishment and the inertia of constant enclosure in a cramped space is the dullness of mind and heart, the subtle exhaustion that threatens to engulf even the life of the inner person. This experience deepens Relmaríndë's understanding of just how deeply man and woman were meant to live in contact with the world of the senses, with the richly layered tapestry of the cosmos and of life itself, with hours passing in succession each with their particular meaning and purpose, and to find in the contours of life the means through which heart and existence become a gift both received and given, and thus fully free and fully alive. Even if one may find in solitude, in stillness of body and purposelessness of action, a deeper contact with the very invisible wellsprings from which the cosmos itself is born, and to which it shall return, the contact of the heart alone is not enough, for its seeks also to clothe itself in flesh and in life, in choice and in action, lifting the world closer to its origin and its purpose precisely through enacting what is seen deep within the heart, just as the heart's seeing, inversely, is born most maturely through a life beautifully and vibrantly lived.

Yet neither of these is accessible to Relmaríndë now, and she finds not only meaningful action and bodily movement taken away from her, but also an encroaching feeling of inner suffocation, a kind of numbness in which her thoughts move in narrower and narrower circles, gradually overtaking her. And when she looks into the eyes of her companions in bonds, she sees that the young woman is already much further along this path of degradation, having little within her to resist it. Lily, on the other hand, is a mystery inscrutable, and her interior world is almost entirely unreadable with the exception of a certain persistent light in her eyes and a presence in her countenance and her words which reveal that, whatever narrowing her long time in servitude

has caused within her, it has not snuffed out the interior life entirely, and perhaps even has deepened it by urging it on to a point, to the essential, to the bedrock foundations of life and meaning.

The first eventful change in their journey comes whenever the caravan passes through a village. Why the slavers do not make a point of traversing around it Relmaríndë does not know, but she seizes up the opportunity without thought or hesitation. Hearing the bustle of an open-air marketplace or town square through which they pass, and Stagrímur crying out, "Wild and dangerous beasts! Step back and give way that we may pass through!" Relmaríndë presses her face to the canvas covering the cage and calls as loudly as she can, "We are not beasts. We are slaves! Please, someone help us!" She continues to call out in this manner until the canvas flap is thrown back. Her hope is immediately dashed as Stagrímur's angry face greets her; and, before she can react, he swings a cudgel directly down upon her head. Blinding pain courses through her and a flash of white light, and then everything sinks into blackness. Her body goes limp and her legs buckle beneath her; and, before the loses consciousness, she she feels arms wrap around her from behind.

When she wakes it is in darkness, and only after a few moments is she able to discern the contours of Lily's figure leaning over her, while their other traveling companion is curled in a fetal position in the corner, sleeping deeply. "It was worth a try," Lily says to Relmaríndë, pity and understanding in her voice. "I have done likewise numerous times. But you must understand that slavery is legal in some provinces of Vælíria, including the one in which we now find ourselves. Even if someone was inclined to liberate us, they would find little support in the law or government of the land."

"How can such a despicable practice be legal?" asks Relmaríndë, trying to sit up but stopping immediately when pain pierces through her head.

"Do not try to move for a while," says Lily as if giving voice to her pain. "Be grateful that he did not break your skull." And when Relmaríndë has settled back into a resting position, "Slavery is legal because it is not called slavery. No leader of our land would say in public that the capture and selling of individuals is an acceptable practice, and in fact they would outright condemn it as abhorrent. They rather speak of the poor ûrandi who need indentured servitude in order to thrive, finding their security and livelihood through devotion to a master. It is just part of the hierarchy of life in which some require masters as truly

as others need servants."

"You do not speak in jest?"

"I do not, though it was not always this way. But you must also understand that not all servitude is as bad as you might imagine. I myself had a master for years who treated me not unlike the rest of his household. Apart from my lack of freedom to leave or to choose another life for myself, my responsibilities and experience were not unlike what one would find in contractual employment."

"I would think that an exception," says Relmaríndë.

"Whether it is or not, I do not know," replies Lily. "But there is certainly also great evil and injustice in the practice of slavery in our land beyond the obvious: the curtailing of an individual's freedom and their being treated as the property of another. Men are often forced into grueling, back-breaking labor with little rest or nourishment, and women are often...well, forget I said anything."

Feeling sick, Relmaríndë whispers, "I understand." But then, unable to resist the question that arises within her, she asks, "Is *that* legal?"

"It is legal when it is freely chosen by the woman herself," Lily explains, the expression in her voice veiled, almost as if there is too much sadness here for her to allow the emotion to betray itself. "When it is forced, it is illegal in all the provinces of Vælíria. But in practice the question is rarely asked, of either individuals or of brothels, whether the women give themselves freely or under compulsion to their masters."

"I do not know what I would do if that were to be my fate," Relmaríndë says quietly. "I would rather suffer death than give myself away in such a manner."

"But being the weaker sex, we are often given no choice in the matter, not even a choice between death and degradation. It would be a mercy to be killed, but instead we live on, unable to resist and unable to flee. And as debased, as violated as our life may appear in our eyes, it remains something sacred, a trust not our own, which we have no right to end by our own hand." With these last words Lily betrays more concerning her own experience than she had intended, and as she shares a quick glance with Relmaríndë, both women know that this is the case. They sink together into heavy and sorrowful silence. And soon pain and exhaustion overtake Relmaríndë and she lets herself slip again from consciousness into a deep sleep, one punctuated by nightmares that leave her drenched in perspiration and chilled to the bone by the time the first light of morning comes.

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Nearly another week passes and then the second significant event on their journey occurs. Relmaríndë is stirred from her thoughts by the sound of large doors swinging open on rusty hinges, and then the cart bumps roughly over what seems to be a wood-planked bridge. Then it comes to a halt. Voices sound around them, though they are unable to make out more than snatches of their words and conversation. But soon enough the canvas covering is pulled off the cage and the three woman, hidden for so long in half-light, are exposed in the brilliant light of the midday sun. Looking around, Relmaríndë sees that they are in the bailey of an old castle or fortress, its stone walls cloaked in vine and moss and crumbling away in places after centuries of weather and wear. The instinct for escape surges through her and she casts her gaze about for options; yet she recognizes that it is hopeless. The great doors to the castle swing shut and are barred with a heavy reinforced beam, and then, a moment later, one of the slavers stands at the back of the cart, thumbing through the ring of keys attached to his belt. When he has found the fitting key he unlocks the cage and ushers the women out of the cart and onto the packed earth of the yard. They stand blinking in the light and trying to regain the steadiness on their feet that after these weeks of inactivity they seem to have lost.

Inspecting her surroundings, Relmaríndë sees three other carts similar to their own and from them emerging other groups of slaves, one of young men and two of women of various ages. All in all there are fourteen persons enslaved in this caravan, and their expressions range from terror to resignation to anger and all the shades in between.

"After the inspection keep the groups together and move them to the upper chambers on the north wing," cries one of the slavers. "We leave for the city at dawn tomorrow."

Herded like cattle by dozens of armed men, the captives cross the yard and enter the castle through a wide front entrance, where, in a high-ceilinged chamber, they are forcibly stripped of all clothing or possessions to which they have managed to cling since their capture. Made to stand side by side with weapons held to their chests and archers standing at ready should any resist, one by one they are inspected for any item they may have managed to hide during the prior denudation. Her cheeks burning hot with both anger and embarrassment as she covers her breasts with one arm from the leering eyes of the slavers and her groin with the other, Relmaríndë hears Vanya whimpering beside her. Sensing that the young woman is about to break and

to do something that could endanger her, she whispers, "Be strong, Vanya. Be strong. We are with you."

"Silence!" cries the man nearest to Relmaríndë, prodding her chest with the tip of his sword until it breaks the skin and blood begins to flow. "Speak again and the words will be your last." And with a crooked smile, "And move your arms, or they will be moved for you."

Even if she desired to resist, she dos not have a chance, as the two men inspecting the captives at this moment reach her. One pulls her arms from her body and holds them in an iron grip while the other inspects her body and all of its orifices for any object that she might have thought to conceal, though whether this is actually a search or a mere show of power and domination, a mere act of humiliation, she does not know. As much as she tries to restrain them in order to appear strong for Vanya who stands next in line, tears spring to her eyes and flow freely down her cheeks. And then it is over, though her pain continues as her heart goes out to Vanya in compassion, and she undergoes her suffering as if it were her own. Indeed, in this moment some inner capacity in her heart, some ability of the Velási blood within her, is unleashed, and a torrent of fear and anguish and shame and confusion washes in upon her from the prisoners around her, and following shortly upon it and compounding it, the apathy and greed and lust and sick delight of the slavers. Were it not for her desire to support her companions in pain during this moment of trial, she would collapse to her knees. Instead she stands more upright, turning her head to look at Vanya and nodding in encouragement and care, as if to speak silent words of consolation. And because of the bearing that precedes and carries this simple glance, it has a mysterious efficacy, and Relmaríndë is able to discern a shift in the features of the young woman, a subtle strengthening of her resolve and a taste of the interior freedom of which she has been totally bereft until this moment, as of someone drowning whose head at last breaks the surface of the water.

After Vanya, Lily undergoes the search with stoic indifference, though Relmaríndë, with the sensitivity of feeling that grips her in this moment, feels the reverberations of the woman's heart more deeply than she yet has, and she tastes both her bitter and prolonged suffering and also the light of hope that lives unbroken within her. Relmaríndë's mind and heart spontaneously follow the thread of this hope in memory and imagination, in the deep places of the heart, to its source; but the thread is cut before she attains to its end, and the anguish of the next person in line flows in upon her, absorbing her attention. In a few

minutes more it is all done, and the captives are clothed in poor garments of sackcloth and ushered through another set of doors, up a spiral staircase, and down a dark hallway before being locked in rooms with the same companions with whom they had shared their cages on the road.

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"That was...horrible," says Vanya when they have been left alone in the darkness of their cell. "And did you hear? They send us to the city tomorrow. It must be Aelthýrin, correct?"

"Aye," says Lily quietly.

"They intend to sell us?"

"Aye."

As her eyes adjust to the darkness, Relmaríndë looks around the room. It is empty save for a few tattered blankets piled in a corner and a high window on one wall, through which indirect light slants into the room, the only source of light in their stone prison.

"I know of this fortress," says Lily, "though I have never been here before. It is a well-known stopping-place for the slave commerce between the south and the north, and where almost all captives are held in detention before being sold in Aelthýrin or transported further to Vælaróma or elsewhere. However, before this castle fell into disuse in prior centuries, it was known to house many noble warriors who performed great deeds written of in lore or sung in songs. Perhaps some of the virtue of these men and women long passed still lingers in the ancient stones of this place."

"What good are songs and stories at a time like this?" asks Vanya in a quiet voice. "What good are the memories and remnants of people long dead?" And then, catching herself, she adds, "I am sorry. I should not speak in such a manner."

At this moment they hear the jangling of keys and the click of a lock, and then the door swings open. A torch momentarily illumines the darkened room and the form of a man appears long enough for to him to set a platter with three plates on the floor and then to again withdraw, securing the door behind him. On the plates is food enough for each woman to eat until satisfied.

"What is this?" voices Relmaríndë. "Why do they feed us now?"

"I suspect you know the answer," says Lily, taking the platter and distributing the plates to her companions. "But that does not matter. Let us eat while we can and regain some of our strength. Yet eat slowly, so the food does not make you sick. It has been long since we have eaten

such an amount."

While they eat they speak little, each woman lost in her own thoughts. Relmaríndë's mind and heart are still reeling from the intense moments of bearing that she has just experienced, and she is preoccupied by the effort to resist turning in upon herself in order to lessen or numb the pain, but rather to keep her heart open to others even when their proximity hurts.

Whenever they have finished eating the women share a few words, speaking about nothing of particular weight or import, though the very experience of simply being together and speaking brings some measure of solace to each. Then Lily, looking at her companions, says, "Would you like to hear a song? Being in this place makes me think of it."

"If this place reminds you of the song," says Vanya, "then perhaps I do not wish to hear it, as it must be a gloomy song indeed."

"Oh, that is not the reason I think of it," explains Lily. "It is rather simply the location itself and its past that stirs my memory. The song is not particularly cheery, but neither is it glum."

"Then by all means, I would be willing to hear it," Vanya concludes.

"I agree," adds Relmaríndë. "Does this song have a name?"

"Whether it has a name, I am not sure," says Lily. "But let me allow the lyrics to speak for themselves." And so after a moment to collect herself, she begins to sing:

> In ancient days as great war racked the land
> Soldís the Deathless came, his sword in hand.
> Though slain a hundred times he could not die
> and drove back the oppressor who was nigh.
>
> He came promising peace but bringing strife;
> war he ended, with which our land was rife,
> and for a short moment, a brief respite
> all seemed serene, all seemed restored to light.
>
> The sun shone brightly and the moon was fair
> and children weaved ornaments in their hair.
> And yet in the cradle, in the child's bed
> death came, unbidden, to the royal seed.
>
> And he who united divided land
> by might in arms and war, with sword in hand,
> proclaimed himself ruler universal
> with right of rule and judgment over all.

But an order of knights stood unbroken,
adhering to the old ways forgotten
by most people of our ancient land,
and though openly they could not withstand

their ways became legend, and legend myth,
until their name, spoken by ken and kith,
planted yearning hope for a life unknown,
of peace and liberty in fields unsown.

Irandiélistë Nerethion,
with burnished shield, and spear sturdy and long,
they fought not to supplant the unjust rule
but to protect innocents from the cruel,

without commission from the Emperor,
and unknown to him and to his power,
but in faithfulness to their ancient troth,
they stood still as bastions of light and truth

for ages untold 'til from history
they passed, and lived no more in memory.
But in songs still sung of days forgotten
their legend is promise, life to quicken.

"Who were they, these Irandielístë Nerethion?" asks Relmaríndë after Lily has fallen silent.

"Precisely what the name implies: protectors of this world devoted to the god Nerethion and under his mantle. Of course we know little any more of fact or history beyond the echoes of legends long living only in song and verse. But I believe that they truly existed, and that under the legends is a profound truth not only about these righteous warriors but about our land and the memory of our past enduring even in the ages of the Empire's domination. Indeed, I have cause to believe that precisely this ancient castle was their home, for legends speak of 'a citadel by the sea, where the River Ista empties into ocean's expanse.' That is where we are, and, if I am not mistaken, even to this day this fortress goes by the name of Castle Istë. The men who have taken over it and appropriated it to their own ends little thought to change the name, not knowing the origins from which it comes. Indeed, few still living know that the river and the town Istáris further inland from the coast both owe their origins and their naming to these warriors of old."

"What does that word mean: istë?" asks Relmaríndë. "Even though

I am fluent in your language, I do not recognize it."

"It is the old word for a knight or oath-bound warrior," explains Lily, "or rather the plural of that word. The title Irandielístë Nerethion literally means 'knights of Irándiel in devoted service to Nerethion.' Thus we are not far from 'Knight's River,' or such it was called in the old tongue."

"You believe that the presence of the knights still sanctifies these halls," says Relmaríndë, "and their spirit shall be with us when we travel up the river to the city tomorrow. Is this why you tell us of these things?"

"A meager hope, I know," remarks Lily, "but I thought saying something was better saying than nothing at all. As long-enduring as our present suffering may appear in our eyes, it is but a short moment in the history of our people, and thus perhaps it may serve some good beyond our sight or comprehension, connecting the glory of our past with the hope of future restoration."

"In moments such as this despair seems more justified than such memory and hope," remarks Relmaríndë, and then she smiles mournfully to herself as she reflects upon her words. "And who am I to say such a thing, who have been entrusted with the memory and hope of my people?"

Vanya rises to her feet and paces anxiously around the room, something that the other two women entirely understand. In fact Relmaríndë rises and paces with her, moving her body and stretching it after the weeks in cramped enclosure, although her physical weakness and fatigue make this difficult. As she passes under the window she hears a sound soft and subtle, at the very edge of hearing, and she pauses. "Are we above the ocean?" she asks at last. "Despite the thick stone that surrounds us and our height above the earth, I think I heart the crashing of waves far below us."

"I suspect that we are, yes," replies Lily.

Leaping to grab hold on the stone sill of the high window, Relmaríndë attempts to life herself up to look out, but her arms are too weak and she falls again to the floor, though not landing uncomfortably. After two more attempts she is able to accomplish it, and she indeed sees nothing out the porthole but open sky and undulating waves. With one further lift with her arms she is able to push her head far enough outside the window to look down. She sees that the castle is built up to the very edge of a rocky escarpment overlooking the ocean, its waves crashing against the stone.

Dropping herself again to the ground, Relmaríndë turns to her companions and says, "We are not as high as I thought we would be. It is perhaps thirty or forty feet to the ocean below. And seeing the window up close, I think, Vanya, that you might fit through it."

"Are you suggesting that I attempt to escape through the window?" she replies, wide eyed.

"I am just mentioning the possibility. It would be very dangerous to jump from such a height, but perhaps we can lower you down a significant portion of the way."

"How?"

Relmaríndë steps toward the blankets and lifts one of them, twisting it into a rope-like shape and then pulling on it as hard as she can. It holds. "Lily, will you hold the other end of this?"

Lily rises to her feet, clearly in agreement with Relmaríndë's idea, and the two women together test the weight-bearing capacity of the blanket. "For someone as petite as you, Vanya, I believe it will hold."

"You are truly serious?"

"Did you not wish to escape? And did we not tell you that we would do everything we could to help you do so?" asks Lily.

"That is right. It is certain that neither Lily nor I will fit through the window, but if even one of us can escape, then it is worth the effort." Without waiting for an answer Relmaríndë begins tying the other blankets together, and by the time this has been completed she is confident that they can get Vanya to within fifteen or twenty feet of the water—still a dangerous distance if she were to enter it poorly, but possible.

"I-I will do it," whispers Vanya, her face a mixture of relief and anxiety, "but only if you think I can."

"I most definitely do," says Relmaríndë. "Be courageous. We will help you pass through the window, and then you must hold on very tightly to the blankets while we lower you down. Whenever I call to you that we can go no further, or when it is clear that we cannot, you must plant your feet firmly against the castle wall and push off from it. Release the rope at the furthest distance from the wall that you can, then hold your legs together, straight downward, and tuck your arms to your side. Try to hit the water with your feet first. And the surf will be quite strong, so once you have entered the water try quickly to swim to the surface and to find a place where you can climb back onto the land. And then—"

"—And then flee," Vanya concludes.

"Exactly."

While Relmaríndë throws the end of the blanket rope through the window, Vanya, overcome with emotion, embraces Lily as if she were her mother or her dearest friend. This is followed shortly by a similar embrace shared with Relmaríndë.

"If I m-make it," she says, shivering with fearful anticipation, "you shall have my undying gratitude. And I hope to meet you again that I may express it to you."

"It will be reward enough for you to find your freedom," says Lily with a final gesture of affection, a simple caress of her palm on Vanya's cheek.

Then the two older women lift Vanya toward the window and help her to crawl through, leading with her feet. The last thing they see of her is her face looking through the porthole, beautiful and fragile in its vulnerability, and then her hands clinging desperately to the rope. And then they begin to lower her, slowly but deliberately, until there is no more blanket to spare.

"That is all, Vanya. Go!"

A few moments pass in which both women hold their breath in anticipation, and then there is a final tug on the rope, and then a release.

Chapter 17. Vægo Moorlands

Hældáris.

The small company departs shortly after first light, Aeyósha and Îsáric walking while Hældáris rides, his wounds from the mykkëvéngr still causing him pain. They travel this way for two more days, and the woods continue thick all the while, shading them from a chilly north wind that blows in for much of both days. But by the time the sun hangs low over the horizon on the eve of the second day, the trees have begun to thin and the earth to be littered with stones, cloaked in waving grasses and shrubs, and pock-marked with little gullies and rugged ravines: the beginnings of the Vægo Moorlands. That night they sleep under the stars, which are spread almost unobstructed above them except for the occasional stray wisp of cloud moving quickly to the south.

When they wake in the morning, to their surprise, there is a dusting of snow upon the ground, and the air is bitterly cold. They eat their breakfast quickly while gathered around the fire and then depart on their way. By the late morning most of the snow has melted into a soft dampness upon the ground with the exception of what is shaded by

the girth of the few sparse trees or larger boulders spread about. Here and there can be espied the ruins of old stone houses hundreds of years past fallen into disuse and disrepair, or fieldstone fences edging what must have been long ago pasture or farm land, but which now lies fallow, buried thick under centuries of growth.

"What happened to this land?" Aeyósha asks, gesturing to the ruins that surround them.

"I do not rightly know all the details," remarks Îsáric by way of response, "but there are at least two causes that I know of for the land to be as you see it now. One is the simple fact of the urbanization of this part of Vælíria, and in truth all of Vælíria, during the reign of the Empire. There were many incentives for the people of the wilds to seek their well-being, fortune, or safety in the cities and towns, or even to gather together in simple settlements such as what we saw in Hinstad. The other reason...well, is of a more grievous nature."

"War?" guesses Aeyósha.

"Aye, war. These stretches of land—from the western border of the forest through the moorlands and up into the Vollrænd—were a stage of much conflict in the inter-tribal strife at the beginning of our history as a people. These lands became the prime bargaining-chip, as it were, in the petty wars between the tribes that would become the clan of Ulfäs and those that would become Turínhäs."

"Ulfäs and Turínhäs," asks Aeyósha, "those are the clans of which Ûlfaeng and Turholm are the seats of leadership?"

"You guess rightly," comes the voice of Hældáris from atop the wain that rides a short ways ahead of them, though clearly near enough for him to both hear their conversation and to take part in it. "However, during the long years of the Empire the distinctions between the clans became much less important than they once were. It is not much different than what happened in our own Telmérion during the Imperial occupation, though to a much greater extent. Is that correct, Îsáric?"

"Exactly so. Certainly a community does not lose its own local identity when incorporated into a greater unity, and not even, for that matter, when suffering oppression, at least at first. But with time can come forgetfulness. And while the extinction of all conflict and warfare between the clans is certainly a boon, there is also much that I fear has been forgotten forever in the unity that the Empire effected among our people for so many centuries." Îsáric falls silent for a moment as if thinking, and then speaks again, correcting himself, "My choice of words was a poor one. I did not mean to speak of what the Empire

brought us as true unity. Authentic unity never dissolves distinction, nor absorbs and annihilates those who are incorporated into it; it rather deepens, expands, and brings to flourish this very distinction and uniqueness. However, uniformity, as the lifeless and twisted mockery of true unity, cannot abide such diversity, and it will bring about its eradication either through a subtle and gradual suffocation or through a violent onslaught. The former has been at work among our people for so long that we cannot even remember it being any different. We can perhaps find in ourselves hope for something else, but too many generations have passed for the history of the clans before the Empire to live in anything but books and ballads."

"I lament the loss of these lands," says Aeyósha, still looking about with something akin to fascination written upon his face. "Walking through them now, I can almost feel, can almost imagine, the lives of those who once called them home."

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That evening, with the descent of the sun and the coming of dusk, the temperature drops significantly and a biting chill envelops the land once again. Thankfully the north wind has ceased and is replaced by an almost total stillness. The air is so still that everything upon the land, too, seems to have stopped as if in homage to the silence; and whatever sounds there are, be it the cracking of a twig or the hoot of an owl, seem both magnified and muffled. In other words, they sound forth from this stillness and silence and in it remain enfolded, only enhancing and deepening the sense of its all-enfolding presence. Combined with the silhouettes of ancient stones and the rubble of abandoned homesteads standing stark against the last light lingering on the horizon, this stillness creates an almost eerie feel, as if the world itself has drawn in breath and is paused, hesitant, before the exhale. That, at least, is how it appears to Hælduris, his heart still recoiling in shock from the events that have recently befallen him. For Aeyósha, on the other hand, the stillness feels like a moment of restful repose, and the echoing silence of the broad land roundabout and the sky wide and expansive above, and the noiselessness which is yet so full of voice, is a welcome companion at the end of the day.

Sitting on the trunk of a massive tree long fallen and beginning to decay into the earth, Aeyósha looks out longingly at the last light fading from the sky, a colorless gray now passing quickly into black. He remembers his home and aches, more than he has since his departure, for the moment of return. Though he is unwed and both of his parents

died years ago, an elder sister and a younger brother await him in Fian'caehil. Litrædi and Efnílir are both within two years of Aeyósha in age, and they have always been close both in heart's affection and in the shared substance of life. The former, sickly and incapable of bearing children, has also remained unwed, working as a seamstress from home, though she has also found joy in being for the children and younger people of the town a kind of mentor or mother-figure. Her quiet demeanor and her joyful endurance of suffering and illness has given her an evident authority for all who meet her and, perhaps paradoxically, it has made her attractive to those who are young, and who precisely thus are so adept at sensing hypocrisy or superficiality in their elders. Efnílir, on the other hand, has been wed for six years, and his wife and child live with Aeyósha and Litrædi his sister, in an expansion to their childhood home that was built during the couple's engagement. Through all the years of his life, therefore, Aeyósha has yet to live apart from his siblings, and their absence now is so tangible that it feels like a presence. He grieves at this absence and prays for their well-being, letting his heart miss them and long for the sight of their face or the touch of their closeness.

But he grieves, too, at the loss that has greeted Hældáris and himself upon their arrival in Vælíria, feeling all the while the radical vulnerability in which they now find themselves, two sole survivors trying to continue a mission which has changed so much in character and form even if the inner essence, which is invisible to the eye, remains the same. Thinking of this, he turns to direct his gaze, half unconsciously, upon Îsáric. He feels gratitude for the man and for his openness to them, something so unexpected yet so helpful and consoling. But to his surprise Aeyósha does not see him anywhere in the camp, either lying down to sleep or seated around the campfire that casts its ruddy light upon the weary faces and figures of those near to it. *He must have stepped away for a moment,* Aeyósha thinks, *but I hope he returns soon. It is dangerous away from the group.*

It is almost pitch black in both earth and sky by the time the form of Îsáric makes itself visible in the light of the fire, and his voice sounds as he speaks to one of the merchant brothers about a trivial matter. Aeyósha cannot hear what they are saying, but he does not need to. He is simply grateful to have the presence of others with himself and the king's son on their journey, something, however small, which is a sign of kindness when all else has been lost.

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Hældáris wakes with a start long before dawn, when the world is still cloaked in darkness and cold, though his heart races and his body is clammy with sweat. He sits up and looks about, but even the campfire has dwindled now to hardly more than fading embers, and all those around him sleep but for the one who keeps watch half a dozen yards away, only his silhouette visible as a darker shape against the dim glow of the nocturnal air. The nightmare lingers in Hældáris' consciousness even more vividly than does the world before his eyes and the soft noises of night sounding in his ears and the chill against his flesh: he sees again and again the form of Relmaríndë slipping away from him, and no matter how much he reaches for her, and how vehemently, he cannot cross over the distance and save her from sinking into the abyss.

Overcome with grief and a sense of utter powerlessness, he weeps silently for he knows not how long. And then he rises to his feet and approaches the sentinel, though he cannot make out who it is without more light by which to see. "I will take over the watch until sunrise," he says, trying not to startle the man, who, when he turns to the voice, is revealed to be Astër.

"I am struggling to keep my eyes open with so little to focus them upon," Astër replies, "so I appreciate that. Thank you."

"It is my pleasure," says Hældáris. "I do not think I could sleep more, even if I tried. And I enjoy waiting for the coming of the sun."

He situates himself looking toward the east so that he can watch the first light begin to paint the sky, harbinger of the coming sun, though he regularly turns back, too, to scan for the blackness in the west. Camped as they are in a wide plain, the travelers are exposed on all sides with little to defend themselves, and so Hældáris, as much as he desires to drink in the consoling beauty of the sunrise unhindered, knows that in this moment watching all flanks of the company is necessary. Eventually he embraces this task wholeheartedly and in fact finds in it perhaps more beauty even than merely sitting staring to the east. For he rises to his feet and paces slowly and quietly around the perimeter of the camp, looking about at all the silhouettes visible in the distance, black shapes of greater darkness against the dark sky. This vigil is only interrupted, as the streaks of pre-dawn light reach out their thin fingers through the low hanging clouds in the east, when Dágra rises from sleep and softly calls out to him.

"I am going to begin preparing a bit to eat, so that we can depart shortly after the others rise," he says. "Come sit next to me, will you? I would like to speak a bit."

"Very well," replies Hældáris, and he seats himself near the mercenary, relaxing the intensity of his watch somewhat though keeping his senses alert to their surroundings and his eyes on the perimeter of the camp. And as Dágra rekindles the fire to a strong flame and begins to place strips of salted meat upon a flat metal skillet, he asks, "Was there something specific about which you desired to speak?"

The man does not immediately reply, whether he is thinking about what he wishes to say or simply finishing the task at hand first, Hældáris does not know. But then Dágra sits back on his haunches and looks at the king's son, and says, "You travel toward Vælaróma in order to seek peace for our people. Is this correct?"

"It is."

"And you place your life and well-being in danger for a foreign nation, and with no thought for gain?"

"I have not thought of it in such a way."

"But it is the truth?"

"I suppose so."

"Truly you seek nothing from this? There must be in you a desire for glory, or praise, or perhaps for a handsome reward. Or maybe the approval of your father is enough to motivate you."

"I know not all the depth of my motivations, Dágra, though I can say with certainty that I seek not my father's approval, nor any earthly reward—for I had all that I desired on this earth already before departing from my home, and this I have lost on my journey; and my father's approval and love has been given freely from my earliest days, and never have I conceived of earning or augmenting it by my own accomplishments."

"But do you see any hope in your endeavor?"

"There was very little tangible hope to begin with," replies Hældáris, "and there is even less now. We have come simply because we were asked to come."

"By your king?"

"By the people of your land, or at least those who think to represent them."

"Who can truly represent the people but the people themselves?" Dágra asks, and though his questions come one after another with hardly a pause, his voice is kindly and bears no accusation or doubt.

"In truth no one can, at least not in fullness," Hældáris says after a moment. "And yet represent them some must, for so it is in this life, that a man must speak for the people to make their desires and needs,

their pain and their plight, known. And so it is, my father has taught me, that this very desire and pain must be borne by some for the sake of all. A single man, as it were, can carry the world, if he truly lets himself be carried deeply and firmly enough by what is greater than he."

"You believe that is true?"

"A single man...no, not as a man alone. It is impossible that a man can carry the world. We are too small, too frail, too limited to let our hearts dilate to such proportions. But in the One who is not a man, in the One who is boundless, perhaps we can be granted a participation in a greater and wider bearing, in the very Love that holds the world."

"How do you speak thus, son of the king?" Dágra says, and in response to the tone in his voice Hældáris turns to look at him, their eyes meeting.

"What do you mean?"

"You speak not as of something you have thought or heard, but of something you have experienced, something that in your heart of hearts you live as your deepest truth."

"Whether it is my deepest truth I do not know," says Hældáris, "though I hope that it is, or may be so. But I know that it is truth, the truth for each person and for all." He sighs and then continues, "And yet in the same moment I struggle, for the pain and loss of these days has plunged a knife into my heart and it twists within me, threatening to sever something in me that was never meant to be severed."

"Again you speak of experience deeper than I know," Dágra replies. "I know how to take a man's money and swing a sword where he tells me to swing it. I know that I want to be free to work for a wage and to receive it, and to not have another man tell me what I may think or say or do unless it truly be to protect me from my own stupidity. And yet you speak of a thought deeper than my thinking, and a feeling deeper than I feel. Your culture must be far different indeed than ours to have preserved some spark of life or light that among us has been extinguished or has at least grown dim."

"The light of which you speak is within you," Hældáris says, "otherwise you would never recognize it. It burns within all of us, and thus we may recognize it when we see it outside of us, provided our hearts are pure and simple enough to see."

"So says your father, right?"

"Yes, so says my father, who found the light within and who brought light external, light from beyond this world, to a people plunged into darkness even unto death."

Chapter 18. Light and Loss

Albrýndaer.

The labor of making a path to the fissure of light has begun in earnest, as people from all the different encampments roundabout have come together to gather stone and to pile it, a little higher each day, until it will allow them access to what they all hope to be an exit from this prison into the light of day. But Albrýndaer for the first week recovers from his wound, which has become red and inflamed. Since he is unwelcome in the house of Ílya's father and yet not fit to return home, she gives him a shelter in an old tent at the edge of the encampment. Often she returns there during this time, sitting by his side not only to clean and bandage his arm but to speak and to listen, to cherish his presence as he does hers, both of them marveling at their unexpected reunion. And with the fever of enthusiasm that courses through the community like a tidal wave at sea, stirring many hearts and bodies to work and planning in preparation for their escape from prison, the two young persons go unnoticed.

"What a strange chance it was that after your flight you came first, and unknowingly, to this encampment," remarks Ílya, wonder glistening in her eyes.

"I do not believe it was chance. Perhaps in the past I might have; but certainly not now. Everything, free though it be—and precisely in its freedom—is a part of the great fabric of the weaving of the One whom we do not see, and yet who is present in each and every thing."

"Your unlikely escape certainly speaks to that," she replies. "I am astounded that things unfolded as they did. Little hope was there for escape from such a place, and yet here you are, and here you are with news of a freedom that our people had all but ceased expecting."

"I wonder what shall await us above, if we truly are to escape."

"Does it cause fear in you?"

"I would not call it fear," Albrýndaer says thoughtfully, "though I am concerned. I am concerned not so much about what we shall find as what we shall do when we escape to the surface."

"Whatever we do, let us do it together."

"Yes, I agree completely. But when I spoke of 'we,'" he clarifies, "I actually meant to speak of the community as a whole. I am concerned

that there is so much resentment and bitterness that our return to the surface shall spark violence and death."

"I hear murmurings, the same as you," Ílya says. "Whispered conversations, words shared in stillness and in dark corners. And soon I think we shall hear them spoken openly and even shouted as rallying cries. But perhaps the voicing of these things is necessary, and even the resistance. After all, an Empire that imprisons men and women and children in such a place cannot be one ruled by justice and good."

"Of course, that is true," replies Albrýndaer with a sigh, "and yet I worry that violence will cause as much evil as it does good, or rather that in seeking to demolish one thing it shall bring down many other things as well. Innocent human lives most of all. My concern is that we shall flee from violence and death beneath the earth to violence and death above it."

"Yet there is little that we can do but witness the events as they unfold," Ílya concludes with a tone of resignation. "What can two young persons such as ourselves do in the face of such events?"

"You are not wrong, at least in the main. But perhaps there may yet be some small measure of help we may give, or safety we may provide, even in a situation far beyond our previous experience and in a place we have never yet known."

"You sound surprisingly hopeful."

"Even in the face of great evil and suffering, I believe there is always a way for light to weave goodness, however hiddenly, into the fabric of loss. Having experienced what I did, of this I am certain. My hope is that in coming days we may serve in some small way the purposes of this goodness."

"Then I shall join you in that hope."

† † †

After he has recovered sufficiently to move about, though still too weak to travel, Albrýndaer and Ílya often walk slowly through the mostly deserted pathways of the encampment, talking quietly with one another or together remaining lost in silent thought. During one of these times, Albrýndaer asks her, "Have you ever heard of a writing entitled the Arechaíon?"

"Never," she replies, looking at him with curiosity in her eyes. "Why do you ask?"

"Just interest. I read a while back a fascinating account of the origins of our people based in what I take to be an ancient history. It was called the Benaíon, and it referenced something entitled the Arechaíon, say-

ing that it followed where the latter ended."

"Those titles," Ílya says thoughtfully, "are they not based on the two first letters of the Telméric alphabet?"

"How do you know that?"

"You did not learn that when you were young?"

"I did not," says Albrýndaer. "I was acquainted with no other alphabet than our own."

"The two are similar," she explains, "but the pronunciations and the names we give to the letters are somewhat different, and the written runes also differ."

"What are the first letters, then?"

"Arecha and Bena. I wonder if there are more accounts of a similar nature elsewhere in the world, taking their titles from the other letters."

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Albrýndaer says. "I received the impression from what I read that the Arechaíon was much more ancient than the Benaíon, and written by a different people—a 'veiled' people in the land of Telmérion—whereas the Benaíon was written on our own soil. Either way, the import, it seems, was simply to write about the beginnings, the beginnings of our race and the beginnings of history, and titles based on the start of the alphabet seemed fitting to this purpose."

"I agree," says Ílya. "After all, our word 'alphabet,' in Telmeric, is pronounced as *arechabena.*"

Stopping in mid-stride, Albrýndaer turns to look directly at Ílya, eyebrows raised, and he says, "You perpetually surprise me."

"Of all the things that we have been denied in this underground prison, Bryn," she replies with a smile, "the gift of knowledge is not one of them. And for this I am grateful."

"Yet what we learned was in fact so little! And there is so much more I would know, so much more I would learn!" cries Albrýndaer enthusiastically. "I sometimes dream of how many books I could read in the world above, or how many places I could visit."

"As do I, although I admit I dream more of the latter than the former."

"That is fitting for you. After all, what are words in comparison with the reality itself?"

"As the inverse is fitting for you. For what is mere external beholding without the vision and understanding of the heart?"

† † †

A few days later, in the evening, as they sit together in Albrýndaer's tent eating what food they have been able to salvage, he voices to Ílya,

"I worry for my parents. Not only did I depart from them in a manner that wounded our relationship, but I fear for their well-being and their life. I think I am well enough now to try to find my way back to our encampment, that I may see them again."

"Do you really think that is wise? Even in our encampments it is dangerous, and outside of them immeasurably more so. I fear that if you leave you shall never arrive, and neither I nor your parents shall ever see you again. Should you not rather wait until we make our escape to the surface? Surely at that time you can find them again. Or perhaps indeed they too shall come to aid in building a way to the surface, and you shall see them here with no effort of your own."

"I wish it were so, Ílya," says Albrýndaer, "but I do not want to fail to do everything that is within my power."

"And I do not want you to go," she says quietly, somewhat abashed. "I do not see it failing to act but rather as recognizing the limits of what is prudent and right in the situation in which we find ourselves."

After a moment of silent thought, Albrýndaer sighs and replies, "I-I will think upon what you have said. Although, unless something changes my mind, I intend to depart tomorrow morning." And then, seeing her expression, he exclaims, "Oh, no—I hate seeing you look like that! I shall take all possible care and shall return as soon as I can, hopefully bringing them with me."

By the time morning comes it is not Albrýndaer who has decided to remain but Ílya who has chosen to accompany him. If he insists on departing, she thinks to herself as she walks toward his tent, then she shall simply go with him. Yet beyond the plans or intentions of either, things turn out quite differently. When Ílya enters the tent and gently shakes his shoulders to awaken him, she immediately knows that something is wrong, not only because of the pallor of his skin and the temperature of his body, but also because of the smell. "I thought we were beyond this stage, beyond this possibility," she says more to herself than to him, as his eyes flutter open.

"What is it, Ílya?" he asks groggily, his voice hoarse. It takes him a moment before he can speak, and then he says, "You look worried."

"How do you feel, Bryn?"

"I...I feel very poorly. I do not know what happened."

"I think I do. Will you let me see your arm?"

He holds out his right arm and she unties the bandaging covering the wound. It is as she feared: the wound is foul and festering, the skin around it off-colored, almost desiccated in appearance, and its stench is

pungent.

"It is..." he begins, looking at it as well, though he refrains from saying the word out loud

"It is infected," Ílya whispers.

"But how?"

"It must have happened in the last few days, since it did not occur in the time of the wound's first inflicting. I thought I had cleaned it adequately and took care to protect it. But nothing is truly clean in this underground prison..."

"What should be done?" asks Albrýndaer, raising his eyes and looking at Ílya with concern. And she sees in his eyes that, even in the midst of his high fever and his evident pain, he is more worried for her than he is for himself.

"I do not think there is anything that can be done," she replies, a painful lump in her throat and her heart heavy in her breast. "Perhaps in the world above a wound such as this could be treated, but here...I do not know."

"Is there anyone whom we can ask?"

"I...I could try try find someone. Are you willing to remain here alone while I inquire around the encampment?"

"I do not have any other choice," says Albrýndaer. "And I am dreadfully tired. I will sleep until you return," he continues, already beginning to slip again from consciousness.

"I will return as soon as I can."

† † †

When Ílya returns with an aged woman named Málva, Albrýndaer does not awaken with ease, and when his eyes finally flutter open his gaze is unfocused and his speech incoherent. "He burns with a fever so high it is unsafe," remarks Málva. "How long ago did he receive this wound?"

"It was a week and a half, nearly two," says Ílya, "and yet despite some redness and inflammation it did not look infected or worrisome until this morning."

"Aye, well, that did not mean all danger was gone. I think to myself at times that the very air down here is poisonous. And for an open wound such as that, it is a deadly risk."

"Deadly?" Ílya breathes. "Do you think...?" And now it is her turn to refrain from speaking.

"Only time will tell," Málva says, and then looking intently at Ílya she places a hand upon her shoulder and adds, "We shall do what we

can for him. But it may be up to him whether he survives or not, whether his own heart and flesh can conquer the sickness that overtakes him."

† † †

For six days Ílya tends to Albrýndaer in his illness, with Málva also often visiting the tent to assist in the ministrations or simply to sit for a while with the two young persons, offering what little consolation she can with her presence and with what she has gained in wisdom over many years. Albrýndaer passes in and out of consciousness, at times somewhat lucid and at other times delirious, incapable of rational discourse, his mind somewhere else, fixed upon fears and imaginings in his own interior, where the two women have no access. Occasionally he cries out in fear, and occasionally he speaks to an invisible presence in words full of tenderness and trust, and at times he speaks to Ílya and yet without looking at her, as if she lives before his mind's eye even were she is not present in the flesh. Eventually, however, he sinks into a prolonged silence that extends for days, in which he either slumbers deeply or lies with his eyes open, their stare empty and glassy, as if both seeing and not seeing simultaneously. This expression most of all worries Ílya, and at times she fears that he has died even with his eyes open, and she must pass a hand before his face in order to assure herself that the breath is still in him. In such moments she feels the warmth of his breath and also knows that, as far as his mind has departed, his sight remains, for his eyes flicker toward her hand when it passes before his gaze. Often, as if this movement irritates him, he closes his eyes afterward, sinking into some deep and inaccessible place.

But to Ílya's astonishment and gratitude, the infection gradually clears, and on the morning of the seventh day Albrýndaer awakens with no fever, and his skin is cool to the touch. He turns his gaze to look at her and tenderness is in his eyes. Sitting up and taking both of her hands in his own, he says, "H-hello, my friend. The corn is green in the fields and the rocks glow like lights. Aren't they p-pretty?"

"What did you say?" replies Ílya in hardly more than a whisper, surprised.

"I m-meant to say that you are s-shiny in my eyes." He smiles a childlike smile as he looks upon her, his mouth a little crooked as if half of his face is droopy and unwilling to awaken from sleep. Then for a moment half of his face spasms, as if the muscles uncontrollably contract. And even when his expression has returned to normal, his right eye remains partially closed and his mouth askew. "But methinks that

m-my mind is a little gargly, and that the statues are hiding in the rocks."

"The statues? The ones with which we play?"

"The very same. And y-yet they are in me, in the crevices of my m-mind. I like to p-play with them." He pauses and confusion passes for an instant over his expression, as if for a moment he is aware of the apparent absurdity of his speech. And then, forgetting himself again, he says to her, "W-would you like to come in and join in my play?"

"Yes I would, Albrýndaer," Ílya is able to say, leaning into the tenderness of his gaze even as her heart aches with sorrow, "yes I would."

Chapter 19. Two Songs by the Campfire

Hældáris.

A few moments pass and Dágra has just said, "I would like to continue our conversation later," whenever he leaps to his feet and casts his glance around the perimeter of the camp.

"What is it?" Hældáris inquires, rising to his feet as well and unconsciously reaching for the hilt of the sword over his shoulder.

"Something comes."

"I hear nothing."

"Long have my ears been trained for this. Hurry, wake the others." And without any further explanation, Dágra situates himself at the edge of the camp, drawing his blade and holding it at the ready. Within a matter of moments, Hældáris has awakened his companions with as little explanation as he was given. It is then for Dágra to give the clarity that is due. And he does it without a moment's delay: "*Stringhûndr*. They are hounds corrupted to evil purpose by their wicked masters. I know not if they exist in your lands, but they are far from unknown here."

"Why now?" Aeyósha asks, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and grabbing his weapon.

"They attack just before first light, though I cannot say why."

"Speak no more, Dágra," says Astër with impatience and frustration in his voice. "They come!"

And his warning is true, as within only a few more seconds the whisper of paws pounding against the earth sounds from all sides, and then a flurry of movement and sound overwhelms them, as black

shapes in the night pounce upon them, blood-red teeth bared, growling in guttural, vicious voices so hideous that they would haunt the sleep of even the most brave.

Hældáris hears one whimper and fall heavily to the earth near him where Aeyósha stands half-lit in the firelight, and another is struck down by Dágra with an immense slash of his massive blade. More happens around him too, but he is unaware of it, as one of the beasts leaps upon him, paws with claws extended pressing against his chest and forcing him to the ground. Without a thought Hældáris does as he has been trained to do, and he twists his body out of the way so as not to be pinned to the ground, and lets his momentum carry his sword toward the body of his attacker. But the claws have found purchase, and even as the hound falls to the ground, it pulls him violently forward with it. Collapsing to one knee and crying out in the searing pain as the flesh of his chest tears under the grip of the beast, Hældáris is able to plunge the blade of the lightbringer into what he hopes is the creature's torso. But it would not have mattered either way, as once the blade breaks the skin of the beast, a brilliant light blinds him and all in the campsite. He feels the energy of the light pouring into him and through him, something that until this day he has never experienced, but of which many times he has been told. What he did not expect, however, is that with the outpouring of the light it would feel that his own vital essence was also being drained, funneled into a white-hot exorcism to purge the creature of darkness before him. Even as the light again dims and Hældáris stumbles to his feet, he feels consciousness slipping from him, and he would collapse to the earth were not the strong arms of Aeyósha there to catch him and hold him up.

† † †

When Hældáris awakes the sun is high in the sky, shining full upon his face. He blinks a few times to dispel the fog from his eyes, and he sees the faces of Aeyósha and Îsáric as they bend over him.

"We heard you groaning," explains the latter, "and suspected consciousness was at last returning."

"How long...ah," Hældáris begins, but the pain in his chest silences him for a moment before he is able to complete his thought, "How long was I unconscious?"

"It is a little past noon," says Aeyósha. "Your wounds are ugly but not particularly deep. It is the light that exhausted you. I remember Rórlain telling me of his experience with such things long ago, when I was but a boy. But you recovered quickly enough, all things consid-

ered."

"Quickly enough?"

"Be glad that the creature did not get you with its fangs," interjects Îsáric. "It is said among us that they bear a deadly poison that nothing can hinder."

Pushing himself into a sitting position and looking around, Hældáris asks, "Are all the others well?"

"Aye, well enough," says Aeyósha. "A few scratches and cuts here and there, but nothing serious."

"What were those creatures?"

This time it is Dágra himself who answers, stepping into Hældáris' view and squatting down so that their faces may meet. "I said their name before, stringhûndr, but I expect this meant little or nothing to you."

"We have no such word in our language, nor have I encountered creatures of their likeness before."

"I think I have heard of them—or rather read of them," says Aeyósha, "though in our language they go by a different name. Our people have long called them *faemgrûndi;* 'hounds of the blood-suckers,' it translates, more or less."

"The meaning is the same in our tongue," affirms Dágra.

"But what does it mean?"

"I assume that you know little, then, of the *stringr*."

"In our language they are called *faempíri*," Aeyósha clarifies.

"Faempíri... Stringr..." sighs Hældáris. "I understand the origins of the words now, but I still do not grasp the import. The creatures who command the hounds, these so-called 'blood-suckers,' what are they?"

"Precisely that, no more and no less," says Îsáric.

"Or perhaps a little more," Dágra corrects. "You see, as far as I have come to understand it, these stringr have made a bargain with forces unseen in order to grasp something of everlasting life, something of deathlessness, and they do so by binding their flesh and their spirit to the desperate need to drink the lifeblood of other creatures."

"That sounds like a malicious pact if ever there was one," says Hældáris. "But how is this need different than our own need for food and nourishment?"

"Living men need sustenance to sustain their bodies, this is true," says Dágra, "but its source is of little importance. A man can live on potatoes if he sets his mind to it. The earth yields up its bounty and we receive it in gratitude. There is something beautiful about this depen-

dence and this receiving."

"Verily. But we also hunt."

"Aye, that we do," says Îsáric. "And perhaps our very killing of other creatures to be our meat and our food is a sign that something is not right with the world."

"And these stringr?"

"They consume blood not for bodily nourishment but for life itself, as in the very act of taking they find their sustenance and the fuel for their continued existence. And the higher in the hierarchy of being a creature is, the more sustenance do they find. Is that correct, Dágra?"

"Precisely."

"And what is higher than a living man or woman?" Hældáris concludes. "Is that what you are saying?"

"Yes. Most stringr that we have ever heard of from children's tales or history books descend into a form of cannibalism, as their insatiable hunger leads them to yearn for and rely upon human blood for their continued life. Such is the price they pay for immortality."

"Such is the price that others pay..."

"Aye, that is better said. Though for some it must, at least in the beginning, be a burden indeed, even though one that they have freely chosen. But I imagine that eventually the mind and the heart numb to the horror of the act, and centuries later hardly anything more than a monster remains of what was once a living person."

Rising now to his feet, Hældáris says, "I seem to be well enough recovered to continue our journey, and I have had enough of such topics at present. Shall we be on our way?"

"Aye, we shall," says Dágra. "However, there is one final thing that needs to be said."

"What is that?"

It is Aeyósha who answers in the name of all, "If the hounds were sent to attack us, then this means that we are being tracked—or better, hunted—by a stringa, or by more than one. We must take immense care in the rest of our journey to protect ourselves and the two brothers who have asked for our aid."

"And what is the best way to do such a thing?"

"Stringr despise the full light of day. Many say it is because it burns them. They are creatures of the darkness, and so they shall likely attack only at night."

"So we set a guard," says Îsáric, "of at least two men."

"And yet if the stringa does not attack us, shall he or she not move

on rather to another victim less equipped to resist their assault?" Hældáris proffers.

Raising his eyebrows in surprise and in immediate understanding, Dágra says, "So you propose that we make sure we are caught by it?"

"I take no pleasure in the death of one who is, or at the very least has been long ago, a living man or woman," says Hældáris, "and yet if we have an opportunity to stop their harming another innocent person, I think that we should take it."

At this moment their converse is interrupted by another voice, that of Astër, "I hear what you are saying, and I do not disagree, but let us not allow any more daylight to slip away from us. If we are being hunted, surely it will follow us even if we travel farther...to a less exposed and more defensible location."

"Aye, you are right," replies Dágra. "And I must speak with our dear merchants and tell them of our plan, which I imagine shall please them very little."

† † †

The afternoon passes as the company continues on its way westward, and at first all are silent, occupied with their own thoughts. The brothers Édvin and Égill were, as expected, not at all pleased to hear of the threat of being hunted by a stringa, nor that their protectors hope to confront them directly rather than to flee from them with all haste. They insisted that events were allowed to play out as they might, and that the travelers did nothing to lure the stringa nor to facilitate a confrontation. And this, with differing measures of agreement, was accepted by all.

As day inclines toward evening, Aeyósha says to Hældáris, "We may be fretting and worrying about nothing. For I have doubts that we shall still be the objects of the faempir's hunt after the display of this morning. Seeing the light with which their minions were felled, they are likely to look elsewhere for the sustenance that they need, and to trouble us no longer."

"You may well be right," agrees Hældáris, "unless of course we are now seen as a threat that must be eliminated. Then we have gained for ourselves a powerful enemy, of whom we shall not be rid until this affair comes to its conclusion."

"Let us hope that it does not come to that."

"Better us than another."

"I suppose so," says Aeyósha, though his voice betrays a measure of doubt, some unspoken uncertainty about whether wishing for a con-

frontation with the stringa is an appropriate attitude. Hældáris assumes that it is the same for his friend as it is for himself: even in such extreme circumstances, neither of them desires to take the life of someone who, however perverse their existence has become, remains in their essence and their destiny human. Occupied each with their own thoughts, both men lapse into silence. And gradually Hældáris' thoughts carry him on beyond the affairs of the day and the considerations they have awakened, and his mind broadens out to the contours of the previous weeks of his life, so full of suffering and loss, of vulnerability and uncertainty.

And as Hældáris walks with his friend at his side, and his newfound companion not far behind them, and those others with whom he travels roundabout, he feels grateful that he does not journey alone. Yet even so, as his chest aches and burns with the wounds he received from the stringhûnda, he feels exposed and defenseless. And despite the evening sun shining full overhead he finds himself looking around cautiously and glancing over his shoulder. Considering all that has befallen him since his approach to the shores of Vælíria, he thinks, it is not unusual that he is experiencing a certain measure of fear and even of paranoia. The assault upon him and all that he holds dear has been frequent and sustained, almost as if some invisible force seeks to set up obstacles to block his way and to turn him aside from his purpose. Or perhaps it simply seeks to maliciously destroy what is precious to him. But surely that is not the case. After all, sometimes things just happen, do they not? And even if forces beyond the ken of man militate against what is good, are they not hindered from laying their hands upon that which the Guardian of all in his kindness has given and therefore protects? And if this is so, then how can Hældáris understand the tragedy at sea, and the loss of Relmaríndë, and the very existence of corrupted creatures such as the stringr, as anything other than a mysterious part of divine providence—like the underside of a tapestry or the shadowed places in an artwork of beautiful chiaroscuro, destined at the end of the ages to be bathed in the fullness of light and to become itself all light?

Turning his attention from these thoughts, Hældáris looks about him as the landscape surrounding is bathed in the vibrant light of the evening sun. And even in the midst of his fear he cannot help being moved by the beauty of the moorlands through which they journey, cloaked as they are in thick grasses and heather and interspersed with trees of various kinds, both conifer and deciduous, though there is a marked preponderance of the latter. Ruined homesteads and watch-

towers still litter the landscape here and there, their ancient wood rotting away into the earth and their tumbled stone and cracked masonry overgrown with budding vines and mosses of green, purple, and red.

And yet this beauty stirs within his heart not a feeling of joyful contentment but of melancholy, an aching sadness in the very wellsprings of his thought and affection. But is not all beauty in this life marked by a feeling of sadness and loss? So he thinks to himself. In every taste of goodness and every glimpse of beauty there is hidden some memory of a lost homeland which has never been known but can never be forgotten, even as there is also a hope for the homeland still to come, which is the same as that of the origin from which all has come, though carried to fullness and consummation beyond all imagination or desire. All beauty, all love, he thinks, is always a wound as much as it is a healing. Or rather its healing occurs through its wounding, until the heart itself becomes all wound, all openness and vulnerability, weeping at the slightest song of the sunset or dancing in response to the whisper of the littlest flower, touching thereby in some way, even in exile and longing, the home where longing shall be fulfilled in fullness of presence and belonging and the journey of life shall give way, beyond all shadows and darkness and obscurity, to the radiant adventure of eternity.

But until then one walks in the chiaroscuro of this mortal life, finding light accentuated by the shadows, and by the shadows being impelled to yearn more ardently for the light. Has Relmaríndë already passed beyond the shadows into a place of light, or is she in some place of waiting, expectant of a light yet to come? Is not her death, rather than a loss, a liberation? This very thought, as it passes through his mind, effects a shift somewhere deep within Hældáris' heart, and the fear that has been oppressing him loosens its grip, or at least changes in its nature. For a moment he sees a path beyond the fear of death and into an acceptance of it, even a longing for it, in the hope that he may venture where she has gone before, and that the hole that she has left in his heart may be filled again with the fullness of her presence, and even more with the presence of the One whom Hældáris has known from his earliest days, but who in the darkness of this life, shattered by pain, suffering, and loss, is all but invisible to his inner eye and inaccessible to the experience of his heart.

And then the moment has passed, and as the twilight of the sky changes into nocturnal darkness, Hældáris loses the threads of his thought and experience and feels a sense of heaviness return to replace the lightness that he has tasted, though the latter sinks into some secret

place within him, hidden but not extinguished.

† † †

They set up camp for the night among the ruins of an old watch-tower, half of it still standing twenty yards above the surrounding moorland and the other half collapsed and broken, spread where it has fallen and sunken into the soft earth, which reaches out in grass and vine, root and branch, to enfold it in an embrace that over the centuries has assimilated the cut stone into the very earth almost as part of it. The remnants of the tower provide complete protection from the south and the east, while leaving their camp exposed to the north and the west; but even this shall make the watch easier even as it provides a significantly improved sense of safety for the wayfarers in the face of their fear of pursuit. While a fire is lit and a meal is prepared, bedding is strewn about and the men prepare themselves for the night, which is cool though not yet cold. A steady albeit gentle breeze blows from the north and whistles among the ancient stone, for some eerie and for others consoling, considering how much the perception of the heart is colored by the trust and hope that it carries within, or by its fear, by its confidence and serenity or by its uncertainty and trepidation. One reads the world according to what one carries already within oneself; and yet at the same time, a heart truly humble and receptive can listen deeply enough to hear the world itself speak, gentle yet sure, and thus to gradually align what is within the heart with what is outside of it, with the very truth of being and of life.

"Do any of you sing or play an instrument?" asks Édvin, carrying a small pack from the back of one of the wains and setting it beside his sleeping roll. "Perhaps a little music would do us good."

"Not worthily for your ears," replies Astër, "nor for any other, I am afraid."

"I do a little of both," offers Hældáris after a moment's pause, "though I have no instrument with me."

"Well, that is good. I myself pluck the lyre a bit, though I am a pitiful performer," replies Édvin, "though Égill is better than I."

"I also play the lyre," Hældáris says.

"Do you? Well, brilliant! We have one with us now. Will you play for us?"

"Gladly. It has been too long since I have touched the strings, and my fingers long for the touch again, and for the music born from it."

"Spoken like a true musician," adds Égill with a broad smile, drawing from the bowels of a cart a bundle wrapped in cloth. When he has

withdrawn its contents, he places in Hældáris' hands a beautifully-crafted nineteen string lyre, its weathered wood richly colored in the firelight.

At first he plays a few simple melodic pieces, some traditional to his people and some of his own creation, while the other travelers sit in silence and listen, no other sounds interrupting the music than the crackling of the fire, the whistle of the wind, and the occasional call of a nearby owl. Then Égill asks him, "Can you also sing for us?"

"I suppose I can. Is there anything in particular you would like to hear? A certain piece, perhaps?"

"I know not what music we might share in common. But even if I did, let us hear something especially Telméric, something that speaks with the voice of your culture and your land."

"I know just such a piece," says Hældáris, glad for this opportunity. "It is entitled, 'The Lay of the Velási,' an ancient song from days long past." And after preparing himself for a moment in silence, he plucks the strings marking out the accompanying melody and then begins to sing in a soft yet clear voice:

> In days of yore when time was newly wrought
> and grass fresh-grown and daylight new and young,
> among the woodland and the mountains' shade
> man and woman walked in oneness and peace,
> and light was given to them as a troth
> binding earth to heaven and heaven earth.
>
> Affixed in the wood of the greatest tree
> the Illûstra gave light and warmth freely
> in equal measure, a priceless jewél;
> it was fullness given yet promise too,
> of light eternal, unbound, yet to come,
> which sun and moon and stars dimly reflect.
>
> Yet light cannot in the hands be held, trapped,
> but must be allowed to shine upon all
> in its ungraspable fullness, so near,
> yet surpassing all that can be contained,
> in the beauty known not in possession
> but in intimacy of belonging.
>
> When darkness descended thus on the world
> as those first children made the light their own
> —forgetting that it was theirs from the start—

grief and division, sorrow and lament,
rippled through creation like a rupture
in cloth seamless woven by one design.

As love knits unity so greed births loss,
the rupture of communion, "I" and "Thou,"
as a butterfly trapped in a jar dies.
But so too promise is given in loss,
that the cocoon, death, bears hidden new life,
and life and light return in darkest place.

Many years of warfare and corruption
follow in the wake of that first taking,
and Gálrid comes, lusting still for power,
seeking the jewél that has lost its light,
a manslayer he becomes, in anger
born of hunger appeased not by goodness.

Warfare, too, follows, and its untold fear,
but mercy intervenes to limit death
that life may be born in the face of loss:
as Hæliána and Neréthion
appear to Silion and his kindred,
full of shining glory and untold peace.

Spirits of light and beauty before time
into time enter to bring light anew
that what was lost may not be so wholly,
but shall live within man as seed and hope,
awaiting the long yearned-for renewal
when Light pierces the darkness and death dies,
the strains of eternity sung in time.

Whenever his song has ceased there is a moment of laden silence in which the listeners consider its words and also give the appropriate space of respect for the singer of the song. Dágra is the first to speak, "It is a lovely myth, though somewhat pedantic."

Hældáris laughs quietly. "Such is the bent of our people. We tend to hit you on the nose with the lesson. We like our words clear and to the point."

"But some things can only be known in the subtlety of experience," says Dágra, "and not in the summation given by simple words. And certainly not in oversimplified moral imperatives."

"I agree with you completely," Hældáris says. "We have a good measure of that subtlety as well. This song is from a very early time in our history, and the translation I have given loses some of the origin, both its simplicity and its nuance."

"But despite all the limitations in expression, the memory is precious to us," remarks Aeyósha, "if only we had not forgotten it for so long."

"A memory? How could it be a memory?" asks Astër. "Surely the remembrance of your people cannot possibly stretch that far back, to the origins of time. As Dágra said, it is myth and no more."

"Myth it is if you mean that is speaks in language symbolic of realities nonetheless historic," says Aeyósha. "But if you refer to it as myth in order to say that it is not real, and that it never happened, then we must disagree."

"Such is your opinion."

"Such is our knowledge."

"What do you mean?" Dágra asks.

"My father met the Silion of whom the song speaks," explains Hældáris, "and he looked upon the ancient tree wherein the light was once housed, and from which it was taken."

"But surely this man would be many millennia old by now, and no man lives for such a length of time."

"If the powers of darkness can grant unto man some taste of immortality, as we know from the stringr of whom we have recently spoken, how much more can the powers of light give him its essence and its truth," says Aeyósha. "The blessing bestowed upon Silion and his kindred, of which the song speaks, was precisely that of enduring life, that they may serve for countless ages as the memory and the hope of the people, until the light comes and they may depart to the place allotted for them."

"Forgive me if I must remain skeptical," Astër retorts. Dágra is silent, his face thoughtful but uncertain.

"There is no need for forgiveness," says Aeyósha.

"Is there a song that speaks well of the mind and heart, history or legend of your own people?" Hældáris asks, turning to Édvin and Égill, holding out the lyre to them. "I would be delighted to hear it."

"I suppose I could attempt one," says Égill, taking the instrument, "though neither my playing nor my singing can compare with yours." Laying the lyre across his lap and strumming the strings as if they were those of a lute, he then makes some adjustments to the tuning so that other notes on some of the strings will sound. "Well, here it is," he says,

and then begins:

Young Aldorin tar'Uneyon,
of his father sire and scion,
came one day into the woodland
and met a fairy on a rock.

"What are you?" saith he to her,
"so strange, radiant apparition,
and yet so beautifullý fashioned
all over, foot, and head, and hand."

"What am I?" she spake unto he,
"I am a fae of yon river;
glass, the arrow in my quiver,
crystal the jewél in my hand."

"I understand ye not," quoth he,
"for I see no arrow, no gem,
and, for that matter, no stream,
but only tree, grass, soil, and rock."

"No river?" she saith, "not yet.
It hath yet to be carved by time
and by water flowing in prime.
But ye shall see, shall understand.

For harbinger am I of life
that yet shall come to this here wood,
and in this place for years have stood,
though, I admit, at times have danced."

"Fae," quoth the man, "my people thirst.
Wouldst thou direct thy stream to me?
For father sends me forth to see
if some goodness I can yet stock

and bring back to my family
and our clan-lands during this drought,
searching wide the lands hereabout.
I shall not return empty hand."

"What wilst thou give me," spake the fae,
"if I lead mine water to thine?
Thus you may speak to father thine
and say for him this you have gained."

"What wishest thou? Thou seemst so free.
To think of any lack in thee
seems an impossibility.
Speak, and I shall do as I can."

"Only that thou, man, comest here
every year until thou art grey
and leave on this stone a bouquet.
Then wealth shall fill thy heart and hand."

"It shall be done," quoth Aldorin,
and thus it was confirmed, truly,
and great rain came, incessantly,
'til the land was again alive.

And river flowed in coming years
to irrigate the Vægo land,
and came the man flowers in hand
and placed them upon fairy stone.

Prospered did he for many years
until, an old man, he forgot.
Appeared to he on near eyot,
then, the fairy, unchanged in form.

"Why come ye not this year, old man?"
she spake, though in her voice was play.
"I jest. I come to ye to say
'thank you' for gifts of many years."

And now the old man recognized,
and upon his face a smile spread.
"Good to see you, old olveäd,
one last time, before mine is done."

"Faithfulness hast thou shown to me,"
the fae spake one last time to he,
"bringing thine gift devotedly,
though all I sought was thy heart's love."

"Lovéd you from the first I have.
In you quenching of thirst I saw,
not of my kin alone, but all,
for who guides rivers but the One?

And you were his harbinger, fae,
into arid depths of my heart;

with me from the earliest start
you shall be with me to the end."

"Myth?" asks Aeyósha with a smile shortly after the singing has ceased.

"Aye, myth," agrees Égill, "though the meaning is very much the same."

Chapter 20. Death in the Night

Hældáris.

When they depart from their camp among the ruins of the old tower the next morning, all the men of the company are surprised, albeit relieved, that there was not so much as a hint or a rumor of a stringa during the previous night. Perhaps indeed they have given up the chase. So too during the day the landscape begins to change from moorland to marshland, as the dry expanse gradually descends under their feet closer to sea level, and the soil becomes damp and thickly laden in mosses, lichen, and prickly shrubbery of all kinds. Shallow pools stand in the lowest places, clear and cool, reflecting the light of the day with placid face and depths unmoving, collected from the rainwater that falls upon the lands. When the traveling companions draw near to one pool larger than the rest, mostly hidden among tall grasses and reeds, they startle a herd of reindeer, at least twenty in number, which bound out of their enclosure and prance across the field to the south. When the creatures have gone a certain distance, however, they stop and turn back, watching the men in curiosity and caution, their bodies perfectly still and umoving and their gaze turning neither left nor right as if they were captured in paint and canvas or etched in stone. Only after the men have moved on do these stragglers bound after their companions and join the rest of the herd.

"Our supplies are running rather low," remarks Astër, "and they would make good eating."

"Perhaps," says Édvin, "but I would prefer we not waste time on that. Even if you were able to fell one with ease, it would take a good few hours to clean and dress it for preservation. We have come to the river valley that marks the boundary of the Vollrænd and a village should not be far, as long as we have not strayed too far to the north or the south."

"What village is that?" asks Aeyósha.

"It is called Stûrkas, a quaint and welcoming place, often visited by the caravans passing between east and west, though of permanent residents it can count no more than eighty or a hundred persons in all."

"We should have no trouble purchasing further provisions there, as well as finding lodging for a night," continues Égill. "Who knows? Perhaps even this very night."

And so it is, as the land descends steeply for a league or two before revealing to their eyes a wide valley dense with trees and vegetation with the crystalline line of a river at its heart, glistening in the sun as it weaves its way from south to north before emptying, beyond sight, into the sea. Far on the limit of sight to the west they can make out the rise of the land once again, the end of the river valley and the start of the Vollrænd properly speaking. Before descending fully into the valley, however, they spend a quarter of an hour getting their bearings, as some days back they lost the main road on which travelers would come from Ûlfaeng to the west, something not difficult to do, as in the moorlands the earth is so overgrown with grasses and so littered with stone that only a proper road, cobbled and paved, would survive the wear and tear of time and the seasons. Once they know more or less where they are, the brothers direct them to travel another half an hour to the north, where they find a well-trodden, wheel-marked path weaving its way down into the valley below. As they descend trees rise up to envelop them and soon they find themselves cradled in woodland once again. A breeze from the north begins to blow, rustling among the branches and leaves that are dense overhead, blocking much of the direct light of the sun and allowing it to fall only in speckles and splotches here and there among the undergrowth. In the bowels of the woods it is chilly even in midafternoon, and traveling is slow since the road is heavily rutted from a recent heavy rain, its damp soil clinging to the wheels of the wains and the boots of the travelers. The beasts of burden mewl as if in complaint before, in response to another arrhythmic song and prosaic poem by Égill, they accept their lot patiently and return silently to their toil.

Laughing softly to himself as he rides on the carriage beside Égill, Hældáris takes the lyre again in his hands and, plucking a few strings, sings a song that emerges in the very moment in which he gives it voice:

> Hurry, our helpers, hasten on your way
> for hay awaits you at the end of day.

Haul your burden, heave and pull, untiring;
you have gone most of the way, aspiring.
A little more and you may fill your gut
in some sheltered cabin, barn, shed, or hut,
and sleep like rocks 'til your next escapade
with hopefully a lighter cavalcade,
a trip a bit smoother, a bit more fine,
since you won't be carrying me and mine.

"You had better watch out," Égill says playfully when the song has ceased. "Too much poetry and music and a man takes flight, unable to keep his feet firmly fixed on the ground. Then we won't be needing a caravan at all. And too much eloquence and this poor tradesman will begin to doubt the goodness of his own little songs."

"I could never replace your songs," says Hældáris, placing a hand on Égill's shoulder. "Your creatures know your voice unlike any other, and there is nothing I would do to change that. The song was for you, not for them."

"That, Hældáris, I well understood. Even though I have given it no voice in word or in expression, you have sensed my fear and anxiety, and you have soothed it as well as any man can. I fear what awaits us in days to come."

"We shall do whatever we can to protect you and your brother. Such is the agreement we made, and we intend to keep it."

"I just hope that any threat we face will not be beyond you and yours."

"As do I."

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As they near the river the trees recede, hewn back to make way for farm and pastureland, and the evening sun casts its last blazing light directly in their faces as it dips below the horizon, soon to bid farewell for the night and to allow the land to plunge into nocturnal darkness. "At this rate we will come to the village just as complete darkness falls," says Égill to Hældáris who, to give the donkey a bit of a rest, now walks beside the carriage. "There are a few inns in Stûrkas, a great number for a place so small. Often villages of this size have no more than a taberna with a single room, or even simply stables where, if the proprietor is generous, men as well as animals are allowed to stay. But here we may even have the privilege of private rooms—not, of course, that it matters much after so many days on the road, sleeping around a campfire to-

gether."

"How far have we progressed toward your final destination on this journey?" Hældáris asks, his knowledge of the geography of Væliria somewhat lacking.

"Turholm? We are about half way. However, our paths may diverge a little before that, if no reason arises for you to accompany us to the city itself, for the road splits and we must take the southern branch. Your destination, on the other hand, lies to the northwest."

"I suppose we shall decide when making such a choice becomes necessary."

In truth they come to Stûrkas before complete darkness has fallen, and this is fortunate as they are able to get a sense of the village's appearance and layout before retiring for the night. The village, when they approach it, appears not unlike many similar settlements in the land of Telmérion, with small houses of wood or stone with thatched roofs nestled closely together, and even a longhouse in which the village's reeve must live and conduct his affairs. On the other hand, Stûrkas is quite different in that it is built on both sides of the river, its two sides connected with three lumber-planked bridges, protected from flooding in part by a large weir fifty or so yards upstream. And even from here they can see, a bit beyond the weir, a fishgarth spanning the distance of the river, the current of water bubbling over and around its wooden poles and netting. A few fishermen are at work preparing to haul in the final catch of the day before returning home for the evening.

A large taberna-and-inn, again similar in appearance to those one would find in a larger town or city in Telmérion, greets them shortly after they step among the houses of the village, its sign that of a blue stag on a white background. Outside the building a stocky man with a full beard of hair graying from brown to white greets them, "A caravan coming from the east, are you? Looking for a meal and lodging for the night? We can provide both, and stable for your animals and a guard for your carriages and their goods."

"Jóharr, it is good to see you again," says Édvin, stepping down from his wain and extending an arm to grasp that of the man.

"Ah, Édvin, Égill. I did not notice that it was you. How long has it been? Three years?"

"More or less," says Édvin. "We have not had cause to travel this far north for some time."

"Better than taking advantage of the business of our competitors,"

says Jóharr. "So you will be staying for the night?"

"If you have room for the two of us and the five guardsmen who accompany us," Égill says, also stepping down from his cart and greeting him.

"Aye, we do. The roads have been troubled of late, with an increase in bandit activity. There have also been other, more groundless, rumors. And affairs to the west have been increasing in seriousness as well. What with the spreading conflict, trade has been disrupted and the price of goods has nigh doubled. All that is to say," concludes Jóharr with a crooked smile, "that there have not been as many caravans as we are accustomed to receive, and we should have no problem giving room for all of you. How do two rooms sound, divvied up however you deem appropriate?"

"That will be just fine," replies Édvin. "Payment before as usual?"

"It is our policy."

While Édvin settles the financial affairs with Jóharr, Égill and the caravan guards lead the donkeys and their wains to a wide alleyway behind the inn, where an armed guard stands watch over stables deep enough for both animals and carriage to be sheltered for the night. Untying the beasts and allowing them to nibble at the hay strewn about, Égill begins to remove from the wains a few boxes containing the most personal or precious items, which even with the armed guard he does not feel comfortable leaving out-of-doors. The five other travelers gather from among their own personal belongings what they might need for the night, and then all together return to the main street. Édvin has already made his way inside, and Jóharr gestures them after him, wishing them a pleasant evening and a restful stay.

By now darkness has cloaked the land and they are cheered by the cozy warmth and light of the room that greets them as they enter the building, a wide atrium with a blazing hearth and chairs and tables strewn about. Along the walls also are cushions on which recline a few travelers, poorer or more frugal folk who cannot afford or do not wish for a more private room and are content to sleep in the main room. Of course, even for its lack of privacy it shall be warmer and perhaps therefore more comfortable than the private chambers, since it alone shall have heat throughout the night. In this respect at least, the practices and customs of the Vælírians are almost exactly the same as those of the Telmérins, even if in so many other areas they diverge. The rowdy and boisterous laughter coming from the far end of the room, where a group of men sits around a table drinking and playing a game of

chance, reminds them of some of these differences.

"After the last few days," remarks Égill, "I could use a bit of lightness and laughter."

"We all could," replies Aeyósha with a smile. "The darker it is the more important it is to be light."

Égill raises his eyebrows and says, "You Telmérins sure do seem to enjoy double meanings and plays-on-words."

This exchange is cut short by Hældáris who unintentionally interrupts, saying, "What instrument is that?" He gestures across the room to where a woman sits near the hearth with a stringed instrument upon her lap, which she does not pluck but bow, changing the tone by pressing the fingers of her other hand to the strings at different intervals. "That looks as though it would be quite difficult."

"You have never seen a bowed instrument before?" asks Édvin, approaching the men from another part of the room, where he has been in conversation with someone whom they take to be the wife or sister of Jóharr.

"We have bowed instruments in Telmérion," replies Hældáris, "just not like that. The sound is beautiful: more rich, full, and subtle than I have yet heard from its like."

"It is a gjalláfen," explains Édvin. "Perhaps once we have settled in you may have an opportunity to speak with the performer and ask her about it. She might even let you give it a try."

"I have never played a bowed instrument before, so I imagine the patrons would not at all appreciate my 'giving it a try.' You pluck a string and it makes a sound, but bowing is completely different. This much I know, and I would not want to punctuate the evening with squeaks and squawks."

Since it is not yet time to retire for the night, the men share a table and order some food and drink, speaking softly of their journey so far and of their plans for its remaining length. Îsáric and the two brothers are the first to push back their chairs from the table and to bid the others farewell for the night. Dágra and Astër follow shortly afterward, leaving Hældáris and Aeyósha alone.

"You seem to be doing better," says Aeyósha. "I have seen you smiling more and even expressing again your native humor."

"I suppose I have," replies Hældáris, "though I cannot say why this is the case. For my grief has hardly lessened, and whenever I call my wife to mind, the pain is like a knife. And I still feel exhausted without cease, as if all my vigor is drained by the constant sorrow that I bear within

me. Nonetheless, what you say is true. It has happened entirely unexpected and unbidden. Perhaps it is true that joy truly comes to us only when we are not looking for it."

"Maybe so. But it brings consolation to my heart to witness the change in you, however subtle it may be."

"Thank you, my friend, for caring for me, and for walking with me on this journey."

"I made that choice whenever I decided to depart from Telmérion at your side," Aeyósha says, "and yet the choice was made for me even more deeply when I survived with you when all else were lost. This mysterious circumstance I see as both a gift and a call, as an undeserved grace and as a task entrusted to me."

"And this consoles *my* heart," Hældáris affirms. "Though do not overburden yourself. You have long been a friend to me. Allow me to be one also to you."

After this both men sink for a while into thoughtful silence. In fact, they realize that the room has now grown quiet and still as the musician has ceased her playing and the conversations of the other guests are dying down to a final hush or stopping altogether. But a few moments later Jóharr approaches them and says softly, "It is nearly the fourteenth hour. That is our curfew in order to allow those who wish to sleep in the main room to do so. If you wish to remain awake I would ask you to do so in your private rooms."

"Thank you, Jóharr," says Hældáris. "We will go to our room. And I imagine we are both more fatigued from our journey than we realize, and a bed shall be enough to help us recognize it."

"Then may you have a restful night."

Aeyósha and Hældáris share a room with Dágra while the other four travelers share the adjacent room. Their room-mate is already asleep when they enter, so they prepare for rest and retire in the darkness without another word. Even after he has laid down, however, Hældáris does not slip quickly into slumber. Indeed, even when he hears his friend's breath slow and deepen, he remains awake, lying on his back with his eyes open, though they behold little more than shadows in the dim moonlight that filters in through the window above his head.

He thinks about Aeyósha's words and he sees that they are indeed perceptive, revealing once again the tender attunement and watchful eyes and heart of his long-time friend and companion. For though he has not ceased to hurt at the loss of Relmaríndë, nor to bear the unsolvable anxieties and persistent struggles of these previous weeks,

Hældáris' heart has begun to find some measure of rest and peace in surrender and in hope. Perhaps peace and joy indeed come unbidden and unexpected, born not of grasping but of acceptance. With this thought he feels sleep begin to overtake him.

† † †

He is awakened to a painful pressure against his chest and a firm hand placed upon his mouth. Opening his eyes he sees in the dim moonlight the shape of a figure leaning over him, its face close to his own though indistinguishable. Only when a mouth opens and fang-like teeth give hint of their presence does Hældáris, still groggy with sleep, understand. Squirming his body in the attempt to get free and groaning to get the attention of his companions, he watches helplessly as the stringa inclines its head to bite him. With a surge of energy he is able to free his right arm, and with it he swings hard, placing a blow against the side of the stringa's head and shifting their weight off of himself enough for him to rise to a sitting position. At this moment a cloud moves from before the moon and pale light shines full into the room; in its luminescence he makes out more clearly the form of a man, his flesh sallow as if hanging too loosely over muscle and bone, giving him a skeletal appearance, and in his face eyes that glow subtly with a sickly hue. He is wrapped in a black cloak that enshrouds him from neck to feet, with a hood that until moments ago was pulled up but has now fallen back as he was forced off Hældáris' body.

"Help!" Hældáris cries once he has regained breath and voice, even as he shifts his body away from the stringa and tries to rise to his feet. Hands are extended toward his throat and the stringa leaps upon him with surprising agility; and both together tumble from the bed onto the floor. A vicious contest of strength ensues as the man, apparently furious from his failed attempt to drain his victim unawares, wrestles like a wild animal, and Hældáris, finally awakening again to his full bodily strength, fends him off. But even so, the hands find their way around his neck and he feels the breath being squeezed from his body.

"Who is it?" cries a voice. It belongs to Dágra. "What is happening?"

Hældáris tries to speak but only a gurgling sound emerges, even as the stringa goes still, as if trying to mask his presence until his victim is dead. But the effort to combine stealth with strength opens up a weakness in the stringa's strategy, and Hældáris takes advantage of this, shifting his hips until one of his legs becomes free enough to ram into the man's body, pushing him away. This is just enough to force the stringa's hands to loosen their hold on Hældáris for a single moment, a

moment just long enough for him to breathlessly cry, "Stringa!"

This is all that his companion needs. Even in the dark Dágra is able to act, and only an instant passes before there is the sound of a blade entering flesh, and the stringa cries out in pain. Then he slumps limply upon Hældáris, who gently rolls him aside onto the floor and pushes himself into a sitting position. A hand is extended to him in the dim moonlight and Dágra pulls him to his feet.

"Well, that was a close call," says the latter. "I am glad that I sleep always with a blade at my side. Wait, you were not bitten, were you?"

"No, I think not," replies Hældáris, inhaling deeply to catch his breath.

"My brothers, what is it that I missed?" The voice of Aeyósha emerges from his side of the room, and they hear his shuffling as he rises from bed. A moment later there is a flash of light and then a steady radiance as he ignites an oil lamp, holding it aloft.

"The hunt is over," says Hældáris, "but only just in time."

"You slew the stringa?" Aeyósha asks.

"That was Dágra's doing."

"Then you have done what I wish I could have done: protected my dearest friend. Thank you."

"Let us move the body," says Dágra. "I do not wish to return to sleep with a corpse in our room."

"It must be in the heart of the night," says Hældáris. "I do not wish to disturb the other guests. Shall we try to pass him through the window?"

"That is clearly how he entered."

"I did not expect," Aeyósha observes with a sigh, "that we would be attacked indoors after so many nights in the open."

"I suspect that was precisely his plan, to attack when we were divided."

Pushing open the window pane, which swings sideways on silent hinges, Hældáris climbs through the window and turns back, as Aeyósha and Dágra lift the body and prepare to pass it through.

"Wait!" calls Aeyósha. "Do you hear him breathing still?"

At this moment many things happen so quickly that Hældáris has hardly time to climb again through the window before they have run their course. The stringa twists his body so violently in the hands of the two men that they drop him to the floor, and before either of them can react he rises again to his feet and leaps upon Dágra, knocking him from his feet and onto the nearest bed. There is a cry from Dágra and then

an angry roar from Aeyósha, who lays hold of the stringa from behind and, with great strength, wrenches him from his victim and throws him across the room until he hits the opposite wall. Taking in his hands the lightbringer from where it leans against the foot of Hældáris' bed, he bares its blade and advances on the man, while Hældáris leans over Dágra. Lifting him again to his feet they turn together to Aeyósha and the stringa, to see this now through to the end.

"For my sister I shall slay each one of you," comes a voice of cold malice and age-old hate, hoarse and yet as sharp as a blade's edge. "I would have been content with the light-bearing one, but now you leave me no choice."

"How are you not slain?" asks Dágra, holding his neck as blood trickles through his fingers. Hældáris notices this with grief and horror, though the moment does not allow him to remark upon it. For the stringa leaps again from where he crouches against the wall, and were Aeyósha not such a skilled warrior, and were he not also able to channel the light, the man would have had yet another victim. But the blade of the king's sword buries itself deeply in the man's torso, and as it emerges on the other side it glows faintly with bluish light.

"No... You are not the one. How?" Collapsing to his knees with the sword still embedded in him, the stringa cries out in fury and anguish. "Sister! Flee while you can!" And with this the life leaves him for the last time, and his undead existence, prolonged so long beyond natural human span, comes to an end. The sallow flesh of his face, pulled taut over bones far too old, immediately begins to sag before the eyes of the three men, as if upon being slain he ages decades in but a few moments and returns to the domain of mortal flesh, his body passing into the repose of death, and his spirit at last released into the journey beyond.

"He spoke of his sister," says Aeyósha, and without a moment's hesitation he climbs through the open window with the sword in his hand. Hældáris on the other hand turns to Dágra and helps him to sit upon the bed. Taking the lantern in his hands he holds it up and inspects the mercenary's neck.

"He bit you," he observes sadly, stating the obvious but with serious implication, not knowing what other words would be appropriate.

"He bit not to drain me of life in order to fuel his own, but simply to poison me," says Dágra, his voice surprisingly calm, though it trembles ever so slightly. "He got his revenge, though I am glad we were able to stop him before the end."

"Is there no way to stymie the spread of the poison or to stop its ef-

fects?"

"Y-you have already been told the answer to that question. At least as far as our knowledge goes, it is impossible."

"But that does not mean we cannot try. How long do you have before you succumb?"

"But a few hours... If I am lucky, a day." Even as he speaks it is clear that Dágra is being overwhelmed by the toxin inside of him, and his body slumps as if he is too weak to hold it up. Hældáris gently helps him lie down on the bed—Dágra's own—and then gently squeezes the area around the marks of the stringa's bite in the vain hope of expelling some of the toxin. Nothing comes but dark red blood, its metallic scent strong in the room, mingling with the bitter, unnatural scent of the blood of the stringa that pools on the floor beside them.

"You saved my life, Dágra," Hældáris remarks, "and at the cost of your own."

"Hush. I am glad that I was able to do something for you before we parted ways. Y-you cling to that...light...won't you?" His eyes flutter and close and his head lulls to the side, and then, as if mustering himself, he continues, "I wish we could have spoken more and shared many beautiful conversations. But perhaps..."

"Yes," says Hældáris, finishing for him even as he loses consciousness, "in the next life."

† † †

Aeyósha returns a quarter of an hour later, not through the window but through the door, and their companions are with him, and Jóharr as well. "I searched for her but I could not find her," he says. "I do not know if what he said in his parting words was simply a gesture of brotherly devotion or if he expected her to hear his voice and to flee. When daylight comes we can inspect the surroundings for any clues. Until then, I suppose we can clean up this mess."

"And I will inform the guardsmen at first light," says Jóharr.

"There is something more pressing and more grievous at this moment," interjects Hældáris, as none of the others have noticed the state of Dágra.

Astër steps forward, startled, "Dágra? What happened to you?" Kneeling at the bedside he places a hand upon his companion's brow. "He was bitten... I see it now."

"Yes. I am sorry."

"Then there is nothing we can do. His flesh already grows cold and the life leaves him."

Dágra's traveling companions remain in vigil at his bedside through the rest of the night until, as the first rays of dawn shine in through the window, dancing in warm hues upon the opposite wall, he passes from this world.

He and his killer are laid out in an empty room in a nearby house as preparations are made to inter or dispose of their mortal remains. Some suggest burning the body of the stringa and burying Dágra here in the village. Others suggest burning both of the bodies, one as a purgation and one as an honorable effigy. At last the decision is made by Astër. "He has a wife and a son in his hometown of Elûric. I wish to send his remains back to them to be mourned and buried where they belong. Let us burn his corpse and collect the ashes. As for the monster, do with it whatever you wish. I care not."

"You have a family, Dágra, who even now awaits your return," Hældáris says under his breath, addressing the deceased man. "How I wish I could have come to know you more deeply before you were taken away." And then, turning to speak to Astër, he asks, "How far away is his home? I would visit his family with my condolences if I could."

"I fear it will not be an acceptable detour for your journey, which in your mind is so pressing. It is quite in the opposite direction. But worry not, I shall deliver the condolences myself."

"Very well then. But at least allow me to send a letter with you."

"As you wish."

As for the body of the stringa—a man long bound to powers of darkness who dies nameless among strangers—it is burned and buried in an unmarked grave. Hældáris and Aeyósha stand over the grave for some moments after the unceremonious burial, wishing that they knew the man's name and could speak it in their silent prayers that he would find mercy and new life after his countless years of living death.

And then it is done, and fatigue descends upon them with a vengeance after the intense events of the previous night and morning. As they walk back toward the inn-and-taberna, a man in a heavy mail hauberk and helmet, with a sword at his waist, hails them. "Greetings," he says, "My name is Réllic. I am the captain of the guard." And after they have introduced themselves, he continues, "I may have some leads as to the 'sister' of whom the creature spoke, if it is in your interest to pursue her. There are two things that may be of assistance to you, and in fact of assistance to us, if you agree to my proposal. First, we did indeed find a set of tracks leading away from the window of your room,

though we stopped following them a few hundred meters into the woodland to the east, though it seems they lead further still. Thus I would suppose that 'she' was here during the attack, as we thought, and that she fled at the bidding of her brother. Second, considering the direction of the footprints and our prior knowledge of these creatures, we have a suspicion that they in fact have a lair somewhere nearby, and that it would be possible to track her to it."

"What makes you think that?" asks Aeyósha. "We were first set upon by their hounds some days back, further to the east. Surely they would not canvass such an expanse, would they?"

"In fact they would," explains Réllic. "It is the manner of stringr to hunt in many locations, as they become hated and hunted themselves in all places where they make their presence known. I expect that they have numerous lairs. If you make haste, you may yet find her before she departs from this one, and bring an end to this affair once and for all."

"You said that we may be of assistance to you," remarks Hældáris. "Is that what you meant?"

"Aye. We have suffered stringr attacks for many years past, and have never been able to do more than limit them by preventative measures. It seems even those were not enough last night. I am sorry about your companion, but we are relieved that a stringa has been slain, and would hope to see the same for the other as well. Or if you wish not to slay it, at least capture it and allow us to bring it to justice. This may bring some measure of peace and security to our village. Will you do it?"

"Can you not spare any of your own men at arms to accomplish this task?" asks Aeyósha.

"I fear we have not the power to bring down a creature such as this. We have tried before and failed, and none of my men wish to relive such an experience," Réllic says, and though he speaks tersely and as if with reluctance, it is clear that he will not change his mind on this matter. "Were you to bind her and bring her to us, however, we could handle the rest. Until then, I shall redouble the guard on the village, awaiting your return, as we fear an attack in retribution, either from her or from her kin. And it goes without saying that a handsome reward shall be yours upon your successful return."

"It is an unpleasant business," says Hældáris, "but also necessary, that those who harm the innocent must be stopped." He shares a glance with Aeyósha. "Though we regret the lack of assistance, we are willing to aid you nonetheless. We shall seek this stringa and judge for ourselves, are we granted to find her, what ought to be done."