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Dawnbringer:

Lightborn

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A Tale of Irándiel

Definitive Edition

Joshua Elzner

ELUARU, ARAS NU MOEN DA DAHE KALEN,
SVAS ARECHA PASSA MENERIS EN SORDA
DA HEILLA KALASTEIA SENI KORDA,
ASANG TUA SEANGA DARENG SURANA NOAN,
DA TAN GALEMI ENNA TORVELA KALLA TUA,
DA EN ANE KALLA, KA'ELENG A DA EN NOAN,
NOE HYRA KALLA NOEN, TAN SAMA,
ONYS ONANDA, SEIKANI,
FYRIS KA'EAT ALAIE
DIA TAN ONA QUA ELIARU.

Eldáru, arás nu moën ya yahë kalén,
svas arécha passá menéris en sordá
ya heilla kalasteía sení kordá,
asáng tua seánga daréng surána noän,
ya tan galémi enna torvéla kallá tua,
ya en ane kallá, ka'éleng a ya en noän,
noë hyrá kallá noën, tan sama,
onys onánda, seïkáni,
fyris ka'eat alaíe
dia tan Ona qua eliáru.

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

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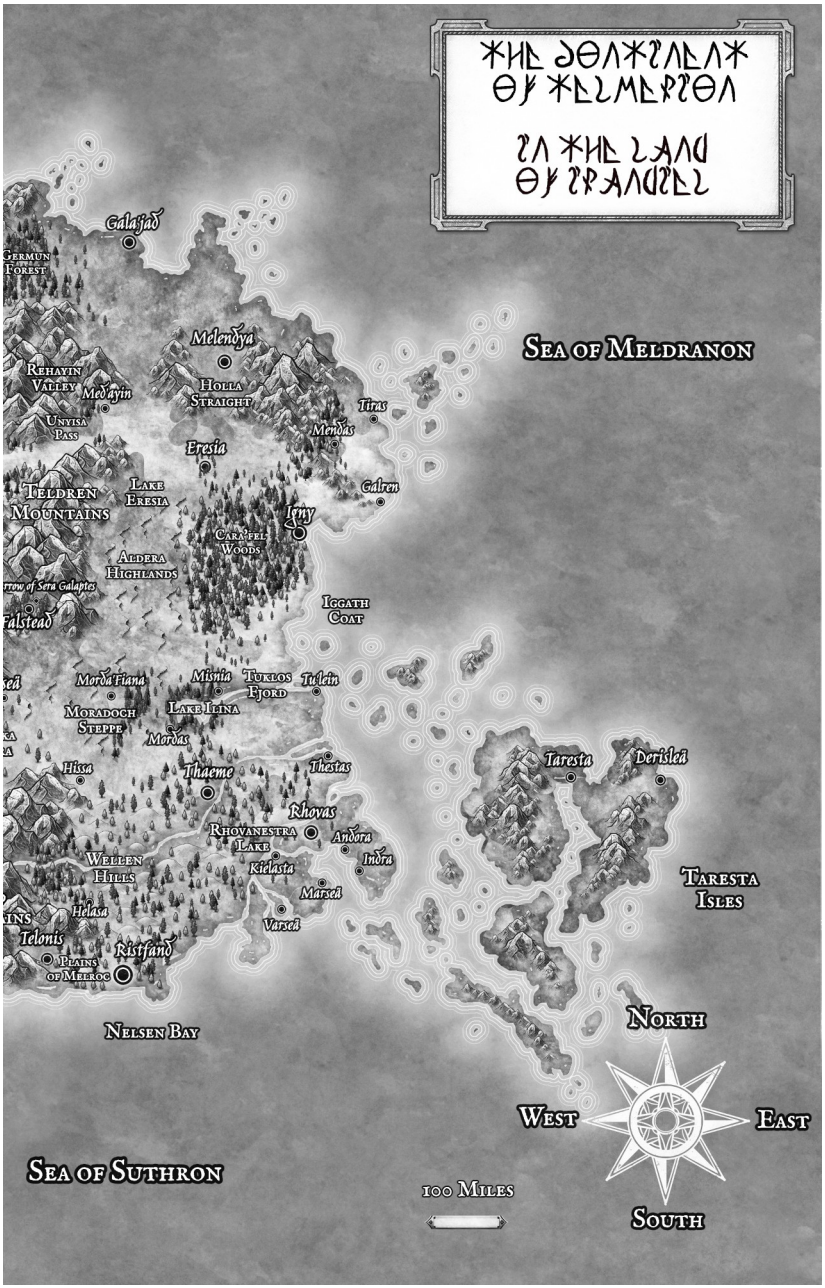
Galajad
Germun Forest
Melendya
Rehayin Valley
Medayin
Holla Straight
Univisa Pass
Eresia
Titras
Mendas
Teldren Mountains
Lake Eresia
Galren
Irvy
Carafell Woods
Aldera Highlands
Iggath Coat
Falstead
Sea of Meldranon
Morda Fiana
Misnia
Tuklos Fjord
Tulein
Moradoch Steppe
Lake Ilina
Morvas
Hissa
Thaemo
Thestas
Taresta
Derisleh
Rhovas
Rhovanestra Lake
Andora
Indra
Wellen Hills
Kidlasta
Marseh
Taresta Isles
Helsan
Varseh
Telonis
Ristfand
Plains of Melroc
Nelsen Bay
North
West
East
South
Sea of Suthron
100 Miles

Phonetic Spelling of Central Names and Words

Aédin – AY-dihn
Aldéra – ahl-DEH-rah
Áldin – AHL-dihn
Alíja Feskar – ah-LEE-yah fes-CAR
Alsenór – ahl-seh-NOHR
Anaíon – ah-NEYE-ohn (as in "eye")
Arechaíon – ah-reh-KEYE-ohn
Arûnis – ah-ROO-nihs
Brûg'hil – BROOG-hil
Brýma – brih-mah
Cára'fel – KAH-rah-FEHL
Caróch – kah-ROHK
Cirien Lorjiës – sih-rih-in lor-ee-es
Criseä – krih-SAY-ah
Draíon – DREYE-ohn
Dréya – DREH-yah
Eldárien Illómiel– el-DA-ree-in il-LO-mee-el
Eldáru – el-DAH-roo
Eléndras – el-ehn-drahs
Elmáriyë Siliári – el-MAH-ree-eh(ay) sih-lih-AH-ree
Elsedór – ehl-seh-DOHR
Eöten – eh-OH-tehn
Fálstead – fahl-STEHD
Féndra – fehn-drah
Finístra – fih-NIH-strah
Fýrir – fih-rihr
Gálrid – GAHL-rihd
Gjerínda – gyeh-RIHN-dah
Gléndas Medóra – glehn-DAHS meh-DOHR-ah
Hælia – HAY-lee-ah
Hæras – hay-rahs (plural haerasi, hay-rah-see)
Hérsir Sædán – HAIR-sihr say-DAHN
Hiliána – hih-lee-AH-nah
Ígny – IG-nee
Iliónis – ill-ee-OH-nis
Illûstra – Ill-OO-strah
Irándiel – ir-ahn-DEE-ehl
Irilóf Vándirel – ir-ih-OFF VAHN-dih-rehl
Jatíldë – yah-TIHL-deh
Lænin – LAY-nihn
Mære – mare
Malakráth – mah-lah-KRAHTH
Malrûn Vérdis – mal-ROON VEHR-dihs
Maríndas – mah-RIHN-dahs
Martínia – mahr-TIHN-ee-ah
Melándia – meh-LAHND-dee-ah
Meldáris – mehl-DAHR-ihs
Melængthar – meh-LEHNG-thahr
Miránd – mee-RAND

Moradóch – mohr-ah-DOHK (dohch)
Mórda'Fiána – MOHR-dah-fee-AH-nah
Mórlof – MOR-lof
Mórnwyn – mohrn-wehn
Myrdalánæ – mihr-dah-LAH-nay
Myéllion – mye-EHL-ee-ohn
Neréthion – neh-REH-thee-ohn
Nirániel – nih-RAH-nee-el
ónas – OH-nahs
Onylándun – oh-nee-LAN-duhn
Relihím – reh-lih-HIM
Relmaríndë – rehl-mah-RIHN-deh(uh)
Rhóvas – ROH-vahs
Rícktë – RIHK-teh
Rídrej – RIHD-rey
Ristfánd – rist-FAND
Ródric – rah-drihk
rœdra – roh-drah
Rórlain Farâël – ROHR-layn far-AY-el
Rûmdil Fýrrum – ROOM-dihl FEE-ruhm
Sádric – SAH-drihk
Sekánin – seh—KAH-nihn
Seikáni – say-ee-KAH-nee
Selía – sehl-EE-ah
Seriyéna – seh-rih-EH-nah
Sílion – SIHL-ee-ohn
Sójen –soh-yehn
Symbélyia – sim-BEH-lee-ah
Séra Galáptes – SEH-rah gah-LAHP-tes
Stïeka Mára – stih-AY-kah MAH-rah
Teldyn - tehl-din
Telmérion – tehl-MEH-ree-ohn
Télmoth – TEHL-mohth
Telmothrána – tehl-mohth-RAH-nah
Telónis – tehl-OH-nihs
Telrán – tehl-RAHN
Tilliána Valésa – tih-lee-AH-nah vah-LEH-sa
Tímus – TEE-muhs
Tel-Velfána – tehl-vehl-FAH-nah
Thrýmir – THRIH-mihr
Toróäs – tohr-OH-ahs
Týrfing – TEER-fing
Ûndan – OON-dahn
Vælíria – vay-LEER-ee-ah
Velstadeä – vehl-stah-DEY-ah
Víndal – VIHN-dahl
Vrû'ádach – vroo-AH-dak (or DACH, guttural)
Welíya – weh-LEE-ah
Wýgrec Stûnclad – WIH-grehk STOON-klahd
Igrándsil – ee-GRAHND-sihl
Yjind – yihnd

Book 1

A Song for Nirániel

Chapter One
A Sky Above the Waves

"Echoes of an ancient myth
emerge from the mists of time,
vibrating from the silent word before all sounds,
unspoken voice given utterance...
reverberating deep in this heart of mine.

Light from the origin of time
shines forth as rays from the luminosity
deeper than sun and moon and stars...
bathing the inmost recesses of the spirit's eye,
granting, in darkness, the ability to see."

These words I heard when I was a child, on my mother's knee,
too deep for me to understand.
And even as I grew, they remained beyond me,
not in their complexity, but in their simplicity.

It is said that the whole universe was born from music:
a song sung in a silence deeper than we can conceive.
But the echoes of this music, the strains of this song,
where are they now?

The raucous voices of men of power
and of beasts of unearthly wickedness,
and the turmoil of the inner being,
wedded to darkness and blind to light:
these mute the voice that one would wish to hear...
or perhaps rather they deafen the heart that listens,
too close, too loud, too violent
to allow that stillness and silence to echo deep within.

But the echoes of this voice
I wish to hear, reverberating within me.
And this light beyond all light, undimmed,

when shall it shine forth into the darkness, unbroken?
The harmony meeting the cacophony
and the music woven into dissonant noise,
chords and melody interlacing into symphony.

† † †

As consciousness returns to me, my first realization is that icy water surrounds me, suffocating my body like a coiled snake and causing my muscles and my skin to ache and burn. The last thing I remember is sitting in my small chamber in the hold of the ship, leaning back against the wall and feeling the rocking of the waves as we traversed the final few leagues before arriving at last at our destination. Then there came a deafening crash like a trebuchet casting stone against wood, a sound of a violence that I know all too well, and I was thrown forward from my seat. A flash of blinding light seared behind my eyelids and a surge of pain through my head, and then I knew nothing.

And now I awake, and freezing water is my only companion. Water and darkness. The first thought that comes to me is that I never expected to die like this: returning to the land of my youth after so many years away, and only to seek to do good to a hurting people, to a divided nation. And yet it ends so suddenly, so absurdly, with no warning and no chance of escape. Is this my end? Am I to falter and sink in my very return home, drowning even as the coastline has come into view?

Faced with the absurdity of this thought, I turn my body in an involuntary gesture of rebellion—rebellion against death or rebellion for the sake of life, I know not—and feel a cough arise from within as I expel the water that has filled my throat and infiltrated my lungs. And to my surprise, this cough, when followed by a desperate gasp of breath, is answered by air. I am breathing!

With breath filling my lungs, be it even burning cold, icy air, my senses gradually return, and I reach out my hand before me, realizing that I am floating on my back, water engulfing me on every side but air above me. The water is still, but deadly cold; and the air is hardly more than a few inches still clinging to the pocket of space between me and the plank of wood that I feel, rough against my fingers.

I open my eyes, but it is dark in here—so dark that I cannot see. With my body crying out in pain from the cold and the injury to my head, I force myself into an upright position, and I feel my feet touch a solid surface. Flailing about and feeling for some semblance of recognition, I discern that the ship has turned onto its side, and water has almost completely filled the hull. And soon, I am afraid, the ship is going to be submerged entirely.

Now, relying only on memory and hope and the sense of touch, I begin the tortuous navigation that shall lead me out of this vessel of death, dragging

me quickly into the depths of the sea. Knowing that the ship is almost entirely on its side, and that what was up now lies to my left, I realize that I must swim directly under the icy water. At the thought of this, my heart feels a surge of terror: a primal, physical terror of the suffering of icy cold water squeezing about me and suffocating me, and the deep fear of death, of the end of my life before my time has come, before my heart has found true peace.

But I swallow these fears and these thoughts with a lump in my throat, and, knowing that I do not have much time, I inhale deeply whatever air I can and dive under the water. I feel my way forward with my hands and with whatever interior sense of direction I still have in the disorientation that threatens to overtake me entirely and to force me into passivity.

As I swim forward, my right hand pressing against the wooden planked floor which has now become a wall, my chest begins to burn and my limbs to shake. Yet there is nothing to do but move forward, at the threat of my very life. I pass now through a door, sideways, and find myself in what I know to be a narrow hallway, moving slightly upward. This is a good sign, I recognize, even as my lungs contract within my breast in a terrible sensation of deprivation and a wave of dizziness surges over me.

I pass through another doorway and I find my head breaking through into air. My ears are suddenly filled with the chorus of surging waves that replaces the murky muffledness of being underwater, and I gasp deeply to draw in breath with these starving lungs. I pause for a moment to gather myself again, treading water to stay afloat as I lean my shoulder again the wood of the ship even as it recedes from me, continuing to sink into the ocean's morass. My sopping hair has come partially loose from its tie, and it clings to my forehead and my face. I brush it away and realize that my eyes are still closed, whether from shock or from a simple lack of the realization that I have not opened them yet, I do not know. I open them now, and, to my delight, I see a pale and dim light filtering through a narrow slit ahead of me—a passage to the deck—and, beyond that, stars.

The sight of the stars twinkling and shining in their places in the nocturnal sky smites my heart with a surprising intensity, and I find myself laughing aloud without thought—a short but deep laugh—followed by profuse tears from my eyes. Life. Life! I may yet live. Moving forward again, toward the alluring light of the stars awaiting me in the sky, my heart rises within me in a flicker of hope. I fly, up from the murky waters, up from the sinking ship, up from death and loss in the depth of this wreckage of life and this domain of death, and seek to join my song with theirs: the song of the stars, sung silently since the beginning of time, in eternal harmony.

But the songs of old also tell of ancient strife, of conflict in the heavens, of stars rebelling against stars, of gods against gods, and of an earth plunged into

chaos. With this sobering thought, my flight is halted, and I feel viscerally again that I am still in the icy water, wading slowly toward the sliver of night sky that is before me, with my heavy, burdened heart, and my hands covered with blood.

But I press on, and soon the sliver of the sky turns to a wide expanse blanketed overhead, an expanse of stars that is reflected on the waters that surround me in ever-shifting hues like a garment of celestial light cloaked about the earth and undulating in the wind and dancing for the moon. The great night-mist, the auroreal ribbon, burns green and purple, and the family of countless stars in the cloudy banner of Neréthion stretches vivid and brilliant on this late spring night. And closer to us than this is the three-pointed garment of the goddess Nirániel, among the greater constellations of the other gods, the Seven. She is peace and love, the harmony of unity and radiant fecundity, smallest of the divinities and lowest and yet most revered of them all. These thoughts flash across my mind now as I pause in the icy water, my body exhausted, the wide expanse of open sky above me. And my heart spontaneously reaches out, not to the great-presider, Neréthion, god of might and justice, but to the mother of mercy, Nirániel, and I remember a song that my own mother sang to me in my youth, from the days at the beginnings of memory, when I was but too small to speak. *Eldárien, remember to sing always to the tender mother in your heart, and, when you can, with your voice. And never betray her kindness.*

But it has been long since I sang to her, in silence or in words. And it has been even longer since I repaid her kindness with the fidelity that it deserves. But the words and their sense come spontaneously now, and I let my heart sing silently as I begin to swim again, toward what I know to be a mass of land in the distance, black shapes of mountain peaks against the darkened horizon, and, at their base, shores awaiting me.

Sweet mother, save your children when they cry,
for to you we turn in our desperate plight,
crying out with voices directed to you,
in unison among ourselves, full and true.

Hear us, and do not ignore, lest we despair,
for we need your light, your loving care,
we need it more than we need the air.

So come, great mother, give us your sweet bosom,
this bosom that once suckled the twin stars,
and gave birth to the torrent of life on the land of Irándiel.

Sweet mother, sweet mother, Nirániel,
beloved of the Ancient One, yet new,

you shine out, for us, above the rest,
for in your mercy and goodness we seek rest.

Despise us not, but be kind to us, putting us not to the test,
but welcoming us amid the storm, amid the raging seas,
to the abode of your goodness, amid the realms of Midalést,

from whence once humanity came as from your womb,
and to whence it will return beyond the grave, the tomb,
when the last sun has set and your star burns forever,
brightest among the celestial ones, among the very gods.

With these words burning in my heart and keeping me warm amid the death-dealing waters surrounding me, I push forward toward the land of my youth, my ancient home. Will I die here in the ocean, forgotten and unmourned, or shall I, by some miracle, survive this ordeal and come to the land that awaits me? It is a land riven by strife and war and by a plague even deeper, and which I come to aid, in whatever small way I may.

† † †

"The fish are reticent this morning, eh?" old man Mórlof says, as he leans back on the ancient stump on which his father and his grandfather used to sit and which was passed down to him, if things such as stumps can be passed down.

"What's that, father?" asks Miránd, his son, who sits beside him on the ground, idly holding his fishing rod without much thought. The boy was never much of a fisherman. Well, and now he is not much of a boy anymore, now is he, with a wife and three children of his own? It is a relief that fishing is not the only business around here and that the carriages come frequently on their way between this little town of Ígny, a small port to the east and a hub of the lumber and woodworking trade, and cities across Telmérion to the north and the west.

"I said that the fish aren't coming," Mórlof repeats, with a hint of impatience in his voice. "Something must have stirred them up."

"Wonder what it could be," the son says softly. "It's a quiet day, and the waves are hardly moving."

"The whispers of Hiliána, that's what they are. Her soft caresses on the cheek of the land."

"Aye, father, I suppose they are."

Mórlof pauses absentmindedly as he switches his rod from his right hand to his left and, with his free hand, scratches the stubble on his wrinkled chin. "Wasn't there supposed to be a ship coming in from Elsedór today?"

"Indeed, a cargo ship full of goods and supplies, though how we keep 'trading with the enemy' so many years into the war, I do not know," Miránd

says.

"I suppose they see us Telméri as distinct from the Empire that rules over us," Mórlof remarks offhandedly, and his son silently nods.

"Regardless," Miránd continues, resuming his previous thoughts, "the ship should have already arrived. It was expected early this morning or even last night. Though it's never quite predictable how quickly the waves and the wind will bring the ships in to port."

"Maybe the boat is still out there, then," the father muses, "delayed on the waves."

"I'm going to walk out to the pier," says the younger, eager for a chance to stretch his legs and to do something other than fish. "Perhaps I'll catch a glimpse of the boat, and we can watch it coming in to port."

Arching his eyebrows, Mórlof looks intently at his son, "Bored, are you? And you think a boat is going to remedy your own idleness of heart?"

"No, father. But I would like to stretch my legs and walk a while nonetheless, and if I catch sight of the boat, then that shall be a further boon."

"If you insist, son," Mórlof says quietly, "I guess there's no arguing. But remember there are only so many hours in the day."

"Aye, and for that I am relieved. I will be back soon."

With this, Miránd hurries away along the shoreline to the south, where the mooring for boats lies a good two or three hundred yards off, a small wharf with space only for one large barge and a few small boats. Not far inland along the shore, looking out over the wharf, is a stone hut that has for centuries been battered by the winds off the ocean, and for just as long, as far as Miránd knows, has been home and shelter to the caretaker of the pier and his family. Some trees just as ancient, gnarled and wrinkled in their old age not unlike elderly men, lean over the hut, sheltering it in their broad canopy. But Miránd pays no attention to this now, setting his course rather for the wharf. The morning air is cold, but the sun peeks through the clouds over the ocean to the east and shows her warm and consoling face, sending countless glimmers of singing light over the face of the sea, glimmers too brilliant for Miránd to take in with his frail vision. Shielding his eyes from the light, he picks his way over the rocks littering the beach and around the logs that have washed up during the currents of numerous days and nights, obeying the ceaseless rhythm of the sea. It takes him a few moments to notice that there are a few more logs than usual, more than there were the previous day. No, he realizes upon a moment's reflection, these are not logs; they are planks of hewn, formed, sanded, and treated wood, albeit now broken and littered about the beach.

What is this? Miránd thinks to himself as he looks about the beach for anything that would give him an indication of what happened. But he does

not have long to think, and he follows with his eyes more than he follows with his mind. Clearly there are signs of a shipwreck: bottles floating in the shallows between hills of gray, rocky sand, clothing and other miscellaneous items jumbled about as if tossed off by a careless man ready to throw himself into sleep and unwilling to arrange his belongings in an orderly way. But among all the signs of wreckage, Miránd's eyes are drawn to one sight: a human figure lying almost face down in the sand and rock, with a slab of wood clutched tightly in unmoving arms.

"Oh, by the seven divinities!" cries the fisherman, leaping forward to the figure. Without second thought, he turns the body over and looks upon it. He looks into the face of a middle-aged man with worn features, visibly having weathered many sorrows and much strife, and yet also bearing, even without consciousness, a touch of softness or tenderness, something not lessened by the sorrow and pain but rather accentuated and deepened by it. His face is wide with a clearly-defined jaw and angular chin, prominent cheekbones framing tight cheeks, and a nose elegantly arched. But most significantly for the moment, the figure is breathing, air whistling lightly through slightly open lips and moving the hair of a short but thick brown beard. Miránd, still without thinking, pries the life-saving bark of wood from the man's arms and hoists him onto his back.

"Well, this is the catch of a lifetime, eh, isn't it?" Miránd says to himself and then is surprised at his own disrespect, or at his humor, he is uncertain which it is. "It's the catch of *your* lifetime, friend. Let us only pray that you survive. It's a wonder you're still breathing. The water must have been terribly frigid..."

The unnamed man remains unconscious for the entirety of the trip, along the shoreline to Mórlof, and then as the two fisherman together climb the craggy, grass-laden hill another three hundred yards to the edge of the village and their homestead. The latter consists simply of two timber cabins facing one another at a forty-five degree angle and sharing a yard with a low plank fence and sparse vegetation, what can grow in this cold region with a short spring and summer followed by a harsh autumn and a harsher winter: snowblossoms, merry-weather heath, and targ root, with a row or two of hardy potatoes. The nearest house is another hundred or so yards off, peeking through the trees—spruce and alder and oak—that stretch out even to the edge of the rocky sloping crags that lead down to the beach below, outliers of the dense forest to the west.

Inside the house of the younger fisherman, they lay the man on a straw-mattressed, fur-laden bed and kindle a roaring fire in the hearth near him. His clothing had already dried by the time Miránd found him on the beach, and it looks to be in mostly good condition besides the usual wear and tear: a

tunic and gambeson covering his torso and linen breeches and leather boots upon his legs and feet. So there is little for them to do at the moment than to help him recover the warmth he has lost, and with warmth, hopefully strength. And this does not take long, for within a matter of minutes they hear a sharp intake of breath, followed by a groan.

Without opening his eyes, the man begins to speak, although not in a clear voice as rather in almost indecipherable mumbles, "*Meléndia na élen Nirányë, te dan mélen. Hasía ta.*"

The fishermen look at one another in confusion. Perhaps if the mumbles were more audible they would be able to make a guess as to the language, but they are confident that it is not their own.

"A foreigner, perhaps?" Mórlof whispers, again scratching his stubbly chin.

"I don't recognize the language," says the son. "It doesn't sound like any language I've ever heard, though some of the words are reminiscent of our speech."

"Well, you've never even left this town, my boy. I would not expect you to have wide experience of the world."

"That's not true," replies the former, indignant. "I've been to Brûg'hil on business and, to receive my betrothed, to Sillion, and then there was that time that little Elsë needed the doctor, and we brought her thence, remember?"

"Hush, son," says Mórlof.

"What?"

"Our guest is awake."

Miránd turns to the man and finds him silently looking up at his rescuers. His eyes are a deep and rich blue, sober yet kind, and difficult to look into for long for the intensity of presence that they convey. Miránd soon turns his gaze away.

"Welcome," Miránd says. "It looks like the gods were watching over you and fished you right from the sea."

"Well, in truth my son here fished you from the sea," Mórlof interjects, "and he carried you all the way here, at that."

"Thank you," the man on the bed whispers. "I take it I am in Ígny?"

"Yes, indeed you are," replies the younger fisherman. "And you are welcome...for the saving, I mean. And I expect for other things besides. You are in our home, after all."

Shrugging his shoulders at his son's unclear speech, Mórlof clarifies, "What my son means to say is that we are glad you are here, and that you are most welcome. Are you injured in any way?"

"I struck my head," the man replies, "but the wound does not seem to be of a grievous nature." As if overtaken by exhaustion, he then closes his eyes

again.

There is a moment of pregnant silence, in which the two fishermen are uncertain of what to do, either to tend to the man or to give him space to rest. This silence is broken only by the presence of a woman who steps in through the doorway.

"Ah, my dear," Miránd says, hurrying to his wife, a woman with long hair the color of lightly baked bread framing a narrow face at the time of life when youthfulness is replaced by age and its smooth freshness replaced by the lines and wrinkles of time and care. "Alíja, we found this man lying unconscious on the beach. You see, the ship that was supposed to come in last night seems to have fallen afoul and come only in pieces."

"Yes, word has reached the village," the woman replies. "Your feat carrying him here did not go unnoticed. I was at the market to purchase a few victuals after escorting the children to their tutor, and word reached me like a ripple on the water. Well, is he injured or in need?"

"He seems well. He has only just awakened."

Alíja walks to the side of the bed and bends down to inspect the stranger in her home. After a long moment, in which the two standing men look on uncomprehending of her feminine ways—though the man lying on the bed, opening his eyes and looking up at her, senses much more than they—she rises again and says, "Well, have you offered him anything to eat or drink?"

"Aye, er, well... No, we were about to do so," Miránd cries. "Recall he only just awoke a moment before you came in!"

"Then I shall fix him some hot soup and warm him some bread, if he is well enough," Alíja says. And then, to the man: "What say you to that?"

"I would appreciate it greatly," whispers the man lying on the bed. "I would also like to know the names of my kind hosts."

"Of course, that is only fitting," Mórlof replies. "Our apologies, sir, as we are not accustomed to hosting strangers, and certainly not people saved from the ocean, mind you. We are but simple village folk who spend most of our days fishing and tending to the other affairs of our small homestead and family. My name is Mórlof, son of Nímfel, and this here is my only son, Miránd."

"What is your surname?" asks the stranger.

"Feskar," Miránd replies. "Not a very creative surname but chosen by my great-grandfather many generations back. It's an old Telméric word for fisherman."

"I am accustomed with the word, though I have yet to meet any who use it as a surname," responds the man, and nodding his heart toward Alíja, "and this must be your wife."

"My name is Alíja," she says with a gesture that is something between a

bow and a curtsy. "Know that you are most welcome in our home for as long as you find it fitting or necessary."

"Again, I thank you, but perhaps you should question what kind of man you have received into your home before you offer him such an unconditional welcome."

"Your eyes tell me enough, sir," she replies simply.

To this the man has no response except to lower these eyes and to absentmindedly stare at his hands laid across his abdomen.

"As for us, we would be happy to know more about you, for your sake as well as ours," Mórlof says. "By what name are you called?"

"My name is Eldárien. I am the son of Bierand of Fálstead, and our surname is Illómiel."

"Eldárien Illómiel," says Alíja, "your name has a beautiful ring to it."

"Thank you, madam."

At this, the woman laughs.

"Madam? I have not been called that in ages. Perhaps never. People do not much speak like that around these parts, but only in the great cities, unless they think themselves addressing some great personage. I assume it is none of our business to inquire if you are from such a place or a person of such a standing."

"You may ask anything you wish, as I am your guest and likely indebted to you for my life. But I assure you that I am neither nor think myself to be."

"Well then," begins Miránd, "I would like to—" but he is interrupted by his wife's gentle touch on his arm.

"Hush, Miránd. Let the man eat and recover first, and then there will be time for conversation."

"It is alright," Eldárien says. "I feel my energy returning already."

"Yes? And that energy will be gone in a few minutes at this rate. Rest, I tell you!" With this she turns away, beckoning for her husband to follow her into the kitchen.

"What is it, dear?" Miránd asks quietly, as his wife sets about gathering vegetables for the soup, cutting them, and placing them in a pot filled with water that hangs over the fire.

"This man is no ordinary traveler," Alíja says.

"Indeed?"

"You have heard the way he speaks."

"Many speak that way, just not here."

"But you have surely seen the nature of his clothing and his arms and the knots in his hair?"

"The what?"

"The knots, you fool!"

"Don't call me a fool!"

"...You're right. I am sorry," she says with a sigh. "But he has the marks all over him."

"The marks of what, exactly?" Miránd asks, trying not to reveal the degree of his ignorance.

"The clothing he wears was designed to go under a suit of plate armor, and it also covers a chain shirt, which he wears even now. And his arms have not the shape of an ordinary laborer's. It is not brute muscle he has, but toned strength."

"So you are saying he's a warrior or soldier of some kind?"

"Yes. And not just of some kind," Alíja replies. "Ordinary guards and infantry fighters do not wear plate mail."

"I see... And his hair? The braids?"

"Not just the braids, but the knots at the end. But I imagine he will inform you of their meaning soon enough. For now, let's get to work preparing him something to eat."

"Aye...but do you think perhaps—perhaps he's dangerous?"

"I wouldn't suppose so. We will be cautious regardless. I imagine it is best if he stay at your parents' house tonight. We will let him in here, around the children and ourselves, only during the day. I suspect he won't want to stay long."

"It seems you are in on so many secrets!"

"Not really. And you will know all soon enough... I just have a bit more experience in this regard, considering my upbringing."

"Are things really that different in the larger settlements?" Miránd asks.

"Yes, and no," Alíja answers. "Many customs are similar, and yet the culture also differs in significant ways. Regardless, I have found life in a village both more wholesome and more simple. Even so, whether in city or village, there are often a lot of things that we build up around ourselves which should not be there, which harm us even as we think they protect us. It seems to me that this man is in conflict with something of this nature...or perhaps with many things."

† † †

Eldárien eats the soup which is brought to him very slowly, cradling the bowl in his hands and sipping on it, as if its very proximity to him and the warmth flowing from it is permeating and loosening his frozen bones and bringing life to his body. His hosts refrain from asking questions as long as there is still something in the bowl. The two fishermen try to act occupied with something meaningful, though they do not fail to give the impression of "hovering" around their guest in anxious expectation; Alíja has gone out to receive the children and accompany them on their way back from the

tutor. When they have returned, their young and enthusiastic voices can be heard as they play noisily in the yard, filtering dimly through the walls and windows of the house. Presumably she has told them of the man in their house and of the proper manners, caution, and kindliness that is called for in such a situation.

When at last she comes in again, Eldárien is finishing up the final bit of food in his bowl, which he then hands to her with a deep bow of the head—an unspoken thank you.

"It is time, I presume, that we talk?" he then says, looking at those present in the room with him.

"If you feel well enough for it," Mórlof replies, "it would be a comfort to us knowing who and what kind of man is staying with our family. As you yourself said."

"Of course. First, I assure you that you have nothing to fear from me, any more than you would fear from any man. What I intend to say, rather," Eldárien adds, as if struggling for words, "is that I mean you no harm."

"Tell us from whence our guest hails," Alíja says kindly, though with a natural authority that seems to emanate always, and unknown to her, from her person.

"Originally, or in the immediate present?"

"You are from Telmérion, are you not?"

"That much is clear, given the fact that my accent is not far distant from yours," Eldárien answers. "In fact my speech and my manner is similar to yours, and I expect that my upbringing was not far different either. I was raised in a village not unlike this one and in a humble home much like this."

"The name?" Miránd inquires.

"I think I mentioned it before, though only in passing. It was Fálstead, though it exists no more."

The others do not say anything in response to this, apparently uncertain if a response is called for or what an appropriate one might be, and so Eldárien continues.

"I was raised in toil and in play and taught the ways of manner, nobility, and responsibility both by my parents and by a dear acquaintance of the family, whom I also considered a personal friend. It was this man, too, who first instructed me in the ways of combat, teaching me both swordplay and archery, for in these my father had little skill, though to him I am indebted for many other things besides."

Miránd suppresses the desire to look at his wife to see her reaction.

"When the days of my youth found conclusion, I moved on, leaving the village of my birth, and soon began to make my living with the blade."

"You were a mercenary?" Mórlof asks.

"I suppose that is not exactly a clear way to put the matter," Eldárien says gently, with a subtle expression which conceals innumerable emotions. "But no, I was not, nor am I, a mercenary."

"What then? A soldier?" Miránd suggests.

"I was employed in the service of the Imperial army and eventually, after many years, found myself stationed in the Hinterlands of Tel-Velfána. That is the immediate place from which I now hail." Eldárien is quite aware that these words could have made his hosts uncomfortable, and so he adds, "I no longer align myself with the Imperial army. You can see me now as any other man."

"Worry not, friend," Alíja says, "we do not stand in resistance to the Empire, whatever our own thoughts may be in that regard. The strife that rends at the heart of our nation does not leave us untouched, but in this place you need not fear us, nor do we fear you."

"If you knew the true depth and extent of the evils perpetrated by the agents of the Empire, perhaps you would speak differently," Eldárien sighs. "We did terrible things there...in..."

His voice falters. Uncomfortable with the silence, Miránd speaks instead, filling the pause with words. "We have heard distant echoes of the wars on distant soil, but little has reached us, as occupied as we are with the ill here at home. But let me say: just be glad that you were only following orders."

"I was in fact a captain..." Eldárien answers, involuntarily lowering his eyes. There is a moment of dense silence as the import of these words is weighed by each of those in the room. "But yes," Eldárien continues at last, breaking the silence, "I was only following orders. Yet sometimes orders must be disobeyed in order to follow the deeper certainty inscribed in the heart. And this I failed to do."

"Aye, but here you are now," Mórlof observes.

"Yes, and I resolve to never disobey that deeper truth again, no matter the cost."

"Are you safe?" Alíja asks, as if the meaning of the question, and its cause, is evident.

Eldárien raises his eyes and looks at her. She is moved by the impact of his gaze, which bears in it a sadness perhaps deeper than she has ever seen.

"Are any of us safe?" he says at last. "Grievous are the days in which we live. But if you ask whether I defected from my station, the answer is no. At least, I submitted my formal letter of resignation. But after six months without an answer, I departed from my post, unable to abide by the orders that were coming from the general, passed down to him, I believe, from above. I asked my men to come with me, but most refused. And the few who did..." a shadow passes over Eldárien's face, "found their tomb in the depths of the

ocean."

"I am sorry to hear that," Alíja remarks kindly.

"And I am sorry that it is so."

"If this is too painful for you," Miránd suggests, "we can continue this conversation later."

"No, let us continue," Eldárien replies. "I have already witnessed too much death for one lifetime, but speaking of it shall cause no more pain than what I have already come to know."

The others nod silently.

"Despite what I have told you, I return to my homeland not in flight, but in response. There is great need here, and I wish to be of assistance in whatever way I may." After a short pause, he adds, "And I hope not with the blade."

"But we are in a civil war," Mórlof retorts. "And you are a soldier, a commander-in-arms. Do you expect to sit idly by and refuse to take sides?"

"I do intend to refuse to take sides," Eldárien replies, "but I hope to do more than remain idle. Surely there is some service I can render to the people of this land, as humble as this service may be."

"Your sword may be needed yet," Alíja says, "though not in the way that you fear."

"Indeed? What do you mean?"

"There mat be a threat to life arising among us greater than that of civil war, or at least akin to it. Perhaps indeed it shall prove more death-dealing than either the Imperial or rebel armies. Stirring into life and action around us are hordes of a different power and a danger much more unpredictable. This, at least, is what the rumors, now widespread, claim."

Eldárien nods his head silently in understanding and says softly, "I think I know of what you speak, though in Tel-Velfána we knew little of this, no more than scattered rumors even weaker than what I imagine you have heard. And most of these were either dismissed in doubt or exaggerated in fear. Please, tell me the truth, as much as you know."

"We have taken to calling them the vrû'ádach," Mórlof begins. "If I understand correctly, this is a name mined from ancient texts by one who knows about such things, and the name has spread to become something of an official denomination. Yet even if they have become a household name in Ígny, not yet has our village had a direct encounter with them, though hint of them stirs in the mountains to the west."

"They are like something out of the deepest of nightmares, the darkest of fears, they say," Miránd explains, "the creatures of darkness crawling out of the shadowed holes and crevices of the earth, seeking to devour the light."

"That may be a little exaggerated," Mórlof says to his son. "We are uncer-

tain of how much they are willing to venture from their caves and even more uncertain of their motivations, if any motivations they have. Whether they are our forefather's fathers brought to life or whether they are some new abomination spawned in the earth, I do not know. But they feed, and to do this they must indeed reach out to what lives to devour it with their own deadness. The foothills of the Teldren mountains have been all but emptied of their former inhabitants, farms left desolate by the departure of their owners whose livestock were taken in the night or left in a bloody mess."

"Do you know any more of what is occurring further west, across the mountains?" Eldárien asks.

"Very little, I am afraid," Mórlof answers.

"Do you have any suggestions of whom I might ask? This is a matter of great importance, and one for which I returned to this land."

"I fear what you will need more than information is a sword," Miránd says. "Whatever these vrû'ádach are, they are vicious beasts."

"They are perhaps no more than beasts," Alíja responds, "vicious but mindless nonetheless. Nonetheless it is well to be informed if you wish to do anything about this crisis."

"It is always well to have information before wielding the sword," Eldárien agrees. "Indeed, more deeply than information, one must have understanding, otherwise the sword will be guided ill and will not strike true, even if it reaches its target. To slay a living thing is always a serious action, and to kill without understanding is a grievous thing. This I know from my own experience."

The dense atmosphere following these words is interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Ah, perhaps it will be necessary to finish this conversation later," Alíja says. "I think dear Yelía is here, having rounded up the children, and the little ones shall be clamoring for dinner."

Chapter Two
A New Beginning and an Uncertain Future

Thick clouds of incense spiral and dance upward in the air, released from the coals burning in the bowls surrounding the altar, as Elmáriyë prostrates herself on the cold stone floor of the temple. She inhales the strong and pungent scent, richness released through burning flame, and thinks back on the path she walked to come to this place. Yet as important as the past is, and the journey, she is here now, devoting her life forevermore to the cause of immortal love, to the presence and work of the goddess in the world. The voices of her companions, the priests and priestesses of the temple, and the sages, echo in song around her, and she lets go of the multiplicity of thoughts and memories. Instead, she tries simply to sink into the fullness of the present moment as it encompasses her, reverberating with an immensity of silent sound, made tangible in the voices surrounding her and in the sweet scent of the motherly maker and caregiver, whose odor is symbolized in the inflamed substance rising to the heavens.

Immersed as she is in restful thought beyond words, she is stirred and surprised when words are spoken near to her, intoned by a soft female voice:

"Rise now, child of Nirániel, and gaze with eyes of heart upon the new dawn of life. Listen with ears of spirit to the voice of the great mother. Feel the intangible love and taste the sweet banquet of her benevolence. And speak back in response, if you truly desire this. You have heard, you have known, and now you dedicate yourself to her and to bringing her light into the darkness of this world, where it is so oft forgotten and scorned."

At these words, Elmáriyë rises to her knees and, slowly and with a deep sense of intermingled gratitude and trepidation, raises her eyes before her to the statue of the great mother, the goddess of love, compassion, and fecundity, Nirániel. In a stance of undying receptivity the goddess stands, with face rapt upward to the light and eyes gently open; but this receptivity of the great mother is also her benevolent generosity to all humankind poured out through her open hands, palms upraised as if offering, surrendering, the gifts that she bears within to all those who approach her in their need.

"Elmáriyë of Telónis," a male voice that she knows well quietly begins, "you have been with us now for two years, and you have learned and progressed in the way of the mother. She opens her bosom to you, to shelter you there without ceasing as her precious and beloved. And from the fullness of this love that you have received, seek also to spread her light far and wide.

Bring her always in your heart, against your breast, confident that knowing her is the greatest boon, and that one cannot share without this knowing of the heart."

With this, the man, clothed in dark robes like the sky at the blush of dawn when darkness tastes the first hint of light, approaches Elmáriyë. His aged face is warm in the candlelight, his wrinkles deep and yet soft, as if witnesses to his wisdom and kindliness. He gestures for her to bend her head. As she does so, he slips around her neck an amulet, crafted with the image of Nirániel, a pattern of interlaced threads of wrought metal conjoining in a way that the end and the beginning meet and are never parted, a sign that she is the interweaver of destinies and of lives in love from the beginning to the end.

As the ceremony comes to its final moment, the voices of all are raised in song, giving voice to the words of an ancient hymn, a hymn deep yet simple, as all true wisdom is, given to the simple of heart.

Nirániel, Nirániel, first and chosen daughter of Eldáru,
beloved one who teaches every heart to love,
come to us and show us the way that is good and true;
beyond the shadows and darkness of life, let us move,
free and joyful in the realm of light, pure and holy,
and bring this light to every lost and hurting heart.

And then in the ancient tongue:

Niránÿë, Niránÿë, belía porá en séka nu Eldáru,
seïka ona qua illüa corá mon eliáru,
vená a noá ya dirá noaë eliána ya fundála;
medlúr ya obscúr surána passá, tratá noë,
liëne ya haláne illá regó en, sanó ya hasïo,
ya dirá aná illá corán derén ya ungdén moën.

After the ceremony is concluded, all of those present retreat to the atrium for a humble celebration among the twisting vines that clothe the wooden pillars and the gurgling water of the fountain in the center of the small but surprisingly spacious room. More songs are sung, and numerous regional treats are offered to the guests, who are few in number but devoted. The town of Ristfánd, one of the southernmost on the continent, is home to numerous sprawling vineyards and farms of holly-lock, and is hospitable also to the cattle rancher and shepherd and the tender of wylána (a bird resembling a chicken, though three times its size and with feathers of radiant colors, bearing eggs both larger and more frequent). Lying near to Nelsen Bay in a wide coniferous plain along the edge of the Yjind Mountains, the climate in this region differs greatly from the mountainous lands cradling her on the west or the desolate and rocky lands to the north, where the strong and hardy Telméri

nonetheless do not fail to help the land yield its fruit and sustain their humble way of life.

Elmáriyë has been in this town for almost three years, having departed from her family's home nestled deep in the mountains of Yjind, where she grew up amid love and toil, amid poverty and the bounty of the land that sustained them, the cold wind sweeping down from the mountains and the family hearth burning almost without cease to ward off the cold and to feed the family who would gather round it.

She came with determined mind and heart and worked at an inn for close upon a year before being accepted into the temple of the great mother. And now on this day, two years since her entrance, after so many joyful blessings and healing trials, she is eager to walk whatever path may be laid before her. She may be young, not yet in her twenty-sixth year, but she has experienced and weathered much and has drunk deeply since her youth of the wisdom of the land, whispering in her ears continually, and of the wisdom of the tender mother who speaks most clearly to those who are most humble.

"Dear Elmáriyë, you have our congratulations and well-wishes as you begin your new life," says another member of the temple, holding himself with almost regal bearing, his arm interlocked with that of his wife. "Have you received word of where the grandmaster wishes you to travel?"

"I have not received word, Éndric," Elmáriyë replies, with a bow of her head, "and thank you for your wishes."

"I would hope you get to travel to the capital city of Brûg'hil. It is exquisite. Perhaps if the grandmaster is not decided, I may suggest it."

"Suggest it you may, but I am not looking for exquisite journeys. There will be beauty enough wherever I may be."

"Ah, but none like the capital! You should see the great citadel of Mérics Mírjorn and the temple of the seven at its height. Nowhere in the world is there such masterful exhibition of the capable work of human hands!"

"Do not our traditions say that 'Nirániel prefers the beauty of nature to all the artifice of man, without despising the latter'?"

"Of course you are right, young one," replies Éndric, "but our traditions also say that Nirániel is one of the divines, who has made her dwelling near us in order to counteract the power of the fallen one. But other traditions say that she is a mere mortal, raised to the status of reverence by the divines and favored by them with a status not unlike their own."

"I wish not to argue with you, my friend," Elmáriyë responds quietly. "Some say that Nirániel is yet to come and that our worship of her expresses but our longing for a gift yet to be given from the origin of all the divine and human orders."

Éndric rejoins, with very little kindness in his eyes, "And why would we

worship what is yet to come, as if we could know it now?"

With this, and to Elmáriyë's great relief, Éndric ends the conversation and turns, with his wife still silently beside him, to another part of the room. He quickly engages himself in other conversations. Always uncomfortable with crowds, particularly those in which she is a special participant, Elmáriyë herself withdraws to a corner of the room hidden in shadows, far from the large brazier that illumines the chamber.

She has only begun to relax and to breathe more deeply, however, when the grandmaster himself, a man of venerable stature with a long white beard and glistening blue eyes, approaches her. It was Cirien Lorjiës who invested her and laid upon her neck the amulet of Nirániel during the ceremony in whose lingering light she still bathes.

"I suppose that our friend Éndric tried to suggest where I should be sending you?" he says quietly.

"Indeed," Elmáriyë replies, reminding herself that Cirien is the gentlest of gentle men and that he wears the robes of his office with as much disinterested humility as many unjustly feel discomfort in his presence—until, that is, they truly get to know him and the grace and serenity with which he loves all entrusted to his care. He is not a man to lean on the staff of his role as if it gave him leverage over others; though in this respect, he is sadly an exception among the order of the temple leaders and often finds himself in conflict with them both in his personal behavior and in his inclinations for the care of the temple and its service to all.

"Well, I assure you," continues Cirien, rousing Elmáriyë from her thoughts, "that I have not yet decided where I wish to send you. I am confident, though, that your heart will be a gift to any and to all."

"Thank you for your kind words."

"You do not mind staying here in Ristfánd for a while longer, do you?"

"No, I do not."

"I expected as much," Cirien replies, his eyes scanning the crowd of people filling the room, though it is evident that he is somehow looking deeper, to what is visible only to the eyes of the heart. "Do you have a wish?"

"A wish?" Elmáriyë asks.

"About where you would like to go?"

"Is that not your decision?"

"Yes, but it is a decision concerning *you*, my child. Never let your desire for generosity and service be an excuse to neglect the gift of your own being and life. You must first live, and always live, in the fullness of your own heart. Only from the fullness of your heart can you truly give our mother's benevolence to others."

"I have not thought much about it," answers Elmáriyë quietly, after a

pause. "Where I would like to be, I mean. In fact, to tell you the truth, it is as though my future is shrouded in mystery, and I cannot even make out the slightest path among the shadows that veil the way ahead."

"It is often so for all of us," Cirien says. "But I must say that I experience the same thing, in your regard, when I think of where best to assign you. I see nothing of what the future holds for you. The darkness surrounding it is immeasurably thick and obscure. And to be honest, I know not what to make of it. This is why I think it is important to wait, to listen, for what may be unveiled before us with the passage of time."

"Yes, I think that is wise," Elmáriyë replies, "and I am willing to wait. I am quite content here."

Cirien chuckles softly at this remark. "Yes, yes, I suppose you are. Though perhaps," he adds, turning and looking into her eyes, "you would like to visit your family for a time?"

"Truly?"

"Truly. If it is a wish of yours, then I will arrange provisions and a horse, and you may stay for a few months or until something more is given us to know."

"It would be a wonderful thing to visit, particularly this time of year."

† † †

Within a matter of two days, Elmáriyë is leading a paint horse by the bridle through the cobbled streets of the city, a small pack tied behind the saddle and another over her own shoulders. Her long auburn hair is braided back from her temples along the side of her head and tied at the back, falling full down her to her upper back. She wears a simple garb of undyed woolen fabric, with a leather jerkin strung together at the front and, over it all, a heavy fur cloak pulled tight around her shoulders and almost sweeping the ground behind her as she walks.

It is early morning, just after sunrise, and the stillness of night clings still to the streets, interrupted only by a few laborers about their business, setting up stalls full of seasonal vegetables, salted and preserved meats freshly hunted or slaughtered, or handicrafts of wood, cloth, skins, or basketwork. Yet even as she walks, the hum of movement and conversation begins to break the quiet air, though the latter still hangs about in the crevices between the tall half-timber buildings, lingering around the heavy stone of the abodes of the more well-to-do, and abiding especially in the simple and yet elegant structure of the temple of Nirániel, which lies directly behind Elmáriyë at the rear of a court of smooth stonework with a thin cavern-fed stream flowing to either side as it makes its way to a greater convergence to the south of the city, whence it flows into the sea.

Ristfánd is one of the only settlements in Telmérion that has retained a

semblance of normalcy and prosperity amidst the chaos of the civil war and the mysterious changes in the weather, in which a harsh and cold land has become inexplicably more so, delaying the onset of spring now by two months and still waiting for the arrival of warmth and the blossoming of the first flowers. Elmáriyë looks around and is reminded of this, as even in the beginning of the month of Méldron none of the usual vegetables are for sale, but only the hardy and late-harvest potatoes and merry-heather roots and a few carrots and lesser herbs. Nonetheless, the people here have not yet known, nor are yet close to suffering, the poverty of true famine, even if diverse supplies and goods, including foodstuffs, are more rare than they have been in generations. This is sadly not true for the smaller settlements to the north, west, and east, in which the lives and material well-being of the people are so deeply tied up with the land and with the unpredictable changing of the weather and the other forces at work beyond human control and ken.

If she is honest with herself, it is to places such as these that Elmáriyë would wish to go to bring the light of Nirániel: places of poverty and hardship, of pain and suffering, of human want crying out for the divine abundance. But she knows that her destiny is not in her own hands alone, and she awaits the gift of grace that will show the way and bring to flourish the good that she cannot bring about by her own efforts. Regardless, the larger settlements and cities of Telmérion have problems of their own, often just as dire as the want for food or material goods. The ten to twelve thousand inhabitants of Ristfánd in fact live in the orbit of a great spiral of injustice and thievery, either in participation in it or in rebellion against it, or, as in the case of most persons, in a blind-eyed tolerance to it after years of long suffering and endurance of the corruption under the surface of the city. This injustice is not of the viscerally violent and murderously malevolent kind as practiced by the marauders and brigands who roam about the land attacking and pillaging, but it is thievery and malice nonetheless. Relihím the brigands are called, in a derivation of the old tongue. And Elmáriyë has heard Cirien speak of those swimming the current of corruption under the apparently clean garment of the city as the "Relihím of Ristfánd." A fitting name and very telling. For even if the garment differs, the stench is the same.

As Elmáriyë comes to the gate of the city, she turns back for a moment, her mind filled with thoughts of the goodness and beauty that she has encountered here, and yet also of the pain and human misery that are also here concealed, and the malice as well. She offers a silent prayer and sighs deeply in compassion and longing, a part of her wishing to remain in the city, to serve the light in the midst of so much darkness, even as another part of her enthusiastically looks forward to the visit with her family.

And with this, she turns and climbs into the saddle of the horse. Gripping

the reins in her hands, she presses firmly against the horse's flanks with her knees and heels, "Giddy up, Fenárion," and the horse responds by moving forward, first at a walk and then at a gentle trot. Elmáriyë experiences its strong and muscular body move beneath her with restrained intensity, She has loved horses for as long as she can remember, spending a large part of her free time tending to the mares owned by her father or riding them for hours along the mountainous trails branching off from their homestead, the wind in her hair and the sun on her back. Indeed, as she rides, it feels almost as if she is riding on the wind itself, or perhaps upon the very foundations of the earth, abiding in perpetual stability and continual movement. And yet now, as the massive cut stones of the curtain wall of Ristfánd recede into the distance behind her, whether she is riding upon the wind itself or not, the journey home will be a long one. But she looks forward to it, as the rolling grassland cloaked in trees and heather, dancing and glistening in the morning sun, greets her in radiant beauty, and after that, the rocky hills await, in a gradual ascent to the lower steppe and then the jagged crags of the Yjind Mountains.

Elmáriyë prays for a safe journey, free from brigands and beasts, and feels a slight trepidation intermingling with her joy and excitement, keenly aware that she travels alone. In terms of weaponry, she is not heavily equipped; it is not her part to be so, and neither is she trained to wield such weaponry if she had it. A short bow is tied to the pack on the horse, and with it a quiver full of arrows, and on Elmáriyë's own belt, a long hunting knife in a leather scabbard. In other words, she is well armed for killing, dressing, and skinning a deer or other wild beast, but for little more than that. And this is only fitting, as it has never been the part of the servants of Nirániel to wield death against humankind for whatever reason, though fighting in self-defense is in no manner forbidden and left to the prudent discernment of each person.

Despite the danger of the roads and the tumultuous state of Telmérion, Elmáriyë feels in the most part secure and at rest, and she easily dismisses the slight surge of fear at riding home alone and unattended. She instead occupies herself with drinking in the sights and sounds she encounters along the way, more brown and lifeless than usual at this time of year but beautiful nonetheless. For the trees dot the landscape with a kind of poetry, standing as silent sentinels over the earth, with their hidden roots plunging deep into her bosom and drinking of her life, and their branches stretched to the heavens, all the more expansively the more they have allowed themselves to sink into the humble depths of the soil. Aspen, poplar, and beech, with a few large oak here and there, intermingle in great diversity, still mostly leafless but majestic nonetheless in their nudity; and among these stand tall and wide the fully-pined spruces and junipers, less in number but more vibrant in color.

Elmáriyë rides like this without stop until the sun is high in the sky and the

air has warmed significantly, though without entirely dispelling the chill. This is not a bother, though, because the atmosphere is still and quiet, with hardly a whisper of wind, and the cold only enhances the sense of reverberating quiet that cloaks the land and of the mysterious whispers of life that inhabit the woods and sing among the trees. Intermittently the chirping of small birds, passerines, warblers, or finches, or the calling of a lark, or even the deep voice of a moose, is heard, breaking the stillness, or perhaps better, intermingling with it. The fullness of sound-laden silence leads Elmáriyë to think that perhaps she is hearing some distant echo, however imperfect, of the silent song by which the gods first sang Irándiel into existence. She dismounts from the horse in the early afternoon and ties him to the nearest tree by the harness. After this, pulling a satchel out of her pack, she makes herself comfortable at the foot of a large oak and begins to eat a simple meal of rye bread and goat cheese, with a few nuts.

She cannot help feeling guilty for having enough food to eat when so many go hungry, and this, despite her teachers' continual insistence that she should feel rather grateful, as the poverty of others beside her own sufficiency should not stir guilt but rather thankfulness and compassion and active concern for them in their need. She does not quite understand, at least on the level of the heart, and can only surrender to the mystery, as she has learned to do, indeed, with so many parts of life. There are many forces at work greater than the human mind can comprehend, and to try to fit them into the mind is an impossible task; but to stand before them in wonder or in lament, in contemplation and receptivity, does no harm but is the very fabric of life and love. Thus she does not mind feeling guilty if it means her heart is still alive to her brothers and sisters, even if there is very little effectively that she can do for them in this moment, and especially if her deep longing to share in their suffering remains as an open wound not yet fulfilled in the depth of communion and compassion that her heart seeks. Hopefully, as time passes, she will learn how both to be closer to those who suffer and to be concretely at their service.

After her small meal, she takes a long drink from a waterskin tied at her waist and cherishes the subtle leathery taste that it affords her—something that she has always liked about travel. Before rising and continuing on the road, she leans her head back against the trunk of the tree and closes her eyes. She hears at first nothing but the dense silence of the woods, interrupted only by the song of birds and the whisper of wind in the canopy of trees, but after a few moments she hears also the distant call of a wolf, answered from a different part of the woods by another. The distance between the two calls awakens in Elmáriyë a vivid sense of the wide space that surrounds her on every side, a sprawling, undulating lowland at the foot of the range of

mountains, with rolling hills and numerous crevices in which trickle little streams as the land descends to fjords that meet the swelling sea as it washes against the rocky shores of Nelsen bay.

She calls to mind the simple farewells spoken this morning, and the embraces of her two primary mentors, the young priest Rídrej, his face only beginning to show signs of age, and the eighty-year-old scholar, Welíya, her face clothed in wrinkles, and her hands, too, like the land's surface covered in valleys and rivers and deep furrows, but still able to hold a book and to clasp themselves in prayer, her sole two desires, apart from the desire to love itself. Their eyes look upon her even now in memory, glistening with a gentleness that she has come to know and to love. Her companions in the order had also been present at the sending-off, many still dressed in their night garments, with bedraggled hair or with a night-cap still tied around the ears.

"We wish you well on your journey," Rídrej had said, "and a safe return. May you find your family well and your time with them a blessing."

Welíya had handed Elmáriyë a small item wrapped in paper and tied with string. "This is for your parents. Give it to them as a gift from us upon your arrival." And, with kindness in her eyes and a subtle smile illuminating her face, "This," she had continued, "is for your siblings." Elmáriyë had laughed as the old woman placed into her palm a handful of sweet candies made from distilled tree sap, clove, and cinnamon—the family's favorite, she had once mentioned off-hand over a year ago in a conversation.

"You remembered!" she exclaimed.

Welíya just smiled and said, "I have learned that it is important to remember the littlest of things, for often in them the deepest things are hidden."

"Thank you very much, all of you," Elmáriyë said and looked into the faces of all around her before turning away for her departure.

With the emotions stirred from these memories, Elmáriyë returns to the present and opens her eyes. The sun is peeking from behind low-hanging clouds, rippled and fast moving as if the waves of the sea had been painted in the sky, and casting a golden hue over the landscape. Fenárion neighs restlessly in his harness, ready to begin again.

"Yes, yes," Elmáriyë says. "We have rested long enough; let us go."

She unties the horse and swings herself back into the saddle before setting off again to the west-northwest. It is only a matter of an hour or two before the land begins to rise before her and, beyond that, the peaks of mountains standing like sentinels at the meeting of earth and sky.

Chapter Three
Memories of Loss

"Tell me the meaning of the braids and knots in your hair," Miránd asks, his youngest daughter, Ylínia, upon his knee, a bit of bread in her hands as she eats it in tiny little bites. The two older children sit together by the hearth, their muffled voices rising and falling in play as they speak to one another, weaving some kind of new tale or game among themselves, a boy and a girl learning to navigate the stormy and yet beautiful waters of relationship in the bosom of wonder-filled reality.

"What is it you wish to know?" Eldárien asks.

"What is their significance?"

"Since you ask, it seems you already have some sense of the answer."

"No, my wife simply told me that there was a significance."

"Ah, I see," says Eldárien, with a glance at Alíja. "And there is. It seems as though she already surmised more about me than I let on in words, and the words proved to be but a confirmation."

"There is much I do not know know," Alíja says, "but yes, I surmised."

"Well then, I see no harm in saying more," Eldárien continues. "See, all the soldiers of the Empire wear a braid in their hair, on the right temple, and pulled behind the ear. It is a sign by which they more easily recognize one another, even while not in uniform. This knowledge is well known to many, as one cannot understandably keep such things hidden. But the further intricacies are harder to decipher. For those in office also wear a left braid that hangs down freely before the ear rather than tied back into the rest of the hair. And according to one's rank, the braid bears one, two, or three knots, indicating whether one is a lieutenant, captain, or general, with another knot added accordingly. There are more intricacies even than this, though they are not relevant to our current conversation and their knowledge is reserved only to those in office."

"So Alíja, you knew by Eldárien's braids that he was a soldier of the Empire?" Miránd asks, turning to his wife. "But he has no left braid, nor knots upon it."

"But he did at one point, I believe," she says.

"In that you are right," confirms Eldárien.

"A patch of hair roughly cut, even if subtle, is still visible, especially if it is so close to the face and the eyes."

"Ah yes, I see it now," observes Mórlof, who until now has been silent,

though clearly he has been following the conversation closely.

There is in fact a short tuft of hair along Eldárien's left temple that looks to have been cut a couple inches from the skin in a rough fashion with a knife or a sword, and it hangs down uneasily among locks of much longer hair, most of which are pulled back into a tie at the nape of the neck.

At this point, the conversation is momentarily interrupted as Mórlof's wife, Yelía, arrives with a steaming pot of tisane and five cups, which she sets before them.

"The ginger tisane is ready, dears," she says, sitting down with them. "Please, take some; the ingredients are straight from the garden."

"Thank you very much," Eldárien says, as he allows her to pour him a cup of the steaming liquid, which in the process fills the small room with the sweet smell of ginger and of another herb. "Is there lavender in this?"

"Indeed there is! Both are good for the stomach and the nerves. At least it has been thought so in my family for generations, and I myself am a firm believer."

"My mother used to grow lavender above the window sill in her kitchen, and she would make tisane with a dash of mint...and milk when we had it," Eldárien says wistfully, sipping from the cup. "This is very good, Yelía. It reminds me of home."

"What more could a woman ask of her hospitality than that?" she replies. "How long has it been since you were home?"

"How long?" Eldárien repeats, taking another sip of his tisane and directing his gaze to the children sitting by the hearth and playing in the carefree way so natural to children but so rare in adults. The firelight glistens in his eyes as the room is hushed for a long moment, his hosts watching him and awaiting his answer. "It has been too long," he says at last, "much too long."

"Well, perhaps now that you are back in Telmérion, you can make a visit?" Miránd suggests.

"Yes, perhaps," Eldárien replies noncommittally and then shakes away his memories. "We were speaking of the custom of the knots."

"Aye. You had them, and now you don't," Miránd says, "but you kept the braid of the soldier. Why is that?"

"Because I still remain faithful to my oath to serve the authentic good of the Empire, as much as I am able to do so in my current situation."

"But, if you don't mind me asking, are you not a deserter?" Mórlof asks, perhaps with too little tact.

"As I said before, I hope that it is and shall be seen as a little more complex than that. Some would call me so, and at times I think to myself that I am so as well. My original company was entirely destroyed and I was the only survivor. After this, I was assigned to another company of three hundred men

and was with them for but a few months before receiving an order that I knew I could not carry out. I left the army with the full knowledge of all involved, as I said earlier, and on matters of conscience."

"Could punitive action still be taken against you?" Alíja asks.

"I suppose it could, yes," answers Eldárien. "I will not know until I encounter authorities of the Empire who are acquainted with my situation. The question, in my mind, is whether it will be understood that I wish to serve the Empire in a way different than before, or whether my departure will be seen as a betrayal and blatantly condemned."

"Yet you said that the Empire has done great evil and that you must stand against it," Mórlof observes.

"That also is true. But I still believe in the goodness of the Empire, and in its capacity for restoration and healing," says Eldárien. "And indeed I still hope that the Empire can be a beneficial presence for Telmérion, if it can be faithful to its original purpose." But immediately upon saying this, he knows that he doubts it. The conversation is cutting deep into questions and insecurities within his own heart, as the atrocities committed in the name of the Empire rise before his imagination; he tries to bury them again so as not to let his own doubt show before his hosts. And yet as the doubt lingers so vividly that it cannot be entirely hidden, he allows himself to say, "To be honest, as to the Empire's goodness for the people of Telmérion, I am unsure. I do not, however, support violent rebellion against her rule. Forgive me. I know not whether any of you are in some measure favorable to the rebels and wish the yoke of the Empire could be thrown off by whatever means. I know that Alíja said earlier that you foster no such tendencies, but still...such things are hard to gauge, and I do not expect complete transparency from you after such a short acquaintance."

"You yourself speak with surprising transparency," replies Mórlof, "and this only lends to your credibility and trustworthiness. So I speak likewise, Eldárien: I would say that we are more or less neutral here, though I do wonder whether any native Telméri, in his heart of hearts, truly rejoices in the fact of the Imperial occupation. Regarding the feasibility of martial rebellion, however, some shade more one direction, and some more the other. That is true for most in this village. We see that the Empire is neither all good nor all evil, and acknowledge that its presence has brought many boons even while also bringing the loss of numerous things that were once our own. In my opinion, I think that the rebellion is quite justified in many respects, considering the current state of affairs, though this does not mean that I would actively support or participate in it myself."

"As for myself, I question whether civil war is the best course of action," Alíja adds. "I for one strongly wish there was a way to achieve these goals, or

a measure of them, without more bloodshed and loss of life. I was raised in closer proximity to the Empire's capital in Telmérion, and thus, you could say, have more 'Imperial blood' in me than others, figuratively speaking. I understand the native identity of the Telméri, and I myself am one, but I wonder if it is possible to turn back history after so many generations of mutual coexistence, of intermarriage, and of cultural intermingling. Either way, I hope we find a way to proceed in peace."

"Then we are much in agreement," says Eldárien.

"Did you know," Miránd bursts out, immediately changing the tenor of the conversation, "that they have started public executions in the main streets of the capital city, and in Ristfánd as well?"

Eldárien lowers his eyes for a moment and sighs deeply, before replying. When he speaks, all that he says is, "Yes...I only recently became aware of this."

"And ever since the Minstead rebellion began," Miránd continues, "the Imperial army has begun drafting young men from the neutral territories west of the mountains. I have heard that they take them even as young as sixteen years of age."

"I had heard rumors but did not know whether it was true. Much, it seems, has progressed since I set sail from Brûg'hil to Tel-Velfána years ago, or even since I departed from Tel-Velfána to return here. It is, I admit, uncanny to fight for a military, for a civilization, of whose actions I am in large part unaware."

"Do you not think, therefore," Mórlof begins, hesitantly, "—I ask this as a matter of thought, not as a conviction—do you not think that perhaps an independent Telmérion would be better than one under the hand of the Empire?"

Eldárien turns uneasily in his chair and tries to hide the fact that this thought has been preoccupying him repeatedly over the past few months. At last he replies, "After the initial conflicts following upon the Empire's invasion two hundred years ago—and after the surrender of the Telméri and their incorporation into the Empire—there has occurred a more or less harmonious conjoining of the two cultures. The roots have grown together deeply. I doubt it would be possible now to sunder them entirely, even with the sword."

"Is it right to resort to violence when the conflict originally ended with an agreement of peace and coexistence? Yes, the Imperials came with the sword, yet when all was said and done, they brought peace," Yelía says, explicitly entering the conversation for the first time. "I know an old woman should not butt into the affairs of younger men arguing over politics. But there is something I want to say. The Telméri were for long ages a group of warring tribes

—were they not?—caught in an endless contest for land and power and resources. Rare was the clan that wished only to live out its days peacefully in the place allotted to it. And though such clans there were—my ancestors being one of them—this did not mean that we were free from the tyranny or violence of others."

"That is true," Eldárien affirms, picking up on the trail of her words, "and in that light, I find it unsettling to think that the Empire was able to achieve, in such short a time, a peace between clans which for centuries had fought one another so persistently."

Yelía lets out a slow breath, rubbing her cheek thoughtfully. "It is a mystery to all of us how the seven clan leaders unanimously agreed to pass the right of highest authority to the Emperor and his legate in Brûg'hil, and to be acknowledged as equal brothers in the *onárion*, the council of the seven. But regardless of how this occurred, it has, it seems to me, brought much good. And apart from Ólrig the Mad, no clan leader has openly questioned or opposed this authority over the past five generations...of course, until the uprising of Wýgrec Stûnclad four years ago."

"I suppose the question before us is whether the ancient conflict should be restored, or if it is even possible to do so, now that the Empire and Telmérion have become so deeply conjoined," Eldárien says. "And yet an even more fundamental question is: why did our people yield those many years ago? Is it because they at last learned a lesson of peaceful coexistence or because they were cowed to their knees by a superior force? As for myself, I do not know how to even begin unraveling this fabric."

"I do not know what there is to unravel," Yelía replies, quietly but with a touch of impatience. "Do you think there is some secret hidden in the past that has led to all of this? There was once conflict, and then peace came. And there was peace for two-hundred years, and now it has been disturbed again. It is that simple. Is it the Empire that has changed, or is it the people of Telmérion? The answer seems obvious."

After this, probably sensing the rising tension of the conversation, Alíja stands and says, "Well, it is getting late. I suppose it is time that we clean and prepare to retire for the night."

"Yes, yes, you are quite right," Mórlof agrees, also rising to his feet. "Come Yelía, let us return home and show our guest where he will be staying."

"I shall remain here a moment to help my daughter-in-law to tidy her house before the night," she replies. "Why don't you go yourself? I will be over soon."

"If you say so. We will see you soon enough."

After offering to stay and help—and receiving a gentle and friendly refusal—Eldárien bids goodnight to everyone and follows Mórlof across the yard to

the other house. The sun has already long disappeared behind the horizon in the west, and without the presence of the moon yet visible, darkness has cloaked the land such that no more than a few yards are visible before Eldárien's eyes. From the moment he steps out of the house he feels enveloped both in darkness and in cold, for with the departure of the sun a bitter chill has also fallen upon the land. The sounds of night, too, greet him: the hooting of an owl in a nearby tree and, a little farther away, the call of a warbler, and, at the very edge of hearing, the hum of the ocean's waves as they wash continuously against the rocky shore. He chances a glance to the sky and sees a star-speckled firmament peeking through dark and low-hanging clouds. This is the same sky that he had looked upon in his desperation the night before, and yet now her radiant face is partly obscured, veiled, even as she winks through with her beauty still, in the dancing of the innumerable stars and the richly saturated colors of the celestial aurora, visible to the naked eye as though it were an ethereal mist hanging about the earth.

Once inside the house, Mórlof promptly shows Eldárien to a small back room, furnished with only a rickety wooden desk and chair and a straw-padded bed with a worn fur coverlet. Over the desk is a paned window twelve-by-twelve inches square and now totally dark.

"I am sorry if it gets cold here during the night," Mórlof says, "but there is no direct heat to this part of the house. We have only one hearth, and unfortunately this is the furthest room from it. The furs should keep you reasonably warm, however. Just keep your nose under the blanket, or you might wake with a red plum between your eyes."

"Thank you for your thoughtfulness, Mórlof, but for me it is no problem. I have spent numerous nights under the stars and in the nocturnal cold, and my nose has abode it all until now."

Mórlof turns to leave but pauses, as if something has come to his mind, and he glances back. "Oh, and concerning Yelía, please be patient with her and forgive her. She speaks from the heart, but at times she feels more quickly and more vividly than she thinks, and her words run ahead of her mind."

"I understood as much, but thank you for your words. There is truly nothing to forgive."

"Good. Well then, I suggest that you retire for the night. She may be a while yet, and there is no need to speak with her again before the night is up. As for myself, I am exhausted from a day full of many words, and shall retire shortly as well."

Eldárien nods silently to this, but then Mórlof speaks again, as if in his absentmindedness he has only now remembered something else essential as well.

"But first, before I go," he says, "let me get a clean change of clothes for

you and a basin of warm water. You can refresh yourself, and we will take your clothes, wash them, and give them back to you by the end of the day tomorrow."

With this Mórlof leaves the room, pulling the door closed but for a few inches. With a sigh, Eldárien sinks down onto the bed and rests his face against his hands. *What is happening to me?* he thinks. *Do I even know who I am anymore or for what I stand? I have been given the gift of life again, even on the very verge of death, and yet for what purpose am I to live?*

He turns his mind to the previous years of his life and to the events that have led him to this place, but he fails to summon anything, dull with an intermingling of exhaustion and pain. He tries for a few moments, grasping for some semblance of rational thought, some control over his memory, and therefore over his present and his future. But it slips through his fingers, and he finds himself standing empty handed, with a shame-laden past, an uncontrollable present, and an uncertain future. At first, his heart rebels against this, terrified of where the current might lead him if he surrenders to it, surrenders to those things beyond his own control and comprehension; but he is too tired to resist, and he surrenders more out of exhaustion than out of desire, though somewhere within him desire too dwells, albeit hidden.

He finds himself sinking into a deep and inaccessible memory long buried, long ignored even if not forgotten, which in this moment becomes as if fully present anew. His heart recoils, however, and he tries as it were to slam shut the doors of his mind and his imagination. But the memory encompasses him nonetheless, and he finds himself again as a young man not yet fully come of age, standing in the open doorway of his home in the village in which he was raised. It is night, and the star-speckled sky stands brilliant behind him, unchanging and yet ever inexhaustible in wealth of beauty. But the sight he beholds before his eyes is darkness itself, without a hint of stars or moonlight or, for him, even a hope of the dawn.

He has rushed in from the hillsides overlooking the village, where he had sat atop "his" rock, as they called it, and gazed upon the night sky, as he was wont to do. It is dangerous to be out at night, of course, as Ma always says, for beasts and brigands roam in the darkness. For the life of these bandits, the Relihím, consists in scouring the forests, traversing the wild, in search of ill-gotten gain. Rarely do they bring direct violence to a village, as their preferred manner is to waylay travelers upon the road or to sneak into lone houses in the depths of night to pilfer material goods, livestock, women-slaves, and all the wealth that can be found. However, this night is different. First he sees the fire, a ring of dull red light gradually spreading to encircle the village. Rushing through the woods and coming again to the settlement, he seeks for a passage through the flames and finds a narrow space doused with water—a

passage for the Relihím to enter and to depart—and enters through it himself. The cries of anguish and fear echo through the air, and the shouts of power and greed also.

The paradox is not lost upon him: for if he had stayed outside of the village, exposed to the wild, he would have been far safer than if he had returned to the village upon seeing the light of the flames glowing through the trees in the distance, and thick black clouds of smoke billowing into the sky. What was once safe and secure is now plunged into darkness and danger, and the sudden inversion unsettles Eldárien and fills his mind with confusion and disorientation. But shaking away these feelings he hastens toward his family home, giving hardly a thought to his own safety, so overwhelmed is he with concern for his family, for his mother, father, and sister. In the house is a cellar, concealed such that only those who know of its location will be able to find it. Since the first moment he realized the plight of the village, he has prayed ceaselessly that his family has taken refuge in the cellar before anything could befall them. But as he comes to his home, after weaving through the flaming chaos of the village, what he sees destroys all remaining hope in his heart.

Oh, Ma, if only I had been here, perhaps I could have protected you! For now I stand in the doorway of our house, and I look down upon your lifeless and blood-drenched body, desecrated like a temple torn and looted by the evildoers. My body trembles at this sight, and tears spring to my eyes as I sink to my knees, the loud crackling of flames disappearing from my numbed ears. I hear nothing now but the memory of your voice, fading away, fading away, as if saying farewell, until it too echoes no more and falls silent.

I know not how long I kneel here before you, tears pouring from my eyes and sobs tearing at my body, before I come to my senses again. The cellar! I must look in the cellar! Perhaps Pa or my younger sister Selía are still there, too afraid to come out. I try to rise to my feet, but I find myself unable, my legs devoid of all strength and my whole body shaking uncontrollably. And the thought of stepping over your lifeless body is inconceivable. Yet so is the thought of leaving you alone in death and fleeing to preserve my life. I remain, therefore, in indecision for a long and tortured moment. At last, and pushing away all further thought, I pull off my outer cloak and lay it over your body, a veiling of both reverence and farewell. Then I step around you as best I can and walk to the back of the room where the wood panels of the floor conceal the secret cellar. I pull back the boards and lower myself inside. But it is empty, and nothing greets me but the damp and musty scent of earth untouched for many months.

My heart sinking within me, I pull myself up again from the cellar and rise to my feet. What more can be done? Pa... Selía... Where have you gone? The

thought of searching the bodies strewn throughout the village causes my stomach to churn and my head to spin. But I have no choice. I stumble to the doorway and, upon stepping into the open, I almost immediately hear a voice. A familiar voice.

"Please, I beg you, just leave now. You have already taken everything that I love, everything that the people of this village have so long loved and cared for. Take my life if you will, but I beg you to leave our village at once."

It is Pa's voice, firm and strong even as it trembles with fear in the face of pain and death and with sorrow at the loss of which he speaks. And in response to this, my heart is torn, the pain of my father compounding with my own, and it is drawn out of itself toward him. I yearn to be with him, to be at his side, to let him know that he has not lost everything. My body begins to move almost without my knowledge, drawn forward by my heart, but then is frozen in place as I witness, through the darkness of the night illumined by flames, the events that unfold before me.

"Why should you live if all you care about has been lost?" one of the brigands says, his voice cold and threatening. Even though I cannot see his face, his smirk is so evident that it is audible even in the tenor of his voice.

"This is not about my life but the life of our people!" Pa protests. "You are destroying everything that the Telméric people stand for—and for what, for power and gain?"

"Your tongue irritates me," says the same man. "Let us remove it from your mouth." An axe blade flashes in the air, and, to my surprise and relief, it is deflected by Pa, who has drawn a long hunting knife from his belt. By the force of his own swing, now deflected, the brigand stumbles sideways and loses balance. Pa takes advantage of the opportunity and kicks him hard with the bottom of his boot, sending him to the ground. As Pa turns to flee, two more men step forward, their faces covered in thick paint, clothed in animal furs, and with horned helmets upon their heads. One catches Pa's exposed leg with a downward thrust of a heavy war hammer, preventing his movement —the thick crushing sound reverberating through my whole being, and much more so Pa's anguished cry--while the other man steps forward and raises a great blade with jagged edge. It all happens in a rapid flurry of movement, from the beginning to end, and I am unable to move even an inch, frozen in terror and agony. The blade comes down straight upon Pa's head, his eyes upturned toward his murderer, and two final words dying short upon his lips:

"Eldárien, flee!"

His words catch me by surprise even as they smite my heart. My father's last thought and concern was for me, and even in his dying breath he sought to protect me. I did not realize he knew of my presence, but the meaning of

his sacrifice is unveiled before me now, as I realize that I am standing much closer to the scene than at first I noticed. I am now separated from the Relihím only by the shadows surrounding me and by the unmoving figure of Pa, crumpled to the earth. He had tried to divert them from my presence and had been unable to do so. So now let me at least heed his words as best I can, and flee!

It is too late to escape unnoticed, for once Pa was felled, my own presence became obvious—not only because I stood directly before the band of brigands, to me too many to count—but also because, involuntarily, I had let out a terrible scream at witnessing the death of my own father. So now is the time to run, to run like the wind runs through the spring hillsides, or like the storms rolling in from the mountains in winter, or like the love of mother and father pouring over me and into me from my earliest days, and washing on, into the life that lies beyond the grave.

And I run, blind to all else, tears still ripping from my eyes, leaping without thought through the smoldering ring of fire surrounding the village, into the woods, and up into the hills, the pounding footsteps of men behind me. How many are there? Certainly they do not all follow in pursuit. One? Two? I try to listen, but I can hear little over the pounding of my own footsteps and the pain throbbing in my head. I am young, but I am fast; yet even so, I do not hope to outrun these men, trained and experienced for decades in the wilderness. My only hope is to hide, to hide somewhere where they can neither track me nor reach me. But is there such a place?

Even as the question enters my mind, I know the answer. Yes, there is such a place. It is the cave of Séra Galáptes, which lies only a short distance into the hills, at the base of the mountain that leads up to Gorójin Peak. I have neither time nor space to consider how difficult it will be to find in the darkness of night, all the while trying to maintain such an agonizing pace. No, I just run, leaning into a hope beyond my despair, a guidance beyond my blindness, reaching out to what I cannot touch and throwing myself forward through the underbrush while the branches of trees lash at my face, arms, and hands, cutting me and making me bleed.

When my body's cries to stop become unbearable, I pause for a moment and collapse against the trunk of a massive, ancient tree, its gnarled roots breaking through the surface of the ground and snaking along the forest floor in every direction. But immediately the sound of heavy footfalls behind me spurs me to run again, to seek a better hiding spot or even the cave itself. The land now rises sharply underneath my feet, and my muscles burn as I force my legs to carry me forward and upward. Rocks also now litter the path, of diverse sizes, some hardly more than stepping stones on my path and others large boulders standing as insurmountable obstacles that I must navigate

around in order to proceed on my way. This slows my progress, but I trust it slows my pursuers' as well.

Tufts of grass. Gnarled roots of ancient trees. Fallen debris clothing the forest floor. Jagged rocks and loose stones. A landscape rising ever upward to the three high and lofty peaks, Méldjin, Gorójin, and Lándjin. Our land is rugged, cold and unpredictable, wild and dangerous, but also bears her own beauty, a beauty which has always attracted me to wander into her bosom and to sit among her trees, to perch atop her ancient stones, to walk among her dense underbrush, and to sing in my heart and at times in my voice. And now, amidst the pain of my sundered world, my slaughtered family, this beauty mysteriously beckons me, as if offering me shelter and repose. But I feel insensitive to this call and want to cry out instead in pain and rebellion. Why couldn't you save my parents, my sister? Why has their blood fallen to sink into your soil, to become but the fertile nourishment of future growth? No, I resist this thought. They deserved to live in their own right and not to die at the hands of such wicked men. If this cycle of death continues, there will be no future growth, no blossoming of new life.

Eldárien, flee.

Flee?

You are new life.

Do not let this life be engulfed in death.

My footfalls begin to pound against solid rock, free from soil and vegetation, and the path starts to descend rapidly before me and beneath me while the land continues to rise on my left and my right. Could it really be? I try to remember the landscape surrounding the cave of Séra Galáptes, but my mind betrays me. Forward, forward must bring me there. But as I try to move, my body betrays me too, and I begin to stagger in utter exhaustion.

Footsteps. Footsteps behind me. Wickedness chasing me to a bloody and terrifying end. No, the sound of footsteps that I hear is nothing but the pounding of my own racing heart echoing in my ears. Have they really given up the chase? As this thought flashes through my mind, the landscape around the cave returns to me. It is not this, but further along, above and ahead. But I realize this too late, for, in my staggering exhaustion, I slip right into a wide sinkhole that lies but eighty yards before the doors of the cave: the barrow of Séra Galáptes, the tomb of the ancient clan of Galaptéä and their long-sung and never-forgotten king, after whom the barrow is named.

The sinkhole provides little to break my fall, and I find myself tumbling headfirst over stone and then falling into the abyss. Just as I prepare to find my death through an accidental fall after escaping the jaws of the sword and axe, I find my body crashing into water, water that soon envelops me and buoys me up—some great underground pool from the rains and snows that

poured moisture into this great sinking hole in the ground. And before this water, which cushioned me in my fall, begins to drown me and pull me under, becoming my tomb, I force my arms and legs to move, pulling me to the surface. My coughs echo through what seems to be a large and expansive underground cavern, though it is too dark for my eyes to see anything, even were it two inches before my face. I swim, and the swim is not a long one before my knees strike rock, and I am able to clamber out of the water and onto the shore.

I push myself to my feet, but I collapse again in pain and exhaustion. My whole body is racked with pain, both from the over-exertion of my limbs and from the fall across rock, and most of all from the overflowing suffering and anguish of the heart. But I cannot now give vent to this agony and I soon find consciousness slipping away from me. My last thoughts are the realization that my pursuers cannot find me here, in the depths of the earth, and a sense of relief for this, followed then by the depths of my heart falling out in an anguished vision: the faces of my father, mother, and sister, present before my mind's eye, whom I will never again see in this life.

Chapter Four
Homecoming

The Yjind Mountains open their arms to embrace Elmáriyë as the golden sun sets behind them, sending shimmers of brilliant color across the sky and changing the lingering clouds from gray-white to various hues of purple, blue, and pink. She leads Fenárion on until it is almost dark and the lingering light of dusk dwindles, and then she pulls aside into a dense grove of trees. Here she sets up what little camp she can: a tent of leather pulled over two stakes of wood and a pole and a bedroll of hide and fur. After making sure that Fenárion is tied firmly to the nearest tree, and gathering her meager belongings into the tent, she lies down and buries herself deep in the furs to keep warm against the quickly deepening chill. This is not the best place to rest for the night, but Elmáriyë feels more or less secure, for the chances of someone or something that could be a threat happening upon her location in the darkness of the night are next to nothing.

And so it is, as she wakes with the first light of morning just breaking over the land to the east and painting the sky a rose white to complement the vivid hues of twilight the evening before. She rests for a while in the warmth of her sleeping roll, upon her knees with her head against the earth—the traditional position of prayer for the worshipers of Nirániel—and then rises. The air is

quite cold, and she finds herself shivering at the sudden change, her breath spiraling before her face as pale mist. After pulling her cloak tight about her and stamping about a bit to get the blood flowing through her body, she packs up camp and feeds Fenárion a few morsels to supplement the grass he was able to munch while tied to the tree. "Good boy. You have done well. Only one more day of this, and we will be there. By this evening you will be feasting on all the hay you can desire."

Elmáriyë unties the horse and climbs into the saddle, which is bitterly cold against her thighs. She looks up eagerly at the sky and hopes that the sun will soon warm the air and dispel at least some of this biting chill. Yet as the day wears on and the mountainous trail rises ever higher among the rocks and cliffs, the air does not become warmer but colder. She keeps herself insulated as best she can, but there is only so much she can do against such pervasive cold. Even the look of the land around her speaks of cold, as a white fog, thin and nearly translucent, cloaks everything, causing objects that recede into the distance to be hardly more than silhouettes of themselves. And above her, the clouds themselves are dense and low-hanging, garmenting the mountains like a cloak carelessly thrown over the shoulders. The trail winds tightly now against rough and steep crags of rock, dark stone with lighter veins of white or gray, switching back again after a few hundred yards or a quarter mile to traverse upward in the opposite direction, all the while drawing near to a sprawling valley at the base of two enormous peaks in which Elmáriyë's family lives.

She glances over her shoulder and sees the Plains of Mélroc spread out beneath her, no more than a ghostly reminiscence of the shapes of trees undulating upon a sea of green, brown, and yellow. But even as she looks, the sun pierces for a moment through the clouds and illumines her sight, and she squints her eyes to see as far as possible. The city of Ristfánd is not visible, either too far away now or too densely covered in the icy moisture hugging the face of the earth. Nonetheless, she brings it before her mind's eye, and the people dwelling within it, in their daily occupations of work and play, and beyond the city, she envisions the great expanse of the sea. In contrast to this, she turns back and imagines what awaits her ahead, a wide steppe or valley in between mountains, with scattered homesteads hiding among the rocks and varied copses, a two-dozen or so families who share a rugged life together while each keeping their own plot of land. Here their sheep, cattle, and pigs graze, and together the families share the fruit of the soil and of their labor with one another, as they have done for over two centuries.

Soon the imagining turns to reality, as Fenárion carries Elmáriyë over the last rise and a stretch of land unfolds before her, mostly flat with only a few undulating hills, cradled in a high valley between the mountains. Even

though she has seen it many times before, it immediately strikes Elmáriyë as mysteriously beautiful in its earth-sheltered and sky-veiled serenity and stillness. Across the plain she rides now, her heart beginning to swell with the expectation of seeing her family again after three years. She knows the land well and has no trouble finding her way to the two standing-stones that mark the limit of her family's farmland. From here she follows the rocky trough of a well-worn trail weaving among the grass and the fields to a wooden house and a stable standing not far from the base of a tall and stony cliff, down which trickles a narrow but fast-moving stream, descending from rock to rock until coming to the crevice that the water follows across the land to the south and, presumably, joining a larger river or the sea itself.

Elmáriyë dismounts from the horse and leads him by the bridle to the stable, in which another horse is already kept, a mare named Tróstir with which she is well acquainted. She gives Fenárion a few shovels full of hay, unties her pack from behind the saddle and throws it over her shoulder, and momentarily caresses the horse on the face and neck. She then turns toward the house but after only a couple steps sees a figure approaching her from the same direction. It is her father, his time and weather-worn face glowing with a radiant smile and his arms open in a gesture of welcome.

"Pa!" she exclaims without a thought and picks up her pace.

"My dear Mari'eä, welcome home!"

"It has been too long."

"So it feels indeed, but it has been as it must be," her father replies as he grabs his daughter's shoulders and holds her at arms' length, as if to get a good look at her, before burying her in his embrace. "We did not know that you were coming, but it is good that you are here."

She simply rests in his arms for a while, his large stature enfolding her own smallness, feeling his raspy breathing after too many bitter winters, with lungs that sound weak but are strong, and his stubble tickling her forehead. Finally she speaks and says, "I am sorry I did not tell you that I was coming."

"Why? Why would you apologize for that?" he replies, holding her out to look at her again. "So as to warn us, as of impending danger? There is no need."

She smiles at this.

"Ah, your mother will wish to see you," her father says, grinning widely. "I would love to witness the look on her face when she beholds you—our own daughter, yet even more graceful and lovely than before."

The encounter with her mother is even more beautifully-awkward than that with her father (such things do not matter with family), as Elmáriyë's mother, in the process of washing a large pot used for cooking stew, promptly drops it when she sees her daughter approaching, arm in arm with her

husband. And if that was not enough, she drops it on her foot and cries out in pain as it rolls for a few feet across the kitchen floor until stopped by Elmáriyë, who lifts it up and places it back on the worn wooden table that lines the wall.

"Are you hurt?" her daughter asks, rushing to her mother.

"I am quite alright," the woman replies without a thought. "Oh, what am I saying? I am wonderful! It is so very good to see you." Then she pauses for a moment and her expression grows more serious, even if her eyes continue to twinkle with gladness. "But do forgive us for not making it to one of the greatest moments of your life."

"I did not expect you to come to my profession and initiation into the temple," Elmáriyë replies. "The road is long and treacherous, especially for someone your age. I would have resisted your coming had you tried."

"Nonsense," the woman says, "it was our daughter's own special moment."

"But it has passed now, and you did not come, and that was as it should be. It was only a beginning, after all, the start of a lifelong journey. And we are together this day, you and I, as family. That is more than enough for me."

"Yes...well, I suppose that it is enough for us as well," she smiles and then embraces her daughter just as her father had done.

"Where are Rejía and Álric?" Elmáriyë asks.

"Out behind the house," her mother replies, "practicing with the bow, I think. Though they may be building another fort among the rocks, as they are wont to do."

"Always behaving as the children they are," Elmáriyë laughs.

"You know Rejía is fifteen now?" her father asks.

"I should know it, yes. She is ten years my junior," Elmáriyë replies. "But it is hard to imagine until I see her face to face. She must be growing into a fine young woman now."

"That she is. Truly." Her mother absentmindedly unties her apron and hangs it on a peg on the wall.

"And Álric?"

"He too is growing, but is still very much a boy," her father replies.

"You know how it is, having you children so spaced out in years," her mother says. "Your elder siblings are so far beyond your age, that if your father and I had not the gift of extraordinary longevity, we would not have lived to see you three grow, nor for that matter, be brought into this world."

"They are not *that* much older than we," Elmáriyë teases, with a smile.

"Yes, I suppose. But they are well into life now, with families of their own...those, that is, who survived beyond youth," she adds with downcast eyes.

The subject visibly pains Elmáriyë's mother even now. Her parents had indeed lost two children, one at the age of two and another almost ten years of age. Considering that the spirits of the dead still live in the realm of Midalést, or beyond it, they are a large family indeed, eight children full, though only six visible to the eyes. Elmáriyë indeed finds herself oft thinking of her lost siblings, one whom she had never met, being older than her and dying before she was born, and the other growing up at her side, only a year younger than her, until she died tragically of illness in her ninth year. She talks to them at times from their dwelling place in the mysterious space to which the human heart goes after the gates of death open and close about it. Surely they must still survive in some fashion, though Elmáriyë does not know in what manner this may be, and the teachings of Nirániel and of the other gods reach out beyond this veil only in vague gestures and dim images, in hopes and aspirations and feelings beyond speech. But perhaps here hope is in itself the greatest proof and the most solid foundation.

Elmáriyë's mother goes to the back door of the house and cries out in a bellowing voice, "In the name of the seven divines, get in here! Your older sister has come home."

"Mother," Elmáriyë says quietly, as the woman turns back to her husband and daughter.

"Yes?"

"Please do not invoke the divinities lightly."

"Ah, yes, sorry... It is out of habit only."

"No, do not frown like that, *Ma*," clarifies Elmáriyë. "I am not upset with you."

Hearing this, her mother returns to the kitchen and begins to again clean the large pot which she soiled by dropping it on the floor.

"You know," her father says, "that there are some who say that the divines do not even exist. There is no force in the heavens, they claim, except what our own wishes and desires have placed there."

"Why do you say this, father?" Elmáriyë whispers. "Do you believe that yourself? If so, I would be glad to speak with you about it, to hear why you believe so."

"I did not say that I thought so," he replies, "only that others have said so. Our neighbor, Olándris, for example."

"He is a cynical old man, Telrán," her mother says, as she scrubs away at the edges of the pot.

"Did you know that he used to be a warrior in his younger days? He traveled across the continent and even spent some time in Vælíria, in the city of Vælaróma, the very seat of the Empire."

"Is that so?" she asks.

"Indeed," he affirms, matter-of-factly, as if only one response is appropriate to this statement.

His wife does not seem as impressed as her husband.

"Perhaps what we worship," he begins, starting up on the earlier train of thought, "are only the faces of our own desires, projected into the heavens. Or perhaps the divinities only live within us, expressions of the good qualities that we bear within, encouraging us to become better persons."

"I thought you said that you did not believe," his wife sighs. "You were only saying that others said so."

"Indeed, indeed, Gjerínda," he mutters.

Elmáriyë remains silent throughout this exchange.

"Anyway, Elmáriyë," Telrán says, trying to change the subject, "your old friend Býlja is engaged to be wed. Can you believe it? She and Afadír ended up getting betrothed after all. The wedding is not far away—I don't remember the date exactly—so perhaps you will be able to attend it while you are here."

"That would be wonderful," Elmáriyë replies. "I would love to attend. And perhaps I can pay them a visit while I am here as well."

"How long shall you be here, after all?" her mother asks.

"It has not been precisely determined. A few months, perhaps, unless something calls me away. I expect to stay a long while, as long as I may."

"Splendid, splendid!" Telrán exclaims, clapping his hands together. "Perhaps we can have the young couple over for dinner and can congratulate them properly."

"That would be fine, indeed," says Elmáriyë. "But speaking of dinner, how has the harvest been?"

At this question, her parents' faces fall—though only for a moment, before they both hide it again.

"Enough to keep us going another year," her father replies tersely.

"Much less than we would hope," says her mother with more honesty and less reserve.

"Ah, I see," Elmáriyë whispers, even as Telrán looks at Gjerínda in discomfort, as if to correct her loose mouth which had spoken too much.

"Telrán, what is there to hide?" she says, setting down the clean pot and lifting up another dish to wash. "Most of our crop did not survive, and we have been making do with the simplest and hardiest fare. And we even had to slaughter old Vákr. He was too ancient to be any good as a beast of burden anyway. Not the best meat—very tough—but it should last us a good many months."

"My dear..." Telrán says, quietly.

"Oh, I am sorry," she replies, stepping forward and placing a hand on her

husband's shoulder. "I should have been more sensitive. I know that it was a tough choice for you. You have ever been a lover of animals."

"One does not plow with an ox for over a decade without growing to love the animal," he says quietly, the sadness showing in his face. "But let it go. We have both now spoken too openly, and out of place. Our daughter is here after two years away, so rather than burdening her with our affairs, let us rather listen to her and all that she has to share!"

"Please, always speak openly with me," Elmáriyë requests. "I am interested in everything that concerns you. It concerns me, too, after all, for I am your own flesh and blood. And even if it did not concern me, I would still want to know."

After this, the back door bursts open and her two younger siblings stumble into the small house, covered in mud and smiling from ear to ear.

"Oh, what a mess," Gjerínda cries. "Out, out! Go clean up in the creek before you come in and track mud throughout the house."

Before turning to go, both of the young persons look at their big sister, smiling and laughing. She is impressed by how much they have grown, particularly her sister, and yet also by how radiantly playful they remain—just as she has always remembered them. It seems the tough times have not succeeded in dampening their spirits, and in this Elmáriyë rejoices.

"Why don't you have yourself a seat?" Gjerínda says to Elmáriyë when they have gone, gesturing to one of the chairs around the dining table.

Elmáriyë nods silently and does as suggested, the deep feelings unique to homecoming washing over her. Telrán sits next to her while Gjerínda continues washing the last of the dishes, and then she sits as well.

"So tell us," Gjerínda says at last, "of your life in Ristfánd and of the celebration for which you had so long prepared."

† † †

The daylight is fast fading from the sky when the conversation at last draws to its conclusion—in sharing and listening from all parties in equal measure—and the family gathers for a meal before retiring for the night. Elmáriyë, however, feels no need for sleep. Indeed, her heart is restless, stirred to deep longing at the memory of the past, at the stories of her family, and at the hope and expectation of the future. After pulling her cloak tight around her shoulders, and holding it clasped at her breast with one hand, she steps outside into the night and walks away from the house and the barn until the starry firmament is visible unobstructed above her. The air is bitter cold, nipping at her nose and ears and lips, and cutting even through her layers of warm clothing, causing her body to shiver. Nonetheless there is no wind, and a deep stillness cradles the land and the air, and Elmáriyë gratefully drinks it in, listening to the subtle nocturnal sounds: an owl somewhere nearby, in one

of the few trees of the steppe or perhaps perched atop the gable of a roof; the stream softly trickling among rocks as it winds its way down toward the sea; and further off in the distance, perhaps even down in the plains, the howling of wolves.

She feels within her a stirring of anxious expectation, and she allows the feeling to linger. What is the substance of this anxiety, and what is she expecting? Of course, it is most likely nothing but the natural fear that one feels before an uncertain future. Her life is no longer in her hands, and though this thought awakens within her a deep security and peace it is also touched by a certain trepidation. It is also true that, however glad she is to be back home with her family, she feels less at home than she had expected. Part of this is clearly because she has found another home, the home of her mature choice rather than the cradle of her youth. But another part—she realizes now—is that she has never felt *entirely* at home even at home. As much as she loves the valley of Telónis and the families that live scattered among the fields and the farms, there has been a spark in her heart, a spark of restlessness, drawing her elsewhere. This is true even of the warmth of her parents, of the joy of being with her siblings, and of the safety that is so unique to the bosom of one's origins, the family of one's birth, rarely to be found so deeply elsewhere. But she has found it elsewhere and in much greater measure. Indeed, the restless longing has led her beyond the security that her parents and her home provided, and returning to them now stirs in her a tension which she did not expect.

Elmáriyë relaxes upon the touch of this longing, which is sweet, even as it is marked by a painful ache. As she walks under the canopy of stars, stars which she has seen and contemplated so many times, she also feels the stirring of memory returning for the many times throughout her youth when she would walk under these same stars, across these same fields, and be gripped by this same longing. And in this way, remembrance becomes in some way fully present, as a line is drawn from then to now, or as they intersect in a single experience made alive at two different moments of life, two different moments tapping into a reality that is always present, deeper than feeling, in every moment even if only tapped into at certain times.

As Elmáriyë reflects upon this feeling, she becomes aware of a trait of her life progressing unto this day, a trait which has gone almost entirely unnoticed by her until this moment: solitude. She has long been drawn to solitude, attracted to it with a deep and visceral impulse of the heart. Yes, her life has been marked by it from the beginning, and after many years, she has befriended the solitude like an intimate companion. Even in her family life and in the daily affairs of the homestead, she lived as if alone, as if no one could see her, or rather she lived before the gaze of deeper eyes, eyes that looked

upon her in her solitude, where she remained veiled from the eyes of flesh. Thinking upon this, Elmáriyë recognizes that it is not the solitude itself that she has loved, but what lives in the solitude—those eyes that gaze upon her when she is alone, those eyes from which nothing can be hidden or concealed. Perhaps this exposure is unwelcome to others, and they flee from it—for do not many people flee from solitude in fear of its vulnerability and exposure? But for Elmáriyë it is secure and safe, and thus deeply desired. When she is alone, she feels least alone, for here she feels most deeply seen and most intimately understood.

Yes, and this is what had led her to Ristfánd, what had led her to her new home deeper than the home of her origin. Stirred by these thoughts, she recalls now a song she had learned in her youth, a song taught to her by an old woman who lived alone at the edge of the valley, in a cottage looking out over the plains as they extended far below into the distance. Elmáriyë sings this song now, in a soft voice audible only to herself and to the solitude that envelops her:

She is the wind in the trees that whispers at night,
she is the sweetness of dewdrops, glistening and falling,
heard only by the heart that is still enough to listen,
and humble enough to welcome her gentle calling.

She is the warmth of the hearth burning while all sleep,
and she is the awakening of one in the night, sleepless;
she is the vigil of expectant longing that they keep,
heart alive in aloneness, yearning for the coming of togetherness.
For the coming of the dawn that dispels every night.

Chapter Five
The Barrow of Séra Galáptes

Before the first morning light has dawned upon the world, Eldárien awakes in the straw-covered bed, sitting up and drawing the furs around him in the bitter chill. He does not stay like this for long, however, as the restlessness of his heart impels him to move, and he swings his feet off the bed and pulls on his worn leather boots. Then, bringing the warm furs of the bed with him, he walks quietly through the house and outside into the icy night air. As he does so, he sees that the first traces of pre-dawn light are hinted upon the far horizon over the dark and murky sea. But the air is still dark, and even these first hints of light on the very edge of the world are pale and icy in tone, without the warm reds, oranges, or purples of the rising sun. Eldárien knows from experience that the moments before the sun first shows her face are colder than those preceding or following, as if all the warmth in the world is drawn by some mysterious magnetism toward the rising sun only to be cast out again prodigiously upon the world whenever her face is fully revealed and she smiles once again unobstructed upon it.

After looking out toward the sky for a prolonged moment, Eldárien begins to make his way down the path to the beach, careful not to trip or to lose his way anywhere along the darkness-enshrouded landscape. In a short time, he stands on the rocky shore with the soft waves washing up only inches before him, whispering their continual song, nonviolent in its gentleness and yet strong in its depth of baritone intensity. The air is lighter now, and subtle streaks of yellow and bluish-purple become visible, glowing through the low-hanging clouds, filling their full-bodied girth with a soft radiance. The painful memories from the previous night still linger in Eldárien's mind, and his heart is heavy. Over the previous months, he had tried to avoid thinking too much about what returning to Telmérion would entail and about the trials and dangers that awaited him. But now as he stands on the very brink of the unknown, and with a past full of suffering, strife, and death, he feels gripped and almost suffocated by trepidation and fear.

It is not that he fears to die; he has stared death in the face for too long and come too close to the brink of death to fear it in that way. But even as this thought crosses his mind, he wonders: Is it really true? Memories of the icy trial in which the ocean almost became his tomb resurface in his mind. He was scared of death then, gripped by terror at the possibility of his life being snuffed out before he had found peace, before he felt, for lack of a better word, ready. He feared, too, the great unknown that death is for every human

being. And though he had been spared then from death and given life anew, he stands now looking into the possibility of death in many other ways, whether at the edge of a headsman's axe for desertion, or in the strife of the civil war, or under the violent assault of these mysterious creatures arising from the bowels of the earth.

But before and beyond the fear of his own death, his heart recoils from the act of death-dealing, recoils in fear of being called upon to kill again. The scenes of the battlefield can never be erased from his mind, no matter how ardently he wishes this could be the case. And with the scenes always lingers a deep-seated conflict with his own self, a conflict that divides his heart in two between who he is and who he wishes to be, or who he thought he would become. And this conflict is also touched by a feeling of bitterness and disgust, disgust with himself. Who is this man, this monster, who is so cruel as to drive a blade deep into the beating heart of another human being or to hack at him and split his tender skin wide open, exposing inner flesh and releasing blood? Can the blood-stained hands and heart of such a man ever be cleansed? Can the filth ever be purged away, leaving pure skin like the flesh of a little child and a heart free and wonder-filled like at the first dawn of life? No, of course not, Eldárien thinks, as he looks out at the brilliance of the rising sun now showing her face above the horizon, warm light sending crimson ripples across the sky and sparkles of splendor across the surface of the ocean. He feels no hope for himself, no hope for a renewal of life and liberty, for the freshness of childhood and the peace of reconciliation. His only hope lies now in the opportunity to fight for goodness in whatever way he may, to stand for all that is beautiful in human life rather than what harms or destroys it. In this manner, perhaps, just perhaps, he can hope to find some freedom from the inner pain, even if he does not find reconciliation and peace. And even if for him nothing changes, as long as he is able to do some good, to relieve some suffering, to bring some hope to at least one person, then he will attempt to see this itself as worthwhile and good.

His thoughts are interrupted when, to his surprise, he hears a voice calling from behind him. He turns and sees Mórlof walking toward him in the dawning morning light.

"Eldárien Illómiel," the old man says, "you will be departing soon, will you not?"

"Yes, I do not intend to linger."

"But surely you are not leaving immediately?"

"There are too many pressing needs ahead of me for me to stay long. I would not be able to rest even if I did."

"One cannot truly do good unless one can also rest while good still needs to be done."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean simply that you are not the world's savior," Mórlof says. "There are many things in this world beyond human ken and capacity. It is our allotted portion only to humbly do what we may...and to rest."

"But how," Eldárien whispers, "when what is beyond us both afflicts us and continually harms those whom we love? How can we not take a stand against it? I am restless for good, and I do not think I could be otherwise."

"I speak not against this restlessness for good of which you speak. Would that we all possessed that in abundant measure. But even restlessness must be held by a deeper rest. Further, there are many ways to take a stand for goodness. What matters is that we stand in our own place, accepting what is allotted to us."

"And for all the other things?"

"For all the other things...trust."

"You speak as if you know," Eldárien says.

"Forgive me," replies Mórlof, quietly. "I speak in folly. It is easy to say fine words when one wishes to appear wise or to aid another, but it is much harder to live them. And you have been tested far more than me, indeed I imagine more than most men. Forget what I said. The path you walk and will walk as the coming days unfold is far beyond me. But I hope and trust, indeed, that you will find the right path, even if you must walk a lonely journey." Mórlof places a hand on Eldárien's shoulder and, looking deeply into his eyes, continues, "Much afflicts you, I know. But you are not truly alone, nor will you be. This much I believe."

Shrugging as if to make light of his own path both in the past and in the future, Eldárien replies, "I head first for the hills, probably to the very feet of the mountains, to try to discover something about the stirring of these beasts from the earth."

"A dangerous task. And a long journey."

"I need to know what is happening and to discern, if I can, what may be done about it."

"And I understand your desire to focus on this threat," Mórlof says, "but I suspect conflict awaits you there as well. You made clear that you wish no longer to raise the sword against your own kind; and indeed the civil war may be the portion of other men. If you are fortunate, its conflict will pass you by. But I do wonder: if you encounter these creatures, these abominations of darkness, will you raise the sword to fight against them?"

"That is yet something within my capacity, if it is indeed fitting to do. But I need to know what I am up against and whether this is the right course of action."

"And?"

"And I have not a sword any longer. Mine rests at the bottom of the ocean."

"Well," Mórlof begins, laughing quietly, "then you are in luck. We have an heirloom passed down for many a year, from generation to generation, from the grandfather of my grandfather."

"An ancient sword is not fit to fight with," Eldárien replies. "It will likely break with the first impact."

"Indeed? Well, not this one. You see, it is forged of the rarest metal, light but strong, which does not wear with the passage of time nor dull with the clash of blades or armor or stone."

"You speak of myéllion?"

"Yes," Mórlof says, a soft smile playing on his lips.

"I could not receive such a gift," Eldárien protests. "A family heirloom should remain within your family. I could not take it away from you. Pass it on to your son that he in turn may give it to his son after him."

"Miránd shall likely never have cause to wield a sword, as I myself have not. I insist that you take it. Consider it an act of trust in you. Consider it, indeed, as a sign of my wish for you to walk henceforth as you have resolved within yourself."

"Very well. If you speak so strongly, I will accept it, though I do not wish to deprive you."

"Nonsense, you would be doing no such thing. But come, let us return to the house. The air is cold, and I am sure that Yelía is already busy preparing something for breakfast. After that, I will show you the sword. I only hope that you are adept at wielding with two hands? It is a greatsword."

"I will be capable enough," Eldárien replies. "We fought primarily with sword and shield, but we were trained also in greataxe and polearm. The greatsword must be similar."

"And yet lighter and more swift, I think. Particularly one crafted of myéllion."

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"Do you feel that you are in good enough health to be leaving?" Yelía asks after Eldárien has finished breakfast.

"I feel quite well, in fact, all things considered."

"Your time in the icy water surely had a negative effect upon you. Perhaps you should stay for a few more days. I fear you will grow ill on the road alone, which is a bad place to be when illness strikes."

"I see your point and I appreciate your care," Eldárien replies, "but I really must be going soon. I would hope to leave tomorrow morning if possible."

"Stay for at least two more days," Mórlof says. "Then we can confidently send you away without fear that you will collapse on the road." This

statement does not come as a request or even as a suggestion, but more as an imperative. Of course, Eldárien knows that he is free to decide, and that even their strong insistence does not compel him; but why betray their kindness all to gain only two days' time when he does not even know his precise destination or the fullness of his purpose?

"I will stay," he says at last. "It may be well to rest for a while longer and to prepare."

"That is very good," Mórlof says, "and I am sure that it will be good to see my son and daughter-in-law and their children for a while longer. I imagine it has been long since you have had the joy of family life laid before your eyes."

After this, the table is cleared and the kitchen cleaned. (This time Eldárien is allowed to help.) And then Mórlof leads him outside to a small workshop behind the house—devoted carpentry and leather-working, by the looks of it.

"Is all of this yours?" Eldárien asks as he looks around.

"Yes, though I have taught Miránd a thing or two and hope to teach the little ones, if they are willing."

"It is quite a workshop to have without the business to support it. You have enough supplies to create quite a collection of items."

"Whoever said there was no business to support it?" Mórlof replies with a laugh in his voice. "We are fishermen. That much is obvious. But whenever someone in the area needs someone to work with wood or to craft leather—shoes or a cloak or a saddle—I am here to help. I am not the only person in town, of course, but the need is enough to give me quite a bit to do. And this kind of work is really a much greater love for me than fishing. To fashion beauty or usefulness with these hands of mine is a marvelous thing. To see the shape take form beneath my fingers, under the touch of my tools...it does me good. Perhaps it feels something like what the gods felt when they first brought the world into existence."

"Perhaps so," Eldárien says quietly as he looks around the workshop.

"Speaking of creating," Mórlof continues, in another tone, "I imagine you will need something to keep you warm in your travels. You know the death-dealing cold of our land."

"Indeed."

"How would you feel if I turned the furs of your bed into a cloak?"

"You would do that?"

"I hope to do it, if you do not object. The bed is very little used, and the furs can be easily replaced."

"I do not object. It would be a much appreciated token, and I imagine quite useful. I wish that I could pay you, but—"

"Nonsense. You can consider it done." Mórlof smiles a toothy grin, and

Eldárien cannot help smiling back at the kindness of this man who has already done so much for him. "I am going to bind the furs inside stretched and treated leather, seamless as much as I can make it, so that the cloak will be waterproof as well as warm. A hood, too, I will need to attach, with fur. We don't want your ears falling off from the cold while you travel."

"First a plum nose, and now earlessness," laughs Eldárien. "Your imagination is quite vivid, Mórlof."

The old man chuckles as he looks around wistfully, as if planning the project in his mind. "Oh!" he exclaims, "and I almost forgot."

"Yes?"

"The sword."

With this, he walks to the back of the workshop and pries open the lid of an old wooden chest. From within, buried among what appear to be various other tools or weapons of ancient make, he draws a sword, turning, he holds it before Eldárien.

"It looks as it must have on the first day of its creation," Eldárien says in wonder, inspecting it.

"Indeed," Mórlof replies. "It is said that myéllion does not wear in even the worst of storms, and that it can cut what no other sword can cut. Here, take it. Hold it. Does it fit well in your hand?"

"I do not know if any sword will now fit well in my hand," Eldárien whispers, but he takes the sword and holds it. The grip is bound with smooth strips of leather which adhere well against the palm, while the pommel, crossguard, and blade are all naked myéllion, a soft but clean silver color, with a touch of blue. On the pommel is an emblem that Eldárien does not recognize, and on the crossguard are carved what look to be vines and leaves, coiling around one another and terminating in flowers on either end. The blade itself looks to be about four feet long and the whole sword, blade, hilt, and all is surprisingly light, simple but sturdy.

"It is very light, almost weightless in comparison with the heavy war axes I am used to wielding," Eldárien says. "I will, however, need to adjust to the length. I have never yet wielded a sword this long."

Mórlof laughs.

"What is this symbol on the pommel?" Eldárien asks.

"Ah, that," Mórlof says, his voice thoughtful as if his mind is carried back to a distant memory. "The sword was crafted, as I said, by my ancestor."

"The craftsmanship is exquisite."

"Indeed," Mórlof says, "it is a trade that has been passed down for generations. If only it still lived in us as strong as it did in our forebears. The emblem you ask about, however, is an ancient symbol of the people who once inhabited this area. Though much is lost to us now, it is understood that they

had many such symbols, representing the different virtues and qualities of human life. This one represents the virtue of integrity."

"Integrity?"

"Unity of mind and heart and life. Oneness of purpose in the truth. That, at least, is the way we have understood it since it was first passed down from father to son," Mórlof says wistfully, "a long memory that has endured many generations. I am not a wise man, but I know certain truths when I hear them. And my ancestors, I feel, had much more wisdom than I. This has the ring of truth to it, if I may say so myself."

"I would say so as well," Eldárien agrees. "Then may I wield it with integrity." And, after a moment of silence between the two men, he continues, "To be honest, I am still surprised to find a work of such art and fine craftsmanship in a small hamlet such as this."

"Why is that?"

"Well, I am not sure, exactly. I just never supposed it. Craftsmen tend to seek out the cities."

"When they desire wealth and fame," says Mórlof. "I think my ancestors were quite different. It is regretful that so much of their nobility has dwindled, in myself too. I feel it and know it. Not the wealth and fame, mind you. I care not about such things. But I do often feel that my life is somehow petty in comparison with what they were and with the great things that occupied their minds and hearts."

"I think that you have little reason to feel that way, Mórlof," Eldárien says, looking up from the sword. "Just because something is small does not mean that it is insignificant. Indeed, I think the truth of the matter is often quite the opposite. I wish I could occupy myself only with small things, but the 'great' things seem always to seek me out. I cherish the humble life that your family lives, and it has been a gift to me to witness and share in it, for however short a time." He pauses for a moment, as if growing self-conscious of his own words, before he concludes, "All of this is to say, I suppose, that I wish to thank you."

"You are most welcome, Eldárien," Mórlof replies, looking Eldárien in the eyes. "I trust that you have a good path before you yet. Big or little, I think that true depth and beauty hides in different places than we ordinarily expect."

"You have shown me that, at least, today," Eldárien says quietly. "Perhaps if I ever need arms or armor, I will now think first to look to the villages before turning to the cities."

"Yet I suspect you will find none to rival my grandfather's grandfather, and those before him," Mórlof smiles subtly, with a sparkle in his eyes.

"No, I suspect that I will not. But I do not think I will have need if the

sword is as sturdy as you make it out to be."

"In that, I trust, you will not be disappointed."

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Yelía's concern is proved right, as that night Eldárien retires to bed early feeling ill and wakes in the morning with a high fever. For two days, he sleeps much and eats very little. They nourish him on vegetable and bone broth and a bit of goat's milk, though the latter he finds to be too much. But on the morning of the third day, he awakes feeling refreshed, and the fever is gone.

"A bizarre sickness, strong but quickly healed," he says to Mórlof, who comes in to check on him about an hour after dawn. "Upon awakening after being discovered on the beach I felt fine, but I suppose the trauma of the cold and the shock at last caught up with me."

"I think you are stronger willed than you realize, Eldárien," Mórlof replies. "You have endured much in both flesh and heart. And your body could not keep pace and demanded rest."

"I think I will wait another day to depart."

"Good. I was hoping you would say that."

That afternoon the air is unusually warm, and the sun shines unobstructed in the sky, glistening brightly off the surface of the ocean and illumining trees and grass and the rocks of the beach. Miránd and Alíja's children play outside in the yard while the adults sit and watch, talking quietly between themselves.

"I hope this warm weather will continue for your journey," Miránd says.

"Even for a day, it would be a blessing," Eldárien replies. "We never expect it for more than a day, though, or at most a couple days, at a time; but I will be glad to have it as long as it remains. Regardless, you know how the saying goes."

"Yes. A Telmérin without cold is like a fish without water."

"A saying not totally precise," Alíja observes, "but it is true in more ways than one."

"Hey, Papa!" cries little Ylínia. "Watch me." The little girl, with braids of blond hair down her back and a face red from play, looks at her parents, jumping up and down with seemingly boundless energy.

"I am watching, dear," Miránd replies.

"Mama, you too!"

"What do you want to show us?"

"I fwip," the girl says. And with this she throws herself forward and plants her hands on the ground, while her body doubles over. And she almost makes it full circle to put her feet on the ground again—almost, but instead she falls on her back, her face even more red and huffing from the effort.

"Oops," she says. "So cwose."

"Try it again," Mórlof encourages her. "I bet you can get it."

And so she does. It takes five tries, but eventually she is able to land on her feet again and looks with up a smile spread wide across her face, to the applause of her adult audience.

"Where do you intend to go?" Miránd asks, turning to Eldárien after a few moments.

"I am not entirely sure what course of action would be best. But I would like to learn more about these denizens of darkness arising from the earth."

"A dangerous task."

"Mórlof said the same. But it is perhaps no more dangerous than standing face to face with an opposing army on the battlefield, or even much less so."

"Except this time you will not have comrades in arms at your side."

At this, Eldárien bows his head, pausing in respect for the fallen, before responding, "Yes, you are right. Nonetheless, I have no choice. Running from this threat is not something I can bring my heart to do."

"Do you have any ideas, then, of what precisely you intend to do?" Miránd asks again.

"I intend to visit a cavern that stood in the hills above my hometown, called the barrow of Séra Galáptes. It is over a hundred leagues from here, so it shall take a great deal of traveling. But it is the nearest place I know that might give me greater insight into this mystery."

"So you will be able to visit your home?" Alíja asks, overhearing their conversation. "That is a wonderful thing."

"I wish it were so," Eldárien says softly. "I intended to remain silent about it, but as you have referred to my home a number of times, I think you deserve to know the full truth. As I hinted before, my hometown is no more, nor has it existed since I was young."

"Oh, I am so sorry," Alíja replies. "Now that you say so, I do remember that you gestured to such a thing. But at the time I did not understand, and lack of understanding led to forgetfulness."

"It was not likely that you would know of it beforehand, and, additionally, I gave you very little indication otherwise. Fálstead was a small village, insignificant in the eyes of the world. It suffered a fate similar to other small villages and hamlets during that period, crushed under the cruel and restless roaming of brigands. In fact, this is one area in which the Empire has been of great help to us. Even before that time, the amount and severity of the raids had greatly diminished thanks to Imperial measures and might. I believe that our village was one of that last to be attacked in such a manner."

"How many survivors were there?" Miránd asks. "Did the community rebuild elsewhere?"

Alíja turns to her husband with a look of indignation, "Miránd! Be more considerate. Do you know what these men were capable of, and what they

did?"

"Aye, I do. But..." Miránd sighs, absentmindedly and shamefacedly scratching his head.

"As far as I know, I was the only survivor," Eldárien interjects, breaking the awkward silence, but making it heavier and more sorrowful still.

Eldárien wonders to himself why he is sharing these painful memories with the Feskar family, whom he has only known for a matter of days. Even a subtle gesture to those fateful events of his life has felt more decades like a spear to the heart, and he has become accustomed to pulling the veil continuously over his heart. And he feels the urge to do so now as well. He desires to let this place of pain and loss abide always in the depths of his heart, where he burns a candle of vigilant sorrow and loving remembrance at the tombs of his unburied parents and sister and before the very life and beauty of the village of Fálstead, extinguished in the matter of a single night.

He is stirred from these thoughts by another question. "Have you visited the barrow before?" Mórlof asks.

"One does not usually visit ancient burial caves, I suppose," Eldárien answers, "even though they were first built to honor our ancestors. But yes, in fact, I have been not only nearby but inside, though it was not by choice."

And then Eldárien begins to explore another memory, this time with greater ease, as it does not directly concern the deep bleeding place of his loss, even though following directly upon it.

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Eldárien awakes on the morning after the attack, his whole body aching and his face pressed against cold stone. He rolls over onto his back and sees brilliant daylight streaming in through the sinkhole above, motes of dust floating in the shaft of golden light as it pours forth onto the face of the pool of water into which he had fallen, stirring up countless glistening shimmers. After a few moments, he sits up, memories of the night before flooding through his mind. He buries his head in his hands and tries to shake them away. But even as he does so, he wonders rather if he should not rather linger with them, trying to reverence and mourn those who were lost. But at present he feels both too overwhelmed and too numb to do so, and he rises to his feet and seeks to move in order to distract himself. The air is also damp and cold, and he does not wish to linger long in this place.

He looks around the rocky chamber. The walls and ceiling create a shape somewhat like at inverted bowl, with the sinkhole at the center, gaping open to the sky. The stone is worn smooth by many years of trickling water, though there are numerous rivulets cut through it like veins, giving it a corrugated appearance. Inspecting his surroundings, he knows that climbing back out the way he had fallen is an impossibility. Hopefully, nonetheless, there is

another way out, as this is not just a natural cavern but the barrow of an ancient king. For a moment, a surge of fear arises in Eldárien, as the thought crosses his mind that perhaps this is not the barrow, but in fact nothing other than a large hole in the earth, which has swallowed him up never to let him go. However, even as the fear surges in him, he sees a passage in the wall, hardly visible in the shadows but tall and wide enough for a few men to pass through side by side. Above the entrance, etched into the stone, are runes in the ancient tongue, almost unintelligible now after the passage of many centuries. Drawing near to them, Eldárien is just able to make them out:

Among the shadows lie
the many fallen under blade of foe
or by illness smitten, or age's plight,
awaiting day's coming, dispelling night.

His knowledge of the ancient tongue is quite thorough, albeit imperfect, learned from his tutor, Aédin. Another surge of sorrow washes over him as the face of this man, noble and peaceful, sober and yet joyful, comes before his mind's eye. How had he not thought of him before now? The loss of his family had been enough to suffocate out all other thoughts; but Aédin, too, is family, or as close as one can be to family who shares not the bond of blood. It was he who taught Eldárien to read the language of their forebears and to work at the smithy in both metal and leather, and to wield the sword and the bow (and many other things besides). There was a little, but wholly peaceful, disagreement between Aédin and his father about the teaching the boy in swordplay and melee combat, as his father wished him only to be proficient in the bow—in which he himself also had a role in his son's education—thinking the sword to be the weapon of murderers and brigands. But he had tolerated and accepted the training, understanding also that one must know how to defend oneself and one's kin from the violence that may threaten them. He understood and accepted that his son would have the ability to defend against the sword with the sword.

Eldárien wishes now, with vehemence, that there were another way! For now they all lie dead, their blood staining the earth, their corpses burned by fire, and Eldárien's sword lies unused, buried deep in the chest in his room. Had Aédin perhaps fought the brigands, standing strong to protect the village with his own expert art of swordsmanship? Or had the simple number and ferocity of the brigands snuffed him out as easily as it had everyone else? Noticing that he is lingering now on painful thoughts, Eldárien pushes them away and forces himself to walk toward the passage. As he enters and follows it deeper into the womb of the earth, the thoughts of death which he had pushed away are once again laid before him. What had he expected? This is a barrow, after all, a burial place for men and women of the past.

Tombs line the walls, long and narrow cuttings from the rock like shelves, in which are visible human figures, wrapped in cloth, though the desiccated skin, tight around sunken eyes and bone, is visible upon some, for whom the cloth has either fallen away or decayed with the passage of time. But even more than the decaying human figure, or in addition to it, what creates in Eldárien a sense of the numinous, a mysterious feeling of presence, is that before each corpse burns a candle. The deeper he walks into the passage, which soon branches off into more passages of a similar width—all lined with burial places—the more he feels that he is standing among the stars, which surround him on all sides, glistening and flickering gently as they feed on a wick unconsumed and wax which does not deplete. What mystery is this, that candles lit in homage hundreds of years ago have not yet burned out, and that bodies laid to rest centuries ago have not yet been reduced to dust?

Indeed, as Eldárien traverses the passages, he feels as if he is walking the passage of time to centuries of old and visiting his forefathers in their eternal rest, as they repose in the bosom of the earth and in the quiet of the subterranean cavern. The peaceful tranquility of their ceaseless vigil enfolds him, and he finds some rest in it; but as he walks, he wonders if there is not more to what he experiences than this, more to what awaits after death than corpses with ever-burning candles. Is all human flesh really destined to an eternal vigil without a homecoming, to forever abide in a lifeless existence of eternal waiting in the depths of the earth, without hope for a dawn of new life? After all, what is waiting but expectation of something to come, and hope but the desire for something wished for and promised? The legends here are obscure, marked by shadows and contradictions. Some tales tell of the repose in the abode of Midalést that all human spirits find while their bodies decay in the earth, or even of a place beyond Midalést, a place of abundance and light; others speak of the spirit resting with the body—as the candle burning in vigil unspent—for ages upon ages. Eldárien thinks that there must be some truth in the latter, without neglecting the former, and that these mysterious candles are indeed the unspent spirits of his fathers' fathers. Or perhaps the candles are but symbols of the spirit which has taken flight to another place, but awaits the time it may be reunited with the body once again, after the fractures of time have passed. But what in truth do they await, if await they do? What can bring about in the unity of restored life what death has torn asunder?

At this moment, as he turns another corner in the tunnel and sees a wider hallway spread out before him, lights flickering on all sides and creating a warm and inviting hue in the air, he remembers a story that Pa had once told him. It was years ago, when he was but a boy, yet the memory has remained with him ever since—little thought of, almost entirely asleep, but present

within him to be awakened when called upon. The story told of a day centuries ago, millennia ago, before the very foundations of Telmérion had yet been firmly set. And on this day, the great god Meléngthar—lord of birth and death—entrusted to the human race an undying flame, to be lit in the room of a woman upon learning that she has conceived and to be kept burning until she has brought forth. This candle is to burn at the bedside of the mother while she is in labor until her child is birthed into the world. And, again, when she and her child die, even be it eighty years later, and with an entire generation between them, each is to bear a unique flame before their resting flesh. And this flame awaits, as they await, the coming of one who will be called Dawnbringer, the hearth-flame which illumines all candles and gathers them together into a single flame that will never lessen in intensity and heat—a single flame, yet in which the unique warmth and beauty of each person's candle will not be lost but rather kept alive forevermore. On that day, even the body, resting in the earth, will rise to burn like a flame forever, alive anew as it once was and yet never to know death or corruption again.

Eldárien thinks of this story now, and despite the candles that burn undying before him, he struggles to believe that it could be true. Most likely these candles will burn forever, as the world goes on as it has always gone until all light is extinguished in eternal darkness. At the moment that this thought crosses his mind, he is startled by it. Where has such a thought of despair come from, such a rejection of the hope for life? But the answer is evident, drowning his heart, as all those whom he has known and loved in life lie slaughtered upon the earth—and no candle stands beside them to await a new kindling of life. While he grapples with his own despair, the candles still silently speaking around him, Eldárien comes to yet another turn in the passage and, following it, finds himself entering into a wide cavern, like the room of a great hall, with daylight filtering in through crevices in the walls and a high window at the back of the chamber, a window naturally formed in the earth and yet carved about with runes and symbols centuries past.

He traverses the hall, his footsteps sounding from the stone and echoing against the walls of the great cavern. This creates an odd sensation, following immediately as it does after the narrow stillness of the passageway leading here, and Eldárien feels exposed and unprotected, as if standing naked before forces far beyond his understanding. At the back of the chamber lies a large and ornate stone tomb, erected from the earth, with runes almost entirely worn away by time though still partly legible.

Here lies,
glorious in might and steadfast in honor,
Séra Gal'áptes,
high king of Telmérion and father of the Galapteäni

Eldárien hesitantly steps forward and sees, in the space between two slabs of stone that at some point cracked and split apart from one another, the corpse of the ancient king, hair still upon his skull, and fingers still intact, though they are little more than bone and skin. Held within his grasp is a sword, now covered in black rust, and around his neck a pendant, worn and rusted, and yet with a red gem still glistening within it, in which are etched, in runes, the letters

Arecha. Ta. Ya. Sera. To his surprise, Eldárien knows what the inscription means, having heard it in stories of his childhood. It had been the symbol of kings for generations upon generations since the founding of Telmérion in the 1st Age.

Aïn Telmérië ya suría.
For Telmérion and her people.

Eldárien looks for a long moment upon the figure and upon pendant, as if reaching back with his heart to those ancient days of heroism and conflict, of life and death, and then he turns to leave. As he does so, he sees a stairway to his right, along the wall, which appears to lead outside. But before he is able to move, he hears something speak deep within him in words that require no words and in voice deeper than speech. He is startled by the communication and yet also in the same moment comforted by it. And he understands immediately what is being asked of him. He is to take the amulet and to wear it for the good of Telmérion and her people. And so he does, with homage to the ancient king and with anxious trepidation, held by a newfound comfort and trust before what the future may bring, like a tiny flower breaking through snow and beginning, against all odds, to blossom.

Chapter Six
To the West

Eldárien pulls his pack tight against his back and adjusts the greatsword, now in a leather scabbard slung over his shoulder, as he stands in the small yard between the two houses of the Feskar family. It is early morning, just after sunrise, and the air is quite cold, having frozen hard the night before, cloaking the land in frost. A freeze is not unknown even into the springtime, but the chill of these days has persisted to a degree that is unusual for this time of year, even in the central regions of Telmérion. In the far north even into the summer month the nights often freeze, but here the distinctions between the seasons are more pronounced, albeit, all things considered, still subtle. Pacing about to stay warm, Eldárien awaits his kind hosts to see him off as he begins his journey to the west. And as he waits, he surveys the land and the horizon, looking first to the tree-laden hills that gradually rise inland, elegant in their variety in contrast to the wide expanse of sea to the east. These hills, for a short ways at least, are dotted with the small and humble houses that make up the village of Ígny, cradled in the folds of the land and nestled among the trees that mark the eastern edge of the Cára'fel Woods. After a while, he turns to the east and gazes out upon the sea once again, drinking in its expanse, its beauty, but also recalling its terror, and bidding farewell to it one last time. The water glistens and shimmers, blazing with the early morning light, warm in color but cold in temperature.

At this moment, Eldárien is stirred from his contemplation as Mórlof appears through the doorway of his house, a small satchel under one arm and a skin of water in the other hand.

"Here is the water that Yelía has prepared for you," he says, handing the skin to Eldárien, who, with a kindly smile, pulls off the pack that he had just adjusted and ties the water to it.

"It's not much, but it will last you a few days. I don't suspect you will have a hard time finding a creek in which to refill it," Mórlof continues. "And this, too, is for you." He hands the satchel to Eldárien, who pulls it open and rummages through its contents: dry provisions for close on a fortnight's journey, if used sparingly, and another smaller sack tied with string, in which is a clay jar of oil and some tightly woven cloth ("For if you have need to travel in the darkness," Mórlof explains). Eldárien hopes that he will not need to make a torch, whether for traveling at night or for traversing dark caves in the earth bereft of sunlight, but he is grateful for the supplies and thanks his host.

As he ties the satchel closed again, his mind carries him back once again to the barrow of Séra Galáptes, and the innumerable candles ever-burning before the bodies of the dead rise before the eyes of his heart. Even at a distance of many years, the lights stir in him feelings both of comfort and of trepidation. Would a normal torch stir less fear and more comfort? Or would its comfort be immeasurably less since less also is its mystery? He thinks of the mysterious consolation offered by those lights ever keeping vigil, and in contrast the light of a torch is, for all its nearness and accessibility, ultimately less able to carry him through the darkest of nights and the narrowest of tunnels. Acknowledging the truth of this thought, Eldárien is surprised that it has occurred to him at all. Regardless, it is soon pushed from his conscious mind as he looks up and sees the rest of the household stepping outside to see him off.

The farewell is sober and yet kind, and Eldárien feels the ache of yet another goodbye, keenly aware that this may well be the last time he sees this family.

"I wish you all the best in your journey and in what awaits you," Alíja tells him. "I am anxious about the state of our land and grateful that you wish to serve her welfare, but I pray you shall be safe upon the road and off of it. And may the desires of your heart for good come to fruition."

"Thank you, Alíja," he replies. "You truly have my gratitude for everything."

"We shall miss you," Miránd says. "An unexpected friend quickly made is a gift, but it is sad to lose you so soon."

"I share in the sadness of parting. But let us remember one another, and remain open to those friends who await us, whom we are yet to meet and know."

"I pray that you do not meet enemies instead," Yelía adds.

To this Eldárien only nods silently, and, with a gentle touch on the head of each child and a final gesture of farewell to his hosts, he turns away. When only a hundred yards have passed beneath his feet, though he knows that he walks toward the heart of the land of his youth, now wrought with war and conflict, he silently makes a decision within himself and reaches up and undoes the braid hanging by his right temple. This action, even though by it he means no infidelity nor even intends to hide his true feelings, makes him feel even more homeless—as if now he has lost, not only his childhood home, but even the Empire in which he had discovered some sense of belonging and purpose. But a new path lies before him, and one which he must be free to follow in all of its fragility and vulnerability, for only thus can he be a servant for the good of all. In response to the feeling of homelessness and fragility, the thoughts rise spontaneously within his heart: *May I never conceal that which ought to be revealed and never reveal that which ought to be concealed,*

but may my acts, both hidden and evident, be true. May I, in all things, walk with transparency of heart and of life.

Eldárien follows a path that runs from the shore and past the Feskar homestead almost straight west. This road, paved with cobbled stone generations ago and now broken and littered with dirt and weeds, passes through the midst of the houses of Ígny and then curls its way between a series of ancient sentinel-stones etched with runic markings and geometric designs. After the village proper, similar homesteads to that of the Feskar family—perhaps ten in number—dot the landscape, each with a look as unique as their inhabitants. Among these are some areas where the trees have been cleared for farmland or for the pasturing of sheep or pigs or cattle. He hears them bleating and bellowing and running about as he walks past. The last building that he passes on his way is a large logging outpost with a mill noisily churning up water from the river as it winds its way to the sea. Eldárien crosses a flat wood-slat bridge not far beyond the mill and then finds that the path comes to a junction. At the intersection is posted a sign which says:

West – Aldéra Highlands, Moradóch Steppe, Téldyn Pass
North – Melendýa, Unyísa Pass

Eldárien takes the path to the west and almost straightaway plunges into the thick trees and dense foliage of the woods. This forest, the Cára'fel, spreads far inland, rising and falling with numerous hills even while keeping a steady upward rise for many leagues as it climbs toward the feet of the Teldren Mountains. But after this gradual ascent from the sea, the landscape changes, and hilly woods give way to barren and rocky steppe, cliff and crag and gnarled root: the Aldéra Highlands. These highlands await Eldárien, and he knows that he must pass through them; but that step of his journey is still close to a week away, and, even further beyond that, nestled in the heart of the Teldren mountain range, is his childhood home.

He has never been this far east, to Ígny, but he passed within about twenty leagues many years ago on the main road that splits the eastern part of Telmérion north to south, connecting Galá'jad and Clarís'ye in the north with Ristfánd and Rhóvas in the south. Widespread trade has become a large part of Telméric culture in the last few generations, since the establishment of the onárion and the harmony of the seven clans. Most of the roads that traverse the landscape of Telmérion date from this period—and thus, are still "young" roads in comparison with the ancient trails that wend their way across fields and through forests, that crawl through valleys and traverse cliffs and mountains. Even in ancient days, however, three great roads were established and, through decades of human labor, were in differing manners paved and marked with way-stations or way-shrines. There is the great Téldyn road

running east to west or west to east, from which comes the name for Téldyn Pass—and both, in fact, take their name from the two mountain ranges between which the road traverses: the Teldren Mountains in the north and center of Telmérion and the Yjind Mountains in the far south.

The second road, the Márdas, passes from the town of Clarís'ye in the north and around the east end of the Teldren Mountains and then progresses south, the entire length of the continent, to Ristfánd. This road has often been used for trade between north and south and, even to this day, is also part of the route taken when persons or supplies travel from Ígny and other towns on the east coast to the western side of the mountains, even at times as far as the capital of Brûg'hil, though for this, of course, the east-west roads are also used. The third road passes from Brûg'hil, in the northwest reaches of the continent, to the center of Telmérion and meets up with the Téldyn road just south of Onylándun; the name of this road is Finístra, and it continues for a lengthy stretch along the Finístra range, a wide expanse of comparatively lower mountains and hills that reach along the center of the continent until meeting with the greater, lofty peaks of the Teldren range. Both of these mountain ranges together give the landscape of Telmérion the appearance of a great mountain rising from the sea—a conical volcano-like landmass thrust upward above the waves, yet with innumerable peaks of different heights and splendors, and on all sides descending into lower mountain ranges, hills, plains, and fjords, which then plunge into the ocean.

Of unique beauty, and an exception to this descending nature of Telmérion, are the mountains in which Brûg'hil is nestled, which drop off straight, in cliffs hundreds of feet above the sea, into icy cold waters that ever splash against the vertical walls of rock. Another unique exception is the Yjind mountain range, which grows close to the ocean and reaches its roots right down into the narrow strip of rocky land that has been shaped by the ocean's water and yet stands ever against it, unmovable and strong. There are, of course, many other noteworthy landmarks at the meeting of land and ocean, as if this kiss of land and sea can never be exhausted in its glory and its depth, and all across the land the same theme is hit with a different key or sung to a different tune. Eldárien has only seen some of these glories and heard some of these tunes, less than his extensive travels would indicate, for his journeys have taken him mostly across the inland of the continent; he has been, however, to Brûg'hil in the northwest, to Ristfánd in the south, and to Galá'jad in the northeast.

The seven clans of old distinguish the land of Telmérion into seven segments, unequal in size but more or less equal in wealth of resources and bounty of beauty, and with cultures and customs all their own. These clans have nonetheless become more similar to one another as time has passed; in

particular, a great deal of their uniqueness has not survived the flattening effect caused by the firm presence and too-strict oversight of the Empire. Nonetheless, they still retain evident unique cultural customs among themselves, and each also has a form of governing structure of their own under the headship of the clan leader—still frequently called a *hæras* from the ancient tongue—but they are nothing like what they used to be. And unlike in more highly developed and centralized societies—such as the Empire of Vælíria—the borders between the clans are not strictly and clearly defined. In the past, this was a point of great contention and the cause of much bloodshed, with ownership of lands and peoples continually passing hands through force of arms more than through any diplomacy. Since the coming of the Empire, however, bloodshed has given way to peaceful, if at times tenuous, coexistence and even, in the most positive circumstances, cooperation. In fact, as the decades have passed and generations have come and gone, the tensions have dissolved and genuine and abiding cooperation has taken their place.

The seven clans are named as follows, with their areas of dominion upon the land of Telmérion. In the far northwest lies the clan of the Bruï, and to the east and somewhat south, with its heart in Minstead, the Mineäsi. In the center of the continent, in a wide valley cradled on the west by the Finístra range and on the east by the Téldrens, resides the clan of the Winfréyi, with their capital of Winfreya, the only settlement in their domain that can be called a city, which is yet circled about with innumerable little villages and hamlets. North and east of this, occupying the northernmost reaches of Telmérion, lies the clan of the Germûndi, and further south, across a stretch of land east of the great Teldren Range, is the clan of the Galapteäni, in which Eldárien is now located, and which covers a great expanse, sparsely populated and yet rich in wood and fish and ore, from Ígny in the east along the coast to the high slopes of the Teldren Mountains in the west, including Eldárien's lost hometown of Fálstead and the barrow of the ancient king, Séra Galáptes. The remaining two clans inhabit large stretches of land in the southeastern and southwestern reaches of the continent, the clan of Rhóvas, or the Rhovánni, claiming all lands of the Yjind Mountains and eastward, and the clan of Onylándis claiming the lands west of the mountains, including the Mídfeld stretch and southwards, along the great forked peninsula to the sea.

Thus is divided the land of Telmérion, marked by ages of growth and development and creativity, and yet also by centuries of warfare in the lust of men for power, in violence against the weak, only to have these very conflicts overcome and brought to cease in a form of coexistence imposed by a more supreme power from beyond her own shores. What remains to be said of the lands that call themselves Telmérion, blessed by the god Télmoth from the beginning of time and ever caressed by the waves of Hiliána, is that two more

clans reside beyond the borders of the continent in outlying chains of islands. They are rarely counted among the rival clans and live an existence apart, linked to the mainland only by a meager amount of trade and an even smaller degree of migration and the linked lineage that this induces. Thus the clan leaders have even now their own independent forms of government and have no part in the onárion, the council of the seven. Of all places in Telmérion, they alone are free from the occupation of the Empire, as few travel thence and return, and thus these islands have never fallen under the gaze of the Emperor. These clans are, to the east of the land, Tarésta and, to the northwest, Neriä.

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To his surprise and relief, the day warms slightly as Eldárien walks through the woods, and the spring sun dances through the trees and casts dappled rays of light upon the ground, interlaced with the shadows of branch, trunk, and leaf. The walk is tiring simply because of the continual rise and fall of the land, undulating up and down even as the land, as a whole, progresses ever upward. The path winds very little and only rarely weaves its way between hills, rather traversing them almost without exception in a straight westerly direction. Trees long ago were certainly hewn and dug up to make way for the path, but now they have grown close again, at times infringing upon the trail and almost always overhanging it, sometimes with branches so low that Eldárien must duck under them to continue on his way. The air is still, with only hints of breeze whispering through the branches and causing the thick grass and vegetation on either side of the path to gently sway.

Even despite the lingering cold, spring is beginning to make her face known in the woods, with many trees in early bud and a few in full bloom, and flowers are beginning to unfold themselves—the few flowers that there are in a climate such as this. Eldárien wonders at the state in which he finds the forest, since it is not as he expected. Spring should already have long been in full blossom and leaning toward summer, and yet here everything looks as if it has been a couple months delayed, hesitant to leave behind the slumber of winter and to welcome the new flowering of life, and yet, after a prolonged hesitancy, yielding to it at last. Of course, the summers in Telmérion have never been more than a couple months of moderately warmer weather contrasting with the intermittent weather of spring and autumn, which seem to be a ceaseless tug-of-war between the bitter chill of night and the warmth of day's radiance, between the winds, rains, and even snows that come down from the mountains or blow in from the sea and the warm, sun-drenched days that come unexpectedly and as unexpectedly depart.

Eldárien stops briefly around midday and sits upon the trunk of a fallen, ancient tree, drinking a bit from the waterskin and eating some bread and

dried fish. As he sits, he thinks, letting his mind wander back, not now to the long buried memories that stirred to life beyond his control while he stayed in Ígny, but to other memories whose import for the present and the future weigh upon his heart. In memory, he finds himself again in the courtyard of a castle with high stone walls, the late morning sun glistening overhead, crowds of people standing about, and his brothers in arms to his left and his right. After years of training they now stand, squires, before the honor of knighthood, in regal garb, and the legate of the Emperor stands before them with an assistant to his side.

"After the time of trial comes the glory," the legate begins, in a booming voice clearly intended to be audible to all in the crowd as well as to the men standing before him. "You have shown yourself worthy through service to those placed above you and through might of arms and strength of will. Now before you stands the glory of knighthood and, if you continue upon the path you have chosen, the glory of battle. I address you now and speak to you all as one. But soon each must answer for himself alone."

With this the legate takes a step forward and turns to his assistant, who hands him a sword. "You are to profess your oath of allegiance before me, who stand in the place of our great Emperor, and before all of the people gathered here. May evil befall you on the day you break such an oath, endangering thus the well-being of the order which you have vowed to protect and uphold." The legate now approaches the first squire in line and gestures for them all to kneel. When they have done so, he places the sword against the squire's shoulder and says, "Do you vow this day to honor in all your acts and words the glory of the Empire of Vælíria and to obey without question the commands of your superiors, as if they were the words of the Emperor himself, ruler of men and custodian of goodness?"

The squire replies, "I do."

Moving the sword then to the other shoulder, the legate continues, "And do you vow to stand always for those traits which the Empire represents and seeks to establish among mankind, namely justice and might, fortitude and forbearance, unity and peace?"

And again, "I do."

And so the legate says, "In the name of the Emperor I accept your profession. Remember always your oath and honor it, for only in this way, may it be known unto you, shall you be of service to those values to which you have committed yourself: honor, glory, valor, the unity among peoples, the order of society, and the unyielding arm of the law, which punishes the wicked and pardons the innocent."

The image now changes in Eldárien's memory, and he finds himself carried in thought to the more recent past. He stands guard at the edge of a military

camp in the wilderness of Tel-Velfána, a group of tents hidden among the trees. A voice sounds from behind him, and he turns, "Captain, may I have a word with you?"

"You may," he replies, "but come, stand beside me, for I must be able to keep watch."

"Of course." The soldier does so, and after a moment he continues. "I wanted to ask you about the orders we received yesterday."

"It is not a soldier's place to question orders," Eldárien says.

"What about a captain's?" the soldier says, his voice audibly constricting.

Eldárien turns to look at him, startled.

"What are you suggesting?"

"I suggest nothing."

"But surely you do?"

"Well...I mean only to ask: you do not truly intend to follow through with the command given to us? To slaughter the enemy even if they surrender and to chase them to the death are they to flee?"

"They would do the same to us were they given the chance. There is no place for such mercy with an enemy like this," says Eldárien. "Do not make me regret sharing my orders with my subordinates in this manner. I have always acted in the belief that even the lowest foot-soldier should be privy to the commands given to his leaders, since in battle they shall all stand side by side. I have esteemed your advice and have often relied on the joint planning of all the men." Eldárien pauses and sighs deeply. "But if it leads to this, I am capable of leading with a sterner hand, and of demanding strict obedience."

"That is neither your mind nor your heart, captain," says the soldier. "Surely you do not mean that?"

Eldárien does not immediately reply, touched by the soldier's courage and by the strength of emotion with which he speaks.

"I..." he begins, but falters. "I too have questions, Léric. But I have professed an oath. We all have. We have no choice but to obey."

The image changes again, and Eldárien finds himself, two days later, standing upon the battlefield, sword and shield in hand. The cries of battle falter around him as the last survivors fall at the edge of his company's swords. Victory has come, and the threat has been annihilated, utterly crushed under the superior might of the Empire. Before long, surely, the lands of Tel-Velfána too will surrender and allow themselves to be incorporated into the order that the Emperor brings to all the lands that accept his reign. And yet the question lingers: What will remain of these lands after they have surrendered? Who will survive to accept such a reign, and of those who survive, what of their own culture, their own way of life, their own traditions?

As he looks across the battlefield, stained with blood and littered with the

bodies of men from both armies, these thoughts cross Eldárien's mind, but he tries his utmost to suppresses them. "To me!" he cries, as loudly as he can. "We are victorious. Let us gather what we can for our uses and bury all the dead." After these words he lowers his gaze, drawing out a cloth from his belt and wiping the blood from his sword, then sheathing it in its scabbard at his waist. As he does so, his eyes fall upon a figure on the ground near to his feet. Eyes stare unseeing upward, and blood stains the lips and the nose and trickles down the cheek. An arrow lies deep in the man's chest, right at the junction of his mail shirt. Death was certain, but not immediate. The man is Léric.

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Eldárien follows the river for four days before it turns to the north and separates from the path, which continues westward, and therefore so does he. On the sixth day into his journey, therefore, the water in his skin is depleted, and he seeks for a means to refill it. To his fortune he comes in the latter part of the day upon a house in the woods. It is not the first habitation that he has seen buried deep in the forest, but it is the first that he has had any cause to visit. The path winds around the curve of a hill and cuts its way through a thick grove of trees before passing along the edge of a clearing. He almost passes by himself without noticing anything, since the house is on the far side of the clearing, about fifty yards off, and largely concealed by the sloping land of the hill and a few willows whose weeping branches shelter it like drapery. He intends to pass on without stopping until he sees near to the house, glistening softly in the light cast through the trees, a small pond, and on its bank squats a man, fishing or washing perhaps, though Eldárien cannot clearly tell from this distance. He decides to approach and make himself known, even if only to receive a little water for the journey. And so he does, calling out "Hail, friend," as he draws near enough for his footsteps to be heard.

The man raises his head, surprised but not startled, and then sets down what was in his hands—a small cage woven roughly of branches—and stands. "Greetings," he replies. "What brings a traveler along this rarely-trodden way? The main road is not far from here, but this trail is small and ill-used, for it goes east only to the sea and westward to the highlands with little or nothing to see."

"I pass from Ígny to the west of which you speak," Eldárien says. "My business, I assure you, is one of peace."

"Sadly, not many who travel in the wilderness far from the main roads travel in peace. Exiles, wildmen, and brigands—criminals of all sorts—make the woods and the hills their home. And they prey on the weaker, who seek only a simple life among nature's bounty. Could you tell me a bit more about your business and your reason for approaching a man in the wilderness? Only then may I decide whether to aid you on your way, for I must assume that is

why we speak."

"You are correct in the latter," Eldárien says, now standing only ten or fifteen feet from the man, and trying to manifest nothing but gentleness and kindness in his bearing. "I am deeply acquainted with the ways of the criminals who live in the wilderness, as they destroyed my home in years long past. From Fálstead I hail, though it has gone decades hence, though I wish now to return to find what I may."

The man seems almost to soften at hearing this, for Eldárien's words are clearly spoken with the simplicity and transparency of truth. Nonetheless, he asks, "And what do you seek hence?"

"I seek clarity regarding the rumors of beasts of darkness arising from the earth, and hope to discover aught that I can do."

The man bows his head for a moment, as if in acquiescence. It is evident that his trust is not blindly given, but he also clearly understands that refusing blind trust is not the same as yielding to blind fear and turning away a peaceful man in suspicion that he may be a dangerous one.

"I only approach," Eldárien continues, "because I have run short on water and know not how near the closest spring or river is, or if rain will come soon. If you grant me that, I shall be on my way."

"You speak kindly," the man says with a smile, "and your bearing is enough to win my trust. I think I shall give you more than that. Come, let us sit that you may rest a while. I will put food and drink before you and make sure that you are provisioned for the journey when you depart."

With a bow of his head not unlike that previously proffered by the man, Eldárien replies, "I accept your hospitality gratefully."

The man picks up the cage that he had set down upon Eldárien's approach, and the latter sees that it contains a catch of inland crabs crawling around and nipping their pincers. The man raises the cage, as if to exhibit them, and says, "A deep underground spring wells up here and nourishes many little creatures. The water is also clear, cool, and rich in flavor. That is why I settled here."

The inside of the house is small and dark, yet cozy, with wood-paneled walls and a thatched roof on thick beams of pine. A small fire burns gently in the hearth and casts rays of red-orange on the walls and the objects in the room. There are two windows, although the wooden shutters on them are currently closed and latched. Two beds rest near to one another in the corner, and beside one of them a chair of woven grasses, and on the other side of the room is a kitchen and pantry area with boxes, barrels, and other storage, and a large basin of water. A ladder also descends into a square hole in the floor near the pantry, likely leading to a cellar under the building. The man grabs another chair that sits against the wall and situates it near the hearth. He

gestures for Eldárien to sit while he retrieves the woven chair from beside the bed and sets it opposite his guest. Then he sits down as well.

"My name is Ródric Farâël," he says. "It is a pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure is mine. My name is Eldárien Illómiel, son of Bierand of Fálstead, though the latter part you already know."

"I hail originally from Melendýa," Ródric says, "but now, as you see, I live in the territory of the Galapteäni. In fact I have long had my home in this region of Telmérion. Here I was married and here bore a child. So if in blood we hail from different clans and diverse places, by the location of our homes we are close to clansmen."

"I set little stock by the clan in which one may happen to be born," Eldárien replies, "though I receive from your words a sense of welcome and encouragement. I believe that is your intent in speaking thus."

"Indeed it is. But if you set stock not by one's clan of origin, I wonder, wherein do you find the measure of a man?"

"In the past, a clan greatly influenced one's way of life, as clan life and custom was essential to the fabric of our society. Then, the divisions were vividly real—if at times exaggerated and not calling for the bloodshed that they excused—but now it seems these divisions border on becoming little more than a name."

"That is true up to a point, though I would not agree entirely," Ródric says. "The Empire has changed the face of Telmérion, for good or ill, but much of our native diversity still persists. And a man always belongs both to his own people and region and simultaneously to all peoples and places. But come, we border on speaking of politics which could cause division between us before we have even become acquainted. What is your answer to my question?"

"The measure of a man?" asks Eldárien.

"Precisely."

"The measure of man comes from his home. That is the first thing to which my thoughts draw me. We are formed by our home—or by our homelessness. I myself have experienced both. For my first seventeen years the village of Fálstead was the cradle of my life and my growth. For the rest, homelessness and wandering were the nature of my longing, which birthed a growth of a different kind." Eldárien pauses and thinks for a moment before continuing. "But a man may choose his home, if his previous home was lost or if he only seeks to make a new one his own. And this, even more than one's origin, reveals the measure of a man. It lies in the home that he chooses, the home that he himself may create, and also that for which he is willing to fight."

"You speak openly to one who is nearly a stranger," Ródric says with a soft

laugh.

"It is you who asked the question," remarks Eldárien.

"Aye, and you spoke with wisdom, as long as it is understood that the deepest home is not a place alone, but the heart of loving and being loved. I am glad that I have welcomed you into my home, who have such a reverence for home." With this, Ródric stands and says, "In fact, there is something concerning that about which I wish to speak. But first, let me offer what I promised and set before you food and drink. Only then shall we continue our conversation."

He then brings out bread and wildberry jam and places it before Eldárien. While his guest begins to eat, he sets two pots on the hearth and rekindles the flames within it, throwing on a few more logs. In one pot, he drops some herbs of various kinds, and in the other, he puts the crabs that he recently caught. Then, taking some bread and jam for himself, he sits down again. The two men sit together in silence for a while, eating and listening to the crackling of the flames. When the water comes to a boil, Ródric pours them both cups of steaming tisane. Only then does he begin to speak.

"You may have noticed," Ródric begins, "that I am alone. Neither my wife nor my child are here. Of course, there is nothing odd about that, at my age. My wife, you see, passed on into Meléngthar's embrace a half decade past. My son, Rórlain, however...it is about him that I wish to speak." Ródric shifts in his chair and gazes absentmindedly into the fire, taking a sip from his tisane. "You see, he lives here with me and has for most of his life. He is about your age, I suppose, or perhaps some years younger. But not two days hence, he disappeared while hunting in the woods."

When Ródric does not immediately continue, Eldárien asks, "He simply disappeared? Did you find a trace of where he may have gone?"

"Sadly, I have," answers Ródric. "Or rather, I have, though the trace is sorrowful. Before that, however, allow me to give you a little information that may or may not be news to you. The beasts in the woods, you see, have been acting strangely of late. Not the small ones, mind you, but the larger animals, the predators: the bears and the wolves. They have become unusually aggressive and, indeed, unusually strong. It is as if they are possessed by some power that is not their own, and with this power, an unknown rage. There are many examples, numerous small encounters over the previous months, perhaps the last year, which reveal this to be the case. But it seems to be progressing, this change in the animals, I mean. Only last week, a bear came into the clearing by our home, crying out in anger as if it were wounded or in the very act of defending itself. But when we looked out of the windows, we saw nothing that could be causing its rage and its roaring. We waited a while for it to move on, but instead of departing, it began to destroy the shed that lies

near to the house, tearing at it with its claws as if it were an enemy or a threat. Suffice it to say that we were startled.

"It is then that Rórlain grabbed a hunting bow and lifted the pane on the window. A fine shot he is, and he pierced the bear directly in the eye. But to our surprise and fear, it did not die. It did not even fall to the ground. No, it did not even flee. It turned to attack us, rearing up on its hind legs and swiping at the air, screaming out in a horrid voice, a bear's voice but filled with something terrifying, something that I have never before heard. It then charged, and my son loosed three more shots, one piercing the heart, before the bear finally fell to the earth and died with a great echoing cry...and that, only a few feet from the open window. Afraid to eat the meat of such an animal or even to make use of the skins and fur—fearing it either diseased or cursed—we buried it in the woods.

"But that is not all. The day that Rórlain disappeared, in the morning before he left for his hunt, he brought me out to the bear's burial place and showed me: the grave was empty, dug up, with earth cast this way and that not by a shovel but as if by some beast with great claws, larger than any wolf or bear or beast that I know to exist. I should have been concerned then that something was amiss and forbade him to depart on the hunt, but I did not do so. I suspect there is some greater beast in the forest that feasts upon the flesh of the others, if this was its purpose for digging it up. Whether this is a new creature only lately come into the area or a long-time resident, I know not. For never before have we buried what we have slain, but taken it for our sustenance and well-being, as is only proper. But even so, if the beast were lately nearby and causing the bear itself to act so oddly—if indeed the two things are related—then I suspect it may have something to do with the disappearance of my son."

Eldárien receives all of this in silence, with heart both grieved and unsettled. After the old man's words are concluded, he says, "I am greatly sorry for the losses you have suffered—of your wife and now your son. Though I pray the latter may yet return to you."

"Thank you. As do I."

"In which direction did your son depart on his hunt?"

"To the northwest. We are not far from the highlands, and many elk live along the edge of the forest. We usually walk northwest until coming to a small river or stream—the first we come upon—and follow this to the place where the forest meets the highlands."

"I would like to offer my aid in finding your son," Eldárien says.

"It is too great a request for me to make of you, and too dangerous, I fear," Ródric sighs.

"Surely you share what has happened not only to let me know of your

situation but also because you wish for my aid?"

"I do wish for aid, and you are the only person whom at present I can rely upon. But..."

"No, please. I offer my assistance freely. I wish to help you discover the whereabouts of your son—though I warn you that I may find something that brings greater grief, or confirms it."

"I understand and expect as much," responds Ródric, "but still, I wish to know. And if there is any chance my son still lives, then I wish everything to be done to save him. I cannot just leave things as they are. I myself have traveled far both days since he left and have found nothing. And I am old and weary from many years of life. There is little I can do, and a long journey through the wilderness on a tenuous search is beyond me."

"Then I am glad I came by when I did."

"As am I. Your presence has given me again a glimmer of hope."

"I will do all in my power to bring you a conclusion to your search, for good or ill."

"It shall be good simply to know what has become of my son, whatever the outcome," Ródric says, "though clearly my heart is torn with worry for him, and I wish for him to return in safety and wholeness."

Chapter Seven
In the Darkness

Since the day inclines already toward evening, Ródric suggests that Eldárien wait until the morning to set out in search of Rórlain. And though Eldárien is anxious to begin the search, fearing that, if it is not too late already, it will be soon, he understands the prudence of the recommendation. If anything, whatever tracks there are that could give him a hint of Rórlain's location would be almost certainly missed during the darkness of night. Therefore, he accepts waiting but insists that he will leave at first light, before the sun even crests the horizon in the east. Ródric provides Eldárien a hearty meal that evening, after darkness has already fallen and the forest sleeps in deep silence, punctuated only by the call of nocturnal birds—owls and doves—the occasional howling of wolves, and the almost inaudible music of a light wind caressing the trees. After they have both eaten, Ródric replenishes Eldárien's provisions with dry food goods and also refills his waterskin, promising more upon his return.

"I hope to be gone no more than a day or two, but I will do whatever is possible to find your son and bring him back to you," Eldárien says, receiving

the provisions and squatting down next to his pack, beside which his traveling cloak is rolled up. He fits them into the bag, rearranging the other objects already within it to do so, and then ties it closed again.

"I appreciate your willingness to help," Ródric replies quietly, almost shyly, "but do not let yourself be excessively put out by me."

"Currently our intentions align, and helping you is the best way to continue pursuing my own aim," explains Eldárien, tying the waterskin, now filled, to his pack. "But even if they did not, a human life is at stake here. I could not pass by without doing the little that I can do."

"If only more men of our time were like you, perhaps Telmérion would be in a very different state."

"Like me?" Eldárien looks up at Ródric, and his eyes speak of deep hurt, a reservoir of pain that keeps him from receiving Ródric's words as a compliment, but which also shields him from the slightest thought of vainglory. He is aware of standing under an infinite debt that he can never repay, such that even if he were to spend an eternity doing good to make up for it, he could never fill in the slightest portion of what is owed. No amount of his own goodness could ever atone for the evil that he has previously committed. This he knows.

While the two men look at one another in silence, Ródric startled and confused by the depth of pain in Eldárien's eyes, the latter becomes aware of what he is feeling and, with a sigh, asks, "Am I only doing good in the attempt to equalize my balance sheet, or even with the presumption of turning the scales toward goodness?"

"Pardon?" Ródric asks, not following the train of thought, since he was unable to discern what occurred beneath the murky surface of those eyes, in the depths within.

"Forgive me. It is nothing," says Eldárien and he lowers his eyes again. "I did not even mean to speak that aloud." Another moment of dense silence passes and then Eldárien rises to his feet and says, "Tell me about your life here. How is it that you sustain your living alone in the woods like this?"

"It is quite simple, actually," replies Ródric, relieved for the change of topic and the easing of the heavy atmosphere that had descended between them. "Rórlain and I make our living hunting and trapping, mostly, with a bit of gardening on the side. And you already saw the spring. As I already said, the water is excellent; and as long as we do not over fish, it provides us also with some supplemental fish every year."

"What about your other needs, those beyond basic nourishment?"

"Both of us can sew and weave well enough to make or mend our own clothes, though my wife was far more skilled in that regard," answers Ródric, and now it is his eyes that reveal a hidden depth, a deep intermingling of love,

grief, and nostalgia: the experience of missing someone who was so close as to be woven into the very fabric of one's own heart but now is gone. "Yes, she made little masterpieces. At least, that is what I always told her and what I have always believed. It was her joy to do it, to participate in our lives not only in a 'woman's work'—which Rórlain and I both do now on our own and are no less men for it—but above all in providing for us something beautiful, were it only a pair of gloves or a belt or a cloak."

Eldárien smiles at this and watches as Ródric pauses and lets memories carry him in their train for a few moments. Then he stirs himself back to the present, "Ah, I was telling you about our way of life. My apologies, I allowed myself to be carried away."

"It is no problem. Please, continue."

"Well," says Ródric, trying to pick up on the thread he had lost, "it is a simple life, if a hard one, particularly during the winter months. We stock up as much as we can before the first snow, since, depending on the year, that snow lasts, at least in its substance, until the first thaw four or five months later. But I assume you know that well enough. After all, your childhood home was higher in the mountains than we are now."

"Indeed." replies Eldárien. "We were at the base of the three greatest peaks in Telmérion, and oft the entire valley in which my village lay was buried under a thick layer of snow from early winter to the first weeks of spring."

"I have never been to Fálstead. What is it like? Or, I apologize, what *was* it like?"

"The area is forested quite heavily, much like here if a little less dense. But were one to travel even less than a day out, the elevation would rise quite quickly. As you crest the hills, you come to the taiga, sloping up the sides of the mountains, until the trees themselves are left behind, unable to endure the cold, and are replaced first by sparse grasses and heather, and then by rugged stone. That, at least, is the landscape of Fálstead and its surrounds. The climate was frigid during the winter, as I said, but in fact the valley was usually spared the bitterest of winds and even, at least as I imagined to myself, kept warm by the embrace of the land. Perhaps I was just equating the warmth of the earth with the warmth of home, or rather, letting this latter warmth color and saturate my experience of the former."

"Not such a bad thing to do, I suppose," Ródric says, with a glint in his eye.

"I suppose not," Eldárien agrees, smiling slightly in response. And then, changing the subject, "But that is long passed now. What about you? What was your reason for departing from home?"

Ródric lowers his gaze and remains silent for a moment, and Eldárien quickly interjects, saying, "I do not insist! If you wish to share, then I happily

receive. But I do not want you to say anything you wish not to say."

"You are kind," Ródric replies, "yet you need not worry in that regard. I need not say much, as some things need only a few words, and much is said by these few. I left because I was fleeing from danger—or fleeing from myself, or fleeing from the law, whichever best expresses it. All three were true in their own way. I grew up in poverty and fell in with a gang who fancied themselves brigands. Bandits. Relihím. To pass from loneliness to a group of people sharing a common life day in and day out; to pass from hunger and poverty to sustenance, even at times to wealth, however ill-gotten; it was a welcome change for me, and I relished it. I was young then. Young and stupid. When I became a little older and a little wiser, it became clear that the only way out was to leave entirely, beyond the borders of our lands. The Relihím do not take kindly to those who wish to part from them. I had met Gníssa while in the group, and we fled together. It was not long before we were wed and made our home here. That is the story in short."

"And many years have passed since then," Eldárien replies with tenderness in his voice, "and you have not gone back on that choice."

"Sometimes, in the beginning, I had twisted thoughts of returning, of going back to all the gains to be had in such a life," Ródric admits. "But that was only in the beginning. Not only did love for Gníssa carry me through and, a growing love for our land—and then before long a love for our son—but also an encounter with those very ones with whom I had once identified myself. Or rather, it was an encounter with more of their kind, since these were not the same group whom I had joined."

"They came here?" Eldárien asks. "I had wondered how you could live in the woods without being troubled by those who make raiding in the wild their profession."

"A small, poverty-laden homestead such as this is usually left alone, as they go for finer pickings," replies Ródric. "We have been untroubled all these years, save once." He sighs and closes his eyes for a moment in remembrance before continuing. "That was the first and only time that I have killed. Two men. Before the rest fled. And I am glad that they did, for, though there were only five of them, I could not have resisted them all. Rórlain was still young at the time, and I could not expect either he or Gníssa to stand up against these men of the wild. I suppose it was this awareness that set a fire deep within me. I protected them, and that is the only time I have been called on to protect those I love in such a way."

Eldárien nods silently as he receives these words, and a moment of mute recognition passes between the two men before he says, "I will do all that I can to bring your son back, Ródric. If he is beyond your power now to protect, I will with my own attempt to make your reach a little longer and a bit

stronger."

Ródric smiles a heavy smile, mixed more with sadness than with gladness, though marked with true gratitude, and then he presses his hands together as if in decision. "What say you to calling it a night? You shall rise early, before the sun, and I wish to see you off. Let us both get some rest."

† † †

Despite his exhaustion, Eldárien does not rest well, passing in and out of sleep until, in the early hours of the morning, he rises from bed and sits staring into the fire. He places a few small logs upon it and tends them until the fire burns brightly again. Try as he might, he cannot cause his mind to stop traveling in circles, inspecting and re-inspecting the events of the previous weeks, and in particular the conversation of last night, trying to find some hint or clue about the path before him or about the precise nature of the mysterious burden weighing so heavily upon his heart. Ever since he returned to Telmérion, it has been as if a yoke has been placed on his heart, as if some great evil has settled upon him, not his own but felt as if it were his own. Or perhaps it is his own, entirely his own, nothing more than the deep awareness of the blood on his hands and the pollution in his heart, and his fear of being in the future what he regrets being in the past. He cannot make any clear sense of his emotions at present, and no amount of thought seems able to bring order to his interior turmoil. He knows that thinking in circles will not bring an answer, but he knows equally well, from long experience, that he cannot simply stop thinking. He has always been pensive to a fault, his father used to affectionately joke (with the emphasis on the affection), and though such thoughtfulness has served him well many a time, it has also made him experience the crises of life, the dilemmas, choices, and turning-points with more anxiety and fear than they warrant. He cannot seem to learn the lesson —in his heart of hearts and in the wellsprings of his mind—that only living itself can ultimately answer the questions raised by living, even if thought has a place in discerning the path ahead and cradling all of life in the bosom of universal goodness and truth. And even then, when it comes to concrete circumstances and moments of difficult decision, sometimes only the next step can be seen, or even a half or quarter step. Indeed, sometimes one simply walks in trust without seeing or understanding, and it is only after the fact that the beauty and meaning in the path dawns upon one's interior vision.

The only way to gain more light, then, is to take another step, and then another, and another, in the trust that truth lies not in one's own making or control, or even in one's own comprehension; rather, truth enfolds and permeates life without ceasing, and one's own personal history is inscribed on its fabric and written within its folds. Realizing that his thoughts have carried him this far, Eldárien smiles to himself. So the circle broke after all, if only for

a moment? Just as he feels his heart surge in readiness to take the next step—a step into the unknown—he hears a voice behind him. "You are awake already?"

"I am," he replies. "I could not sleep."

"I hope you will not tire on the journey," Ródric says and, appearing at his side, sits down.

"And I hope that the journey will be a short one, and that I will find Rórlain quickly."

"It feels like too much to hope," Ródric whispers, "that such a thing could happen. Is it possible, Eldárien, to hope too much?"

Pausing to reflect upon the question, he replies, "I cannot believe so. If hope is rightly placed, it cannot be too strong or too firm."

"And how do I know if my hope is rightly placed?"

"I do not know," answers Eldárien quietly.

After this short exchange, the two men sit silently side by side, gazing into the dancing flames of the fire, orange and red touched with yellow, with a blazing center of blue, and listen to it crackling and popping as it consumes the wood and transforms it into living flame. Time passes quickly in this way, and in what seems like only a few moments (though it is actually over half an hour), Ródric stirs and rises to his feet. He walks to one of the windows and opens the shutters.

"Look," he says as he directs his gaze out of the window, "the first light appears on the horizon. A pale and grim dawn awaits."

Without delay, Eldárien puts on his outer clothing, pulls on his boots, and wraps his cloak tightly around his shoulders. After securing his pack, he turns to Ródric, assuring him, "I will make all haste."

The old man nods and says, "But you forget this," and turns and lifts Eldárien's greatsword from where it rests against the wall.

"I hope that I shall not need it," Eldárien replies, receiving the sword and securing it in its place on his back, "but that is in this case perhaps an ill-placed hope."

"You have the look of a seasoned warrior," Ródric observes, not knowing the depth of truth in his words. "Many carry swords in our world and many die at the edge of them. Even though you are the former, may you not be the latter."

"Thank you," says Eldárien, "but it would also please me more than anything that the blade I carry never knows what it is to be stained by blood."

"What about the blood of the beast that has taken my son, if that is what it comes to?"

"Another asked me a similar question not long ago. And my answer to you is the same: that, I would not hesitate to do."

Ródric lingers a moment longer, looking at Eldárien, a subtly veiled anxiety in his eyes, as if by his gaze he wishes to impart unto Eldárien a secret favor or blessing by which his endeavor may not go ill but come to a good conclusion. "Actually," he says at last, stirred from his thoughts, "it may be good to take this with you. It is not our only one, so keep it with you wherever you go as one of your own possessions."

With these words, he takes a short hunting bow from where it hangs on the wall and, with a quiver full of arrows, gives it to Eldárien. He receives it with a grateful bow of the head and then turns and steps out the door into the cold morning air.

He looks about the clearing, on which a deep mist lingers, curling and whispering among the trees which stand stark as dark silhouettes against the gradually increasing light of day. The upper parts of the mist glow gray in the early morning light while the lower parts are veiled in deep shadow, untouched yet by the coming of day. The grass is wet with dew, and the trees themselves drip with moisture, an audible plopping of heavy drops of water from leaf to blade, from canopy to earth. There is not even the slightest hint of wind, not a sigh among the trees, not a whisper among the plants of the wood. Eldárien draws in a deep breath of the fresh morning air, cold but not quite freezing, and starts his journey to the northwest.

Why is everyone placing weapons into my hands, he thinks as he walks, *when what I desire most is to leave them all behind?*

In only a matter of minutes, the first rays of the sun crest the horizon in the east and cast shimmers of light through the dense fog, turning the gray and colorless wall into a sheet of white and crystal. Eldárien walks quickly but attentively, scanning the ground and the trees as he passes, looking for any clue or hint which would direct his hunt. The fog hinders him, as he can see no more than ten or fifteen feet in front of him, and the trees enshroud him like ancient sentinels stepping forth from the gloom, though it is he who approaches them while they stand unmoving for ages, rooted in the silent earth while reaching their branches to the sky, abiding, as all trees do, in the wordless watch of ceaseless vigilance which is also a dance of wind and sky and earth, of growth and fruit-bearing and slumber, in a continual cycle.

As Eldárien walks, first light passes to dawn, and dawn to day. Soon it is midmorning, and the sun is high in the sky behind his back. The mist has almost entirely dissipated, consumed by the rays of the sun, though the grass is still damp, hidden as it is under the canopy of trees and rooted in the wet earth. And the air remains cold, even though the sky is almost entirely cloudless, with only a few wisps painted pale against a canvas of deep blue. The forest unchanging, the trees thick, the foliage full in the first blossoming of the late spring, and the land undulating gently as the hills rise and fall, all

accompany Eldárien on his journey. The first significant change in scenery he comes upon is a narrow river threading its way through the woods, the water fast and gurgling against the rocks of its bed. It would be easy to cross, as in most places the stream is only three or four feet across, and relatively shallow, boulders breaking the surface in places and creating billowing trails of white foam across the surface of the water. But rather than crossing the stream, he follows along beside it, since it flows forth from the northwest, the direction in which he wishes to travel.

He continues in this manner past midday, keeping the river to his right, closer or nearer as may be, as it weaves back and forth along the path it has carved out over the course of time, between tree and stone, hill and dell. Only when the sun is high overhead and beginning to dip westward does the landscape begin to change. The density of the trees begins to lessen, and the undulating rise and fall of the hills gives way to a steady upward slope, quite steep though marked with numerous crevices rutted into its surface, with rocks littering its sides. Eldárien follows the slope for a good distance, for perhaps half an hour, until it crests and reveals a wide expanse of rugged plain stretching before him. He stands now at the meeting of the hills and the highlands, the edge of the forest and the start of the tundra. This tundra, at least at this time of year, is not icy or snow-laden but rather cloaked in brown and gray heather and also budding forth with varied flowers of yellow, blue, and white, some of which first peek from the earth underneath the snow and appear from it as it melts in the great thaw of spring. With the prolonged cold of a long-clinging winter, however, the richness of the springtime is subdued, and the flowers are few, some in full bloom and some still buds yet to open, even after the snow has bid its farewell

Here Eldárien pauses in his trek to the northwest and explores his surroundings for any clue that would aid him. And such is not long in coming, as only a couple hundred yards to the south he finds the carcass of an elk lying among the grass, with an arrow still embedded in its flesh. Eldárien removes the arrow and inspects it; it is of the same kind as those he has in his own quiver. It is evident that Rórlain shot the elk, but did it flee from him and die without him finding it, or was it here that Rórlain was led aside from his hunt, whether through force or curiosity? It is not likely that the elk fled, Eldárien notes to himself, since the location of the puncture would have killed it quickly, if not instantly. What then? He rises to his feet and scans the landscape surrounding, within many yards of the elk, then down on the hillside to the east, and north and south along the plains, until at last, returning closer to the elk, he finds markings in the grass shortly to the west, which he had missed upon first inspection. The grass is trampled and the earth kicked up, as if here some sort of confrontation occurred. The marks of boots are

visible, whereas until this point in his journey he has seen few, a stray print in a spot of mud or in soft bare soil, and none since leaving the forest. But here the prints are more vivid and clearly defined, because the grass itself in places is torn up and the soil exposed. With this, Eldárien's heart sinks. The fears borne by Ródric and himself seem to have been realized, as whatever beast had torn up the earth to remove the carcass of the bear also seems to have found Rórlain and, judging from the markings in the earth, to have attacked him. But where has he gone now, and what has befallen him?

Finding no body nor sign of blood, Eldárien allows himself to cling still to hope that he may yet be alive. Stirred by this hope, Eldárien attempts to follow the tracks away from the site of the tussle and realizes, gratefully, that this is not difficult to accomplish. The grass is bent and broken under heavy footsteps trailing almost directly to the west. But what kind of creature would have trampled the earth so easily? Something large and without delicacy or lightness in its walk or its bearing. This appears to be a creature that—unlike the other creatures living in the region, which respect the environment that feeds them and leave almost no trace behind them of their passing—crushes and mars what it touches.

After following the trail for the better part of an hour, Eldárien comes to a great rift in the earth, looking as if it were cut open with a massive blade wielded by giants or split by an earthquake ages ago. The crevice's appearance is surprising, not because of the texture of the rippling stone walls or the floor, but because there is no clear indication as to how such a rift came to be; it certainly was not carved by the flow of water, as there is no point of outflow. It appears rather like a monstrous mouth gaping open in the face of the earth, a rift caused by some secret subterranean shifts that rippled to the surface. The path of enigmatic footprints and torn earth that he has been following leads him into the ravine, and it is not difficult to enter, as the land slopes gradually down until rock walls dressed in tufts of grass and clinging vines stand tall to his right and his left. The air here is dense and still and deathly quiet—not with the silence that sings, with the silence that opens up a space in which the heart can dilate and expand, but with a silence that is oppressive, even suffocating. Almost unconsciously, the thought comes to Eldárien, and he finds himself whispering, "This is a place of death." But the sound of his voice dies on his lips, as if snuffed out or consumed by the oppressive air around him.

Fear stirs unbidden in his heart and he tries to suppress it, but he cannot help that his pulse quickens and a knot forms in his stomach and a lump in his throat. Cautiously he moves forward along the floor of the ravine, staying close to the wall on his right in case anything is looking along the narrow passage created by the crevice to see signs of movement. As he walks, bones

of various animals begin to litter the floor—those animals that were unlucky enough to be the food of whatever beast lives in this rift in the earth. Eldárien tries to shake off the thought flooding his imagination of a human body lying among the other creatures, lifeless or even reduced, like the animals, to nothing but skeletal remains.

And the air grows dark, as if even the normal amount of sunlight that would filter into the ravine between the fissure of rock above him is hindered, forbidden from entering this dark and cheerless place. But Eldárien continues to move forward in the dim half-light, as if walking through a land in which all is shadow, all is shade, with no substance. He keeps one hand on the wall, taking courage from the cold and solid stone under his touch, proof that this is not a world of shadow and illusion only but of truth, even if the darkness seeks to veil it. Progressing in this manner, he at last comes to a place where the wall to his right gives way, and he almost falls over as he reaches forward and clutches nothing but air. But he catches his balance and stands still, listening and looking, trying to discern shapes in this gloom and to hear any sounds that will give form to his disorientation. An uncanny and unnatural air blows upon his face from somewhere to his right, where he had expected a wall to be. Perhaps this air, this subterranean breathing, finds its source in an underground cavern, as it is not unlike the deep breath of the barrow of Séra Galáptes, though it feels more malevolent in nature, if such a thing is possible. And if Eldárien is to descend even deeper into earth and shadow, how shall he navigate in this twilight of light and form without becoming utterly lost? Then a thought occurs to him, and he kneels on the ground for a moment and loosens his pack from his shoulders. He removes from the bundle that was given to him by Mórlof the oil and cloth that it contains, and he feels around on the ground for a stick, a fallen branch, or something that he could use to make a torch. But even as he does so he knows that it is not a feasible search. There are no trees in the ravine, nor even on the surface above it.

After kneeling in the silence thinking for a long moment, with the chill wind blowing against his face, Eldárien stirs and quietly unsheathes his sword. At the end of the blade he ties the cloth, tightly so it will not slip away, and douses it in the oil. It will burn for a time, but since there is no wood to serve as extra fuel and to sustain the flame, this sword-torch will not last as long as he would wish. This done, he then, as quietly as he can, strikes stones together until sparks fall on the cloth and ignite it. The end of the sword then bursts into flame. He rises and hurries ahead, the sword extended in front of him. The shadowy, formless darkness still hems him in on every side, and the light of the torch seems frail and weak as it tries in vain to dispel the impenetrable gloom. Nonetheless it gives him just enough light to navigate by—at least four, perhaps six feet in front of him, though beyond that is shadow. He

stays close to the wall still, now more for navigation than for secrecy, and finds the ground beneath him descending rapidly. Having turned to the right from the main body of the ravine, he is, he suspects, entering some kind of side passage or cavern carved out of the earth either by nature or by beast. He cannot tell which, as when he looks up he sees neither roof nor sky, but only shadow, a lifeless gray quickly descending into formless blackness.

The light of the makeshift torch flickers as the cloth is gradually consumed, but it keeps burning, and Eldárien presses on. Soon the ground beneath him levels out. Then the wall he has been using to aid in his progress once again falls away beneath his hand. He takes a hesitant step forward and raises the sword high, scanning the shadows with his eyes. The distinct sense comes to him that he has stepped into a wide chamber, a vast open space, in which lies also the source of the shadows that surround him. He pauses, holds his breath, and listens, and beyond the sound of the torch he hears another sound that constricts his throat: breathing, deep, raspy breathing as of a creature much larger than a man, larger indeed than any creature that Eldárien has ever encountered.

He feels an urge to turn back, to flee to the realm of light from which he came, but he resists it, hoping that nearby is to be found one—still living—who also wishes to return to the light and cannot do so on his own. So, mustering all the courage that he can find within himself, slim and frail though it may be, Eldárien begins walking again, even if his walk now is more like creeping, with as little sound as possible, toward the sound of breathing. But the torch! What good will sneaking be if he is carrying a burning light that will immediately reveal his location? Yet what wisdom lies in extinguishing the torch when he will then be left defenseless against whatever makes the cavern its home, a creature which most likely can see in the darkness with no sources of light at all. And yet he sees no choice but to leave the light he holds so as to avoid detection, and he kicks the burning cloth from the tip of the blade and lets it fall to the ground, where it continues to burn. He leaves it as it is in the hopes that it may give him some small illumination, even at a distance, as he walks into complete darkness: an atmosphere of both secrecy and terror. Yet without hesitating any more, and with naked blade held before him in both hands, Eldárien moves forward, eyes squinted in the effort to see and ears attentive to the slightest sound.

The creature slumbers. This is the awareness that comes to him immediately as he approaches a massive shape in the darkness, a shape that takes form before him in the dim light flickering from the flames behind him, with thick skin wrinkled and dark, appearing hard like reinforced leather or perhaps like stone itself. The shape rises and falls to the sound of the breathing, which reverberates loudly in the enveloping stillness. The thought stirs in Eldárien's

mind to plunge his sword deep into the flesh of the sleeping beast, and to do so repeatedly until the breath is no more. But uncertain what effect this would truly have, he instead draws back and makes his way quietly around the creature, searching for the one whom he came to find and, if possible, to save. As he walks and searches, the word forms unbidden in his mind: *eöten.* Could this creature truly be an eöten, one of the ancient monsters of old, fashioned of the very darkness in the time before memory, and bane of mortal existence upon the earth? Trolls they have often been called in the common tongue, though there are many kinds, from twisted mockeries of the human figure, greater in size and twisted in disproportionate shape, to creatures resembling the animals but morphed beyond recognition and yet in this alteration made stronger, more deadly and more difficult to slay. Eldárien does not know if it is even possible to permanently slay one of these monstrosities, though there are rumors of terrible wars in the past where men fought against great numbers of these beasts. At this thought, Eldárien is glad that he has stayed his hand and withheld the urge to strike. And another thought immediately follows this: he realizes how immeasurably fortunate it was for him to happen upon the beast while it slept, rather than in its waking moments.

Encouraged by this thought, he explores the cavern and, after only a little time, comes upon the figure of a man slumped against a great boulder, chin resting against his chest, which rises and falls softly as he breathes. Reaching out and placing his hands upon the man, trying to raise him up, Eldárien realizes, to his grief, that he is tied by the wrists with large, rough ropes to the boulder against which he leans. Setting down his sword, Eldárien tries to untie the knots that bind the man, but finds that they are too tight, obviously fastened by hands of inhuman strength. So he picks up his blade again and tries cutting the rope, first pulling at it, then sawing at it, in the effort to loose its hold on the man he came to save, if Rórlain this truly be. But this proves to be of no avail, and just as Eldárien begins to lose hope, he hears a voice speak. He knows not whether it resounds within him, within his own mind and heart, or whether it reaches him from without, though in either case he experiences it as an unbidden but not unwelcome guest. And the voice causes no fear and stirs no anxiety. Rather, it reverberates through him like a wave of calm, and Eldárien finds his heart ease into an unexpected peace and relaxation, born of a trust that springs up spontaneously within him from an unknown source.

"Lightborn, fear not. Your path has been seen and marked out."

"Who...who addresses me?" Eldárien finds himself whispering in response.

"My name is Hiliána, guardian of things that live and compassionate guide and companion."

"Hiliána..." Eldárien unconsciously looks around, as if he expects a woman to approach him out of the shadows, glowing with mysterious light. But he sees nothing, even as a light burns brighter within the recesses of his heart.

"You wish to free this man, and you have risked much to come to him, facing the fear that would hold you back. And he will be freed. Be certain of this. But also know that fear much deeper and darkness much blacker await you on your path. But I shall be with you."

Eldárien stands silently for a long moment, his sword held loosely at his side, letting these words echo and take up their home within him, as if time no longer has any importance or, in this conversation, has even ceased to exist. But at last he is stirred by the voice arising again and addressing him, "Raise your blade and cut the ropes. They will fall away easily now. For this sword is henceforth blessed and shall be called the lightbringer, for it will be a scourge of darkness and a servant of light. For the darkness of night is heavy now, descending unto midnight, and even the stars seem to humanity to have grown dim, though they never cease to shine for those who have eyes to see." The voice pauses, as if giving these words time to sink deeply into the soul, and then continues, "You are to stand for the light, little one, for it has chosen you. And know that, however dark it may seem, the promised dawn shall come. Your small part is to be a harbinger of the light in the midst of the night."

With this the voice fades away, and Eldárien feels the sword vibrate in his hand, and suddenly it is shot through with a bluish light, the blade thoroughly illumined and casting a subtle but penetrating light through the surrounding darkness. He raises the sword and with ease cuts away the ropes from the wrists of the man whose form and features he can now easily see in the dim light. Kneeling down beside the man, he looks into his face and recognizes features strikingly resembling those of Ródric, albeit younger. The man has thick, dark hair curling around his ears and a beard of a few inches bristling against his chest, against a leather hunting shirt now torn and streaked with blood. Eldárien lifts him on his back and turns to leave the chamber. But as he raises his eyes, the shadows lessen, as if fleeing to the corners of the room, and he sees before him the sleeping figure of a great beast, humanoid but twisted, with ugly and distorted features, as if evil itself were made flesh and tried to take the guise of a man, though thrice his size and misshapen beyond recognition. And Eldárien knows in this moment, knows that unless he smites this evil, it will continue to plague the land, killing the animals of the forest and the tundra and taking even human life and bringing it to an anguished end in much suffering in a place of shadow and darkness.

And so he steps cautiously forward, Rórlain on his back and the lightbringer in his hands. But he takes only a few steps closer before the beast stirs.

A low groan escapes from its body, and it rises from slumber, stretching and shifting until standing to its full height. In the fear that overtakes him, the air flees from Eldárien's body and he feels faint, as if about to collapse and slip from consciousness. He squats down and allows Rórlain to slide softly to the floor before forcing himself back to his feet and raising his sword before him. *I cannot do this,* he thinks involuntarily, but then, gritting his teeth, *No, I must.*

Evil eyes are laid upon him, and the creature roars with fury. It leaps upon him with incredible agility and strength, and Eldárien is knocked backward onto the cold stone, with Rórlain beside him. The beast raises its hand to bash Eldárien, to crush him into death, but he is able to roll aside with but a split second to spare. Yet as he attempts to rise the creature swipes at him again. Instinctively he raises his sword to parry the blow, and it is thrust from his hands, clattering across the stone, and its light begins to dim. Even as the beast bears down upon him again Eldárien reacts, without the need for further thought, overcome by the need of the moment and by the grace of the light, and thanks to his years of training and experience. Dodging the vicious blows, he ducks away and leaps toward his weapon. Once his hand is laid upon the hilt, he turns his body and, with both hands gripping the sword, thrusts the blade upward into the torso of the beast, pushing with all the strength he can muster. And to his surprise the weapon slides smoothly through the rough and hardened flesh, deep into its chest, and dark blood blacker than the blackest of night streams out from the wound. Light blazes from the sword as the beast recoils, a single scream of anguish escaping from its lips, and then it collapses, not into a heap upon the floor but into dust, as if its very body disintegrates and turns to nothingness upon contact with the light. Witnessing this, Eldárien sighs deeply and sinks again to the earth, exhausted and spent, and his eyes close as he slips from consciousness.

Chapter Eight
Interweaving of Hearts

When Eldárien opens his eyes again, the unnatural darkness is gone, and the cavern in which he finds himself has cleared. It is dim, yes, but not pitch black, with a high sloping roof visible twenty or twenty-five feet overhead and light streaming in from the passage to his left, the passage that he had taken down from the ravine into the lair of the eöten. Aching, he pushes himself to his feet and picks up his greatsword. To his surprise, the blade is completely free of blood or stain, as if the light that had burned through the sword had cleansed the blood along with the purging of the beast. After returning the

sword to its scabbard, Eldárien kneels down over Rórlain, who still lies unconscious, and prepares to lift him onto his back. But before he has the chance to do so, Rórlain groans and opens his eyes. He looks around for a few moments with confusion blurring his gaze, then the shadow passes and his eyes focus upon Eldárien's face. "I-I'm..." he sighs.

"Yes, you are safe," Eldárien whispers.

"No, we must get out of here!" Rórlain begins, his voice tense with fear. "There is a terrible beast in this cave. He carried me here himself."

"I know, I know...but it is gone now."

"Gone? How?"

"It has been expelled," Eldárien says. "We can speak more of that later. But your father is worried about you, and I am sure that the sooner we return to him the better."

"You come from my father?"

"Aye, I do."

"Well then, let us make haste." Rórlain rises to his feet, but his legs falter beneath him, and he would fall again to the ground did not Eldárien catch him under the arms and hold him up.

"We will make what haste we can," Eldárien says, "according to your capacity. But it is better that you recover and we are delayed than that you push yourself too hard all for the sake of a few short moments."

"You do not think that the creature will return?" Rórlain asks, steadying himself and testing his legs again, which this time hold strong.

"No, I do not. Many there are of its kind, but that one has been cast far away, if not dispelled entirely from existence."

"Still...I would feel better if we were at least out of this dungeon before trying to take further rest."

Eldárien laughs softly at this and says in reply, "Yes, I would as well."

With these few words, the two men make their way out of the ravine and back into the light of day, which has now proceeded near to evening, as the sun inclines low on the horizon, soon to dip below the mountains in the west and to cast the landscape around them into shadow.

"Come, let us sit a while," Eldárien says, gesturing to a large flat stone not far from the entrance to the crevice in the earth.

"I can walk now," Rórlain replies. "Should we not hurry back before darkness falls?"

"But you were wounded, were you not?" asks Eldárien. "Does the wound need dressing?"

"Ah...I had hardly noticed," Rórlain sighs, looking down at his torn shirt stained with blood. "It is really nothing. As surprising as it is to me now, I have come away mostly unharmed. These wounds come from the claws of

the beast that pierced me when it carried me from the edge of the wood to its lair. They are little more than flesh wounds."

"Nonetheless, let us have a quick look. I am concerned that wounds inflicted by such a creature could be anything but simple."

"Really, I am alright," Rórlain says, slight frustration in his voice. But immediately he subdues himself, nods, and sits on the stone. He unbuttons what remains of the front of his shirt and pulls it open to expose his chest, which indeed shows a crooked line of puncture marks inflicted by a giant clawed hand. Eldárien sits down beside him and inspects the wound. "You act as if you are accustomed to giving orders," Rórlain says absentmindedly, all frustration now gone from his voice. "Or at least you are accustomed to caring for the well-being of others."

"That is true on both accounts," Eldárien confirms as he presses lightly against one of the marks. "Does this hurt?"

"Only slightly."

"There is no pus and very little blood. And I see no signs of swelling or infection. You may indeed have nothing but simple wounds, though they are a bit deeper than you suggested. All in all, a count this a blessing."

"As do I," Rórlain says as he runs his finger over one of the wounds himself. And then, looking up with emotion in his voice, he adds, "I thought I would never again wake. And here I am with hardly more than scratches. I do not know how I shall ever express my gratitude to you or repay you for what you have done."

"Neither of those is needed," Eldárien replies, "nor in any way desired. I would be more averse to having you in debt to me than being indebted to you myself."

"As you say," Rórlain remarks, raising his head and looking into Eldárien's eyes. His own gaze is serious and mature, thoughtful and full of both pain and longing—an intensity of presence which Eldárien, to his own shame, had not expected to see there. "But a blood-bond is a blood-bond and shall not be broken," Rórlain continues as he begins to button his shirt again. "No matter what you say, I owe you my life, and my people say that such a bond is one of the most sacred, and is not to be dissolved by anything in this world."

"Well then, Rórlain," Eldárien answers, "let your troth be one of gratitude, and may you pray to the gods for me, for that is what I need more than aught else in this world."

The man says nothing in response but simply stands, looks out over the land to the east, and sighs. Eldárien stands at his side and looks with him. "Let us return to your father and to your home."

"Right now, there is nothing I wish for more."

† † †

They step into the clearing around the homestead well after dark, with the stars burning vivid overhead and the sounds of the forest singing in their ears. Rórlain knocks on the door of the house—Eldárien supposes because he does not want to walk straight in and surprise his father—and they both wait. When the door opens, Eldárien takes a step back and allows the emotional reunion between father and son to take place. He lowers his eyes and waits, but soon he feels a firm hand on his shoulder. Raising his gaze, he sees Ródric looking upon him with tears in his eyes. "You have done what I did not think possible! I had little hope that my son would return home safely, and yet here he is. And it is all thanks to you."

Eldárien nods and thinks to himself, *One life saved for the many that I have unjustly taken.*

"Come in, come in," Ródric urges, with a wave of his hand.

In the house, they speak little, as Ródric senses the exhaustion of the two men, though he sets before them a little food and drink. After they have eaten, they retire for the night, lulled to sleep by the sound of a light rain that blows in shortly after they lay down, making soft music against the roof and the windowpanes.

In the morning, despite the events of the previous day, Eldárien again wakes early. The others are still sleeping when he rises from the pallet made for him on the floor, and as he does so he feels the cold that has permeated the interior of the house, the hearth having died down to ash with only a few glowing embers remaining. The rain from the night before has ceased and now a deep stillness envelops the house, punctuated only by the heavy breathing of the two sleeping men. Pulling on his boots and his cloak, Eldárien softly opens the door and steps outside. It is still dark, before even the first streaks of dawn show themselves in the sky, but the moon is a large crescent descending toward the horizon and illuminating the night, such that the silhouettes of trees are clearly visible, black shapes etched against the dim light of the sky, many-fingered hands, as it were, reaching up in and among the stars. Eldárien walks out into the clearing and looks into the dark waters of the spring, in which the twinkling of the stars is reflected.

It is not unlike my own heart, he thinks, deep feelings stirring unbidden within him, *a murky surface whose depths cannot be seen, but capable nonetheless of reflecting the highest beauty.* Then the voice of goodness he had heard while in the eöten's cavern returns to him, and he feels again the surge of peace that had gripped him during that moment; but as he thinks of the words spoken to him, fear also stirs within him. *What does it mean? Lightborn? A scourge of darkness and a servant of light?* He realizes as he lingers on the voice that he heard, and on the words it spoke, that these words linger within him unlike any other words he has yet heard in his life. They carry

with them a kind of substantial presence, an innate sense of their own validity, as if they themselves effect within him what they communicate, even as they offer a gentle and free invitation to his own heart to peacefully, confidently receive them. But even so, he feels a conflict within himself between the peace of the words that is given to him and his own fear and hesitation to welcome them without reserve, and to entrust himself to their mystery. *I suppose,* he thinks, *I just happened to be in the right place at the right time, and the goddess made good on my presence. There is no other reasonable explanation.* And yet even as he think this, he feels a dissonance within himself, as if this thought is a betrayal of the very peace spoken into him. *Your path has been seen and marked out.* And this is a surprisingly consoling thought.

He turns his gaze upward and drinks in the expanse of the night sky with his eyes and his heart, the serenity of the celestial firmament contrasting with the conflict in his own heart. He allows his eyes to scan the sky, passing from star to star, constellation to constellation, until they come to rest on the sign of Hiliána. His thoughts continue, *The way that she spoke to me...it is not as though she were using me, nor as if I were some anonymous tool, chosen at random or through the interplay of circumstances. But still: if I am anything, I am a man of darkness, covered in shadow inside and out, with only a speck of light left alive somewhere deep inside of me. Yet perhaps it is precisely darkness that reflects best the light of the stars. But how...how do I turn my darkness outward and upward, that it may do so, and that the light may fall full upon it?*

At this, his mind carries him back once again to the barrow of Séra Galáptes, the barrow of his past, which is also his destination in the present. *In that moment too, I was addressed, chosen, as if made a dialogue-partner of a presence unseen and yet ever close.* Absentmindedly, he raises his hand and reaches into his shirt, placing his fingers upon the amulet that he had received then, so many years ago, and which he has kept with him ever since. *But then too, it was a matter of circumstances—the interplay of events that led me into that forgotten place, unvisited by living men, at that time and in that way. I do not understand, and I do not know how to move forward...if moving forward is even what I desire. Life when my hometown is destroyed, an amulet of an ancient king...escape from shipwreck, a blessed sword, and the darkness crumbling as if nothing... Does my answer come so quickly, after I have only just begun my journey? I set forth from Ígny to find some light concerning the events of our anguished time and some path through the darkness by which I may be of service to others. And already, it is like an answer has come to meet me. But no...it is not an answer, but only more questions.*

When the first rays of dawn begin to filter through the trees in the east, causing them to glow in a dim light, Eldárien turns back and enters the house.

Ródric is awake and stoking the now blazing fire in the hearth, while Rórlain still sleeps. The former looks up as Eldárien enters, and smiles. "You don't sleep much, do you?" he asks.

"I suppose not."

"A long term problem?"

"A natural disposition and an acquired habit."

Ródric leaves it at that, as if now that this stranger has saved his son's life, no further questions need be asked concerning his past or his purpose.

Eldárien sits down beside Ródric and says, "Your son was lightly wounded when the beast took him, but it was an incidental wound, as it were, minor and unintentional."

"So there was a beast after all?"

"It was as you feared. However, the trouble should have passed."

Ródric looks at Eldárien with raised eyebrow for a moment and then turns back to the fire, the orange light of the flames glistening in his thoughtful eyes. "If the wound was minor, why do you tell me about it?"

"In case of infection or other unforeseen consequence," Eldárien replies. "I have never encountered a creature the likes of which I saw yesterday, and I know not what result comes of its claws piercing human flesh."

"Should I be worried?"

"Cautious, perhaps, but not worried. We inspected it yesterday—a series of puncture marks on his torso—and there was nothing unsettling. They indeed looked simple and clean."

"I see," Ródric exhales, as if pondering Eldárien's words, and then, looking up again, asks, "Do you think this will change the behavior of the creatures of the forest?"

"I really do not know. It may be related, or it may not. Only time will tell, I suppose."

"If you had to give an opinion," Ródric asks, "what would you say that you expect?"

Eldárien thinks about the question for a moment and then answers, "I do not expect anything to change, or very little. But there is much I do not know, so I would not take any prediction of mine with undue gravity."

"Thank you for your thoughts nonetheless."

Eldárien nods and then asks a question of his own. "Do you know anything of the creatures that people have taken to calling 'vrû'ádach'?"

"I thought you would know far more than I," replies Ródric.

"I would still like to hear your part, if you have anything that you think fit to say."

"I really do not, since there are no villages nearby and I have not traveled in years. Rórlain goes to either Ígny or Erésia when we need anything from

town, but even that he does rarely."

"I understand," Eldárien says.

"Do you think that these creatures, be they truth or fable, are connected with the strange behavior of the wildlife and with the beast that took Rórlain?"

"I have my suspicions. Maybe, indeed, what people have come to calling 'vrû'ádach' is really nothing else than what I myself encountered. Perhaps they are one and the same."

"You really think that might be the case?" asks Ródric. "Did the beast you encounter appear in the shape of a man, as though risen from the grave, a walking corpse?"

"So that is indeed what people say concerning their appearance?"

To this, Ródric laughs and then says, "Well, I suppose perhaps I do know more than you."

"I think you do," Eldárien agrees with a smile. "I have heard a similar description once before, but that is all."

"But yes," continues Ródric, "that is the word, and that is the description, which Rórlain picked up on his last visit to Erésia. He told me that he heard that these creatures come during the night and slaughter livestock and rip up the crops from the fields before they are even full-grown. I suppose they eat whatever they can and do not find enough nourishment wherever they happen to make their abode."

"I find it suspicious that they would need to eat at all," Eldárien observes.

Ródric laughs again, "That thought did not even cross my mind, but you are right. For Rórlain also heard that townspeople have kept watch in the hopes of stopping their destruction and thievery, thinking them some wild animals, only to be confronted with what they afterwards described as 'walking corpses.' If they really are dead creatures—or, gods forbid, men brought back to life—then surely they would not need ordinary sustenance."

"As far as I understand it, the art of necromancy cannot bring the dead back to life," explains Eldárien. "It can only create a channel of communication between the living and the spirits that have passed on, and a tenuous channel at that."

"An art abhorrent to the gods, if all the accounts are true," Ródric adds.

"Indeed. But if necromancy lies at the root of what is happening with these vrû'ádach—whatever they might be—then I fear a great evil is at work twisting the intentions of the Seven, turning the cycle of life and death on its head."

"Only ill fruit would such actions bear," muses Ródric, scratching his head, "particularly if those who were dead but now live are now bringing to death those who still live."

"It is an unsettling thought," Eldárien sighs, looking into the flames that leap in the hearth and musing on the interplay of life and death that marks the world in its present state. Fire, a source of warmth, a symbol of the security of the home, can also become a destructive force if turned away from its proper balance; so too water, source of life and growth and health, can kill. He knows both of these things first-hand, the razing of his village through fire and the near loss of his life, and the death of many whom he knew, through water. And in both he came face to face with the nearness, the ever-present possibility, of his own death. But nonetheless, he still loves both and sees their beauty: fire and water.

"Are you alright?" Ródric's voice stirs him out of his reverie.

"Eh? Ah, yes I am," Eldárien replies. "I was just thinking." And then, returning to the topic of conversation, "I do hope that we are dealing here with nothing more than natural creatures that have grown beyond their bounds or become hungry for the bounty that human civilization can provide—and only through human fear and imagination have been dreamed to be the living dead."

"Certainly that is my hope as well, but is that a possibility?"

"I would say that it seems to me quite likely at this point," Eldárien says, "were it not for what I encountered in the cavern yesterday. And that is why I intend to discover more. I would like to stop guessing and come to some kind of certainty, that I may act."

"I would like to accompany you."

The voice surprises both of the men sitting by the fire, for it is the voice of Rórlain.

"What did you say, son?" Ródric asks.

"I said that if this man intends to discover more regarding the terrors of which you speak, I wish to accompany him." Rórlain steps from the darkness into the firelight. "Forgive me for eavesdropping, but I woke a while ago and heard your conversation."

"There is nothing to forgive," Eldárien says. "Come, sit down."

Rórlain sits cross-legged on the floor beside his father, and the men remain in silence for a few moments. Ródric is the first to speak.

"Do you really think that is wise, Rórlain?"

"Why would it not be?" he replies. "This man here—Eldárien, forgive me—Eldárien saved my life from a creature the likes of which I could never have imagined. Now I know that terrors exist in this world that can cause the blood of man to run cold within him. And yet he stepped right into the abode of fear in the slim chances of saving my life. Now I owe it to him, and indeed to myself...no, to all of our people...to journey with him on his quest. Surely you see that his intention is only to seek the benefit of the people of

Telmérion?"

"You speak true, my son," Ródric replies. "But it is a grim decision for me to accept. A part of me wishes to keep you here with me for as long as I remain in this life, and also to safeguard you from the danger that shall surely await you upon such a path."

"And I do wish, father, that I could remain with you always. But this I wish for more. Or rather, I feel compelled to do this and would not be in the right to say no to what I so clearly sense is the correct course of action."

"Should you not take some time to consider this more thoroughly, to think more of this before making such a radical decision?" Eldárien asks.

"My mind is made up. But if you insist that I wait and consider, I will do as you ask."

"I am not going to ask you to do anything. Your decision is your own, even though the path shall belong to both of us, were you truly to come with me. It is an interweaving of destinies, as you yourself said yesterday. And now I know how serious you truly were."

"I am as serious about this as I have ever been about anything," says Rórlain. "I am sorrowful to leave my father and I hope that I may return to be with him again. And I understand that the path ahead of us is dangerous, even if I know little to nothing of the nature or the depth of such danger."

"You know it unlikely that your wish to return shall be fulfilled?" Eldárien queries.

"Indeed."

"And you wish to go nonetheless?"

"Just as truly."

"Very well," says Eldárien at last, softly, and Ródric nods to this too, deeply understanding the heart of his son. Indeed, if only he was younger, he probably would offer to accompany them as well or to go in his son's stead. "But one more thing," Eldárien continues, "I will not be departing today and probably not tomorrow either—as long as your hospitality will have me—and I want you to remain open to changing your mind until the moment we leave."

"My mind is sure," Rórlain says, "but I understand and accept your condition. I will try to avoid rashness and will take this time to reflect upon my motivations and to steel my will."

"Good, because a weak resolve will falter when the path grows dark," Eldárien says gently, "but a decision made in freedom and wisdom will sustain the heart even in difficulty."

"But not infallibly," Ródric adds. "The strength of man alone is not enough."

"That also is true," Eldárien agrees. "We must look to ourselves as best we

can, but more importantly we must look beyond ourselves. Do both while you are here, and I will feel more comfortable having you at my side, even if we must walk into darkness and danger."

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On the fifth day after Rórlain's rescue, the two men set out from the homestead. Eldárien is not in a hurry to leave, since he knows the pain it causes Ródric to let his son depart and also the pain that Rórlain must experience, even though he hides it well. Eldárien feels a great responsibility for the events that his actions have set into motion and fears for Rórlain's well-being; but also, in his heart of hearts, he knows the rightness of the latter's choice. And he takes solace in knowing that Rórlain has survived in the wilderness for many years, a hunter, gatherer, and laborer, and therefore will be able to remain pliable and constant both in his strength of will and in the many skills he has developed. For both will be necessary in the path ahead of them. Eldárien does not know what awaits them; indeed, he knows so little that he feels as if they walk into an abyss of darkness with no light and no destination. Unconsciously, he finds himself grasping for some security, some stronghold in the swirling waters of time that roil about his feet, and he reaches out with the impulse of his heart toward Nirániel, to whom he had cried in the churning waves of the ocean, and now also to Hiliána, whose voice had come so unexpectedly in the shadows of obscurity swelling forth from the unearthly creature whom his blade, by her blessing, had dispelled.

They depart a little before midmorning, and Ródric sees them off with tears in his eyes, tears which cling to his lashes but refuse to fall down his cheeks. He says, before they turn to go, "Come back to me, my son, if you can. I understand that you walk as you must, and you have my blessing to go as you see fit. Know only that my heart shall go with you always."

"And my heart shall remain with you, *Ta,*" whispers Rórlain. "Fear not for us. And doubt not my love."

And that is all. They take to the path that Eldárien had been following when he first came upon the house in the clearing and follow it to the west. The day is warmer than any have been since Eldárien arrived in Ígny, and he allows himself to hope for the casting off of the lingering cloak of winter's cold and the full onset of the warm fecundity of spring. Rórlain follows behind him, walking silently in his footsteps, and as he feels his presence, Eldárien realizes that he must adjust again to not traveling alone, to have another person in his company. Indeed, he realizes that traveling with one other person is much more tangible a form of presence and vulnerability for him than traveling with a whole company, since in a company he could still discover a kind of solitude, sinking into the "group"; but here the presence of the other is keenly felt, not as outside of his solitude so much as part of it. It

is not that Rórlain speaks much; rather, he speaks almost not at all. It is simply his presence—and a presence that has been particularly tied up, in life and death, in indebtedness and fidelity, to Eldárien's own life—that he feels so viscerally. And after the first period of adjustment, Eldárien welcomes this presence. Indeed, he begins to find in it both consolation and strength.

May he find some little consolation from my presence as well, Eldárien wishes as he steps over the trunk of a tree that has fallen across the path. He turns back and watches Rórlain step over it too, clothed in sturdy cloth and leather traveling gear with his pack about his shoulders, a bow and a quiver full of arrows along with it, and a small but sharp crescent-bladed axe in his belt. "We will follow this path," Eldárien begins, "as far as it leads us, and then will make our way up through the highlands to the foothills of the mountains. I do not suspect the path will take us very close to our destination, but a path also won't be as necessary once we are out of the trees. I have never been up to the mountains from this direction, so I little know the area. Nonetheless, once we get close enough I should have no trouble navigating the landscape, as I lived there and explored quite widely for the entirety of my youth."

Rórlain nods, and when he comes to Eldárien the two begin to walk side by side. He says in response, "So this cavern of Séra Galáptes...you said that it is our first destination. Tell me about it."

"I mentioned that it may hold clues concerning these creatures that people call the vrû'ádach. And perhaps it shall help illuminate the connection between these beings and the one I encountered, which I believe is called an eöten. The reason I think it may hold clues is because it is a barrow, an ancient barrow dedicated to the first king, by the same name. But he is not the only one buried there; he is entombed along with many of his successors and also many of his clansmen and the clansmen who came after him for generations. I have not explored the vast tunnels of the place—if vast they are, as the legends tell. You see, no one has been in the barrow for centuries, at least according to our knowledge."

"Why do you suspect this barrow will be of assistance to us and not any other?" Rórlain asks.

"Because I have been in it."

"Did you not just say that no one has been in it for centuries?" asks Rórlain, with a laugh in his voice.

"Yes, sorry about that," Eldárien chuckles. "I meant no one except myself. For you see, there are two entrances. The main one is a cavern in the side of a cliff, an entrance in a wall of stone among the feet of the mountain. The first chamber is open, unbarred, without even a door. I used to explore there as a child, and many others did as well. But there is little to see there. It is mainly

just a cave, beautiful but with little secrets. Well, with the exception of one. For at the back of this cave is a massive, ancient doorway, arched and engraved with runes. No one knows how to open it, to cause the heavy stone doors to swing open, save destroying them by force. There is another entrance, however, which perhaps only I have ever taken, and that unintentionally. It is a great sinkhole in the earth not far from the entrance to the cavern. It opens straight into an underground lake, into which the rains fall and the snows melt, and which connects with the rest of the barrow, or at least with parts of it. As I said, I know very little, since I did not explore it to any great degree. My main concern was to get out."

"How did you 'unintentionally' find this entrance?" Rórlain asks.

"Well," Eldárien begins, but then he pauses, not knowing how much to disclose. He is already coming to trust Rórlain, but these memories are too deep and too painful to share lightly and on such short acquaintance. Yet even as he thinks this he remembers that he has already opened up a great deal even to the Feskar family. Did he do this only because he knew he would probably never see them again, or was there another reason?

"Eldárien?"

"Oh, yes... I apologize. It happened when my village was destroyed. I suppose you need to know the truth of that since we may pass that way. In fact," he pauses and then, to his own surprise, adds, "I intend to stop there. It has been a long time, and I want to take the opportunity."

"Your village...?"

"Yes, it went by the name of Fálstead. Perhaps you have heard of it, perhaps not."

"No, I do not recall ever hearing of it."

"I expected as much. As far as I know, it was never rebuilt."

"Eldárien, I am sorry..."

"It was a long, long time ago."

"Some things even time cannot wholly mend."

"Yes, but much of the sting is gone," Eldárien says softly, "and there are things deeper than time which can also mend the heart. And the answer to the question you have not asked is: my family died along with the rest of the village. To my knowledge, I am the only survivor."

Rórlain says nothing in response to this, but his silence is an adequate indication of the depth of his receptivity and compassion. After a while, Eldárien continues, "Fálstead was attacked by Relihím. They were bolder in those days and frequently passed through the areas to the east of the Teldren Mountains. We lived in fear of them, though they never did more than threaten us and take from us 'tokens' of wealth. But in this case our deeper fears were realized. It was while fleeing from the burning village in the dark

of night that I fell into the sinkhole. It may well have saved my life."

Again the conversation lulls into silence, and they continue walking side by side, the quiet sounds of the forest enveloping them, and their footsteps against dirt and stone crunching as they walk. Only a few minutes pass until the land begins to rise more rapidly and the trees begin to lessen. In place of the trees, great stones litter the landscape, at first few in number and then in great abundance. After about half an hour, they crest the steepest rise and find themselves once again facing the highlands, standing at the place where the tundra meets the forest. They are further south this time, far enough that they see nothing that resembles the location in Rórlain's capture and recovery. They suspect that at least five or ten miles separates them from the place where the river flows out of the highlands and into the woods, near which the ravine cuts into the earth, the ravine which once housed a creature of immeasurable darkness and now lies empty.

At last, Rórlain speaks again and breaks the silence, "I have two questions, and you may answer them in whatever way you please."

"Go ahead. Forgive me for lapsing so suddenly and completely into silence."

"There is nothing to forgive. It was my place, I think, to speak. My first question: I still do not understand how the barrow will help us in our journey. And second: how shall we get in?"

"Those are good questions," Eldárien says with a smile. "I suppose my words have not been very helpful in that regard. As for the second question, I do not yet know. We will see when we get there. If all else fails, I suppose we can tie a rope and use it to climb down into the sinkhole."

Rórlain smiles at this and casts a friendly glance at Eldárien.

"As for the first question," he continues, "the barrow is the only lead I have that stirs any connection in my mind with what I have heard of the nature of the vrû'ádach. It is said that they are human in appearance and yet like walking corpses: the living dead. Does this not make you think of a barrow?"

"That is where the dead are," Rórlain says, "and if the dead came to life, it would be in such a place. But there are graveyards all over the land."

"That is true. However, there was something else I encountered in the barrow which draws another connection."

"What was that?"

"The lights."

"The lights?"

"Before the dead—who were remarkably well preserved—burned lights that seemed never to go out, but rather to burn continually."

"The vigil candles of the dead?" Rórlain asks.

"Just like the tales..." affirms Eldárien, with a slow nod of his head.

"It is amazing to hear that it is true...I mean, literally true. I always thought the candles were symbolic only—signs of the vigilant waiting of those who had passed. But it seems it is both: a symbol and a fact."

"Indeed, it is amazing in truth," Eldárien says, and with this the conversation lapses into silence yet again. After a while Rórlain allows himself to fall a few paces behind Eldárien, and the two men are caught up in their own thoughts, while their steps carry them across the highlands to the mountains that loom large, snow-capped and imposing, but beautiful, in the distance.

Chapter Nine
Light Behind the Stars

"In the presence of all the witnesses here and in the name of the divines, especially Mórnwyn, patroness of love and marriage, dost thou, Afadír, receive Býlja unto thyself, that she may be thine portion and heritage during the trials and joys of this life, and that with her thou mayest bring forth children in piety, benevolence, and truth?"

"I do take thee unto myself, Býlja, that all thou hast may be mine, and all that is mine may be thine."

The cleric then turns to Býlja and speaks similar words, and she responds accordingly. Elmáriyë smiles deeply at her friends' long-expected and long-delayed union. Afadír and Býlja were closest and dearest of friends since their early childhood, inseparable in play and exploration, and later inseparable even in work. Others their age often teased them that they would one day wed so that they could continue doing for the rest of their lives, officially, what they had always done spontaneously. They would only laugh at this and dismiss it, saying that friendship was more important than romance. And they were right. This in particular is what causes Elmáriyë to smile now: that their marriage will be all the more beautiful because it houses something so much more than romance, so much more than mere love (as many understand it). Rather, the love that her dear friends know and have known for so long, she too has come to know and experience in her relationship with the divine. It is like a light beyond all things, pure and chaste and free, unhindered by all possession and clinging, which nonetheless, precisely because of its purity and freedom, shines within and permeates all things.

Elmáriyë is stirred from these thoughts by the conclusion of the ceremony and the words of the cleric, "Now let the procession unto the house of gladness begin." She joins in the group of people who, accompanied by song, escort the newly wed couple to the house which Afadír has prepared. Following

this, there shall be a short and sober feast for all, and then the departure of the guests. It is a long tradition in Telmérion that wedding celebrations are simple and that the man and woman are soon left alone to celebrate in the way that only two hearts so bound can celebrate.

After the feast and the proper farewells, as evening twilight paints the sky red and orange, Elmáriyë walks out across the grassy fields of the valley, singing softly to herself. A gentle and surprisingly warm breeze billows through her white dress, and she delights in the calmness of evening air upon her skin and in her hair, hinting already of the coming stillness of night. She feels great peace burning within her heart after the celebration, lingering in her bosom in a profound gladness for her childhood friends as well as, even beyond this, in a simple joy at the very fact of existence, of life, and of love. She allows this feeling to carry her as she walks, and, her dress flowing behind her and dancing upon the grass as she steps, she feels almost as if she is flying, flying free across the earth with her toes only grazing the blades of grass as she passes. It is sweetness. It is light. It is joy.

She passes on, with hardly a thought, across the fields of swaying grass and flowers, the evening light shining through and illuminating the growing things of the earth with the undying things of heaven. The great boulders and standing stones of the plains stand erect, silent and still, lit on their westward faces and dim, almost black, on the faces opposite the descending sun. They cast great and long shadows across the earth, and Elmáriyë passes through these shadows, feeling in them the first taste of nighttime's chill, only to emerge again almost immediately back into the light and the warmth. She wends her way eastward until, just at the brink of darkness when the sun hides its face behind the mountains and the first stars of night appear in the sky, silently twinkling, she comes to the cliffside that borders the valley of Telónis, with the steep escarpment leading down to the plains far below. She looks out—standing in perhaps her favorite place in the entire world with the exception of the temple of Nirániel—and drinks in the expanse of the plains, barely visible in the fading light, until they too are lost in the darkness of night and become only a mass of black under a star-speckled sky.

And even now she stands unmoving, wrapping her arms around herself for warmth and turning her gaze upward to the sky. Once again, after years away, she stands on the soil of her childhood home and looks up at the starry firmament—something she has done frequently since returning here, as it is here more than in the house or even among her family that she feels *at rest*. But this night feels different. It is different because she carries a joy still sweeter and a peace still deeper. This is the simple fruit of today's celebration and also of the time of leisure, play, prayer, and fellowship that she has enjoyed since coming to Telónis. But her heart goes out now also to the people

in Ristfánd, both those with whom she has shared life over the previous years and the many people who live within the city whom she does not know. And to her surprise, she feels surge deep within her a strong desire to return. No, it is not only a desire. It is a conviction, a calling. But even as it comes she wonders why it does so. It is almost like a weight descends upon her heart, not eradicating the peace and joy that she feels but rather being held within it, housed within it. She feels as if the people of Ristfánd, and the troubles and tales of the city and all its inhabitants, somehow come to take up abode within her heart, and she holds them close, holds them deeply.

And Elmáriyë does not feel threatened or in any way suffocated by this holding. Rather, she feels her heart expand from the peace and joy in which she is herself held, in the longing to hold others, to hold them in their own beauty and joy but also in their ugliness and pain. To hold them in everything, as she herself is held. And as she does this, a sense of pain enters into her heart, almost like a silent warning or a word of readiness. A warning of what? She stands and holds this warning just as she holds everything else, listening for what it might mean. But nothing specific comes. It just *lingers*. Acquainted as she is with inexplicable feelings—for she knows well that she feels not only her own emotions and experiences, but also those of others insofar as all human hearts exist like a seamless fabric or are immersed in the single ocean of being in which ripples are shared by all alike—she simply turns these feelings into prayer. She surrenders them to Nirániel, letting them be held by the goddess in the act of letting her own self be held by her. Indeed, in this act of surrender, still gazing up at the sky glittering with innumerable stars, Elmáriyë feels as if her prayer of surrender is being received by all of the hosts of heaven, all of the divinities, and by the very origin of all things, the Nameless One whom she glimpses in and behind all of the divines and knows through their beauty, goodness, and care.

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Elmáriyë returns home about an hour later and finds her parents sitting together on a bench outside, their backs against the wall of the house and their hands interlaced. The air is quite cold now, and they are wrapped in a single blanket. Seeing her approach, Gjerínda rises to her feet and says, "You must be cold, dear! Let me get you a blanket of your own."

"Were you out here waiting for me?" Elmáriyë asks.

"No," her mother replies, "we were just remembering our own marriage so many years ago. And, well, being thankful for it, I suppose."

"I am thankful for it too," Elmáriyë remarks. "Without it I wouldn't even be here, after all! And even if I weren't—if such a thing were possible!—I would still be thankful that you two shared life together."

"And we have been so glad to have you as a part of our family," Telrán says.

"Thank you, *Ta*." Elmáriyë approaches, gives her mother a quick hug and then leans over her father—who is still seated—and gives him a kiss on the forehead. "Shall I leave you two alone for a while longer?"

Her parents share a quick glance, and then her father replies, "Actually, there is something we wanted to share with you."

"Shall we go inside?" Elmáriyë asks.

"The young ones are preparing for bed or perhaps already laying down, and I don't want to disturb them," Gjerínda says. "Let me grab you a blanket, and then we shall talk out here."

When she returns, Elmáriyë grabs a rickety old wooden chair from nearby and sits opposite her parents. "So what did you want to share with me?"

"Someone from Ristfánd was at the wedding today," says Gjerínda, "and they brought word for you."

"Is it someone I know?" Elmáriyë asks.

"They said that they had never met you before," replies Telrán, "so whether you know them or not I am not sure, but they certainly don't know you. They were simply acting as a messenger. In fact they looked for you after the feast but could not find you. I told them that you had gone for a walk and that I would relay the message."

"They are acquaintances of Afadír and were here for him, but it seems that the grandmaster of the temple—Cirien Lorjiës, correct?—took advantage of their visit to send a message to you," clarifies her mother.

"That is correct," Elmáriyë says. "So what is the message?" In her heart, she already suspects what it will be since she herself heard it only an hour and a half earlier in the silence of her spirit.

"He requests that you return as quickly as you can," Gjerínda answers. "It feels to me so soon. I expected that you would stay much longer. But I understand that even having you here at all was an unexpected and unnecessary gift."

"It is shorter than I expected as well," Elmáriyë agrees. "Did the messenger say anything about Cirien's reasons for requesting my return?"

"It sounds like there is some trouble in Ristfánd with which he requests your aid," Telrán says, "though he did not specify what that meant."

"I suppose I will learn when I arrive."

"We will help you prepare," Gjerínda says, "and will see you off once you are ready."

"I suppose, since they indicated that it was urgent, that I should leave tomorrow. Could we perhaps plan on my departure sometime in the midmorning? That should give enough time to prepare and to say farewell."

"Of course, my dear," replies Gjerínda, her eyes glistening with tears, tears of sadness but also of contentment.

"You had better get to bed soon yourself, my Mari'eä, if you are going to be traveling tomorrow," Telrán says.

"I will. Again, thank you both for everything," says Elmáriyë, rising to her feet and giving each of her parents another embrace.

Inside the house, she changes from her dress into a plain sleeping robe and tiptoes quietly into the bedroom which she shares with her sister, carefully avoiding the creaking floorboards. Before getting into bed, she kneels and places her forehead against the wooden planks of the floor. She has no words and needs none, and she simply lets the events of the day flow in and flow out...and to her surprise, what feels like only a moment later, she wakes up in the same position, her back stiff and her forehead sore. She laughs quietly to herself, rises, and crawls under the covers of her bed and falls immediately back to sleep.

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The next morning, despite her late retiring, she rises early, before the sun. She dresses in darkness and steps out of the bedroom into the warmer part of the house, where the hearth, burning the evening before, is now but a pile of ashes. The temperature has dropped drastically overnight, though she can tell it is not below freezing. She grabs a few logs of wood from the stack and places them in the hearth, and then, within a matter of minutes, gets them to burn steadily. Gazing into the dancing flames, she lets her mind carry her in memory through the previous days that she has spent with her family. Then these thoughts carry her again to last night's conversation and to the experience that she had before that, standing at the ridge overlooking the plains. She wonders what could be so pressing that Cirien has requested her immediate return, when he had earlier indicated an attitude of patience and waiting. Has something gone wrong, or has he received some pressing illumination regarding her future path?

Elmáriyë is stirred from these thoughts by the sound of rustling and muffled voices coming from her parents' bedroom. She goes then to the other side of the room, to the kitchen, and fills a kettle with water and places it over the fire. Hearing a rooster crow from a nearby homestead, she unconsciously turns to the sound, noticing that one of the thick-paned glass windows of the room is still open, and cold air has been blowing through it into the house throughout the night. Hastily she pulls it shut, though the damage has already been done, even if now, with the relighting of the hearth, it is well in the process of being mended. The water quickly comes to a boil, and she has a cup of tisane in her hands when her mother walks into the room.

"Good morning, Elmáriyë," Gjerínda says.

"Good morning, *Ma.* Would you like some tisane?"

"Please."

Mother and daughter are seated together when Telrán also comes into the room. "I am going to step outside to feed Fenárion and Tróstir," he says. "I will be back in a moment."

While he is gone, Gjerínda rises and draws a few curtains to allow the gradually increasing daylight to filter into the room. She also prepares tisane for her husband upon his return. When all three are seated together near the hearth, Elmáriyë says to her parents, "I am sorry that I am leaving on such short notice. I did not mean to mislead you."

"You were not at all misleading," her mother replies. "We all knew that you would be here only until you were called back."

"I agree," her father says, and then, after a moment of visible hesitation, he adds, "But there *is* something that we wish to tell you, and we want to apologize that we have not done so until now."

"Something you have not told me until now? What is it?"

Her parents share a meaningful glance, and Gjerínda nods lightly to Telrán, who then turns to Elmáriyë and says, "It concerns your origins. We have contemplated many times if and when we should tell you. When you went away to Ristfánd, we had let go of the idea of telling you, thinking that it was not important and that the past could be left in the past. But during your stay with us over these past weeks, we both have come to the conviction that you deserve to know."

Here Gjerínda picks up where her husband leaves off. She says, "You see—you are not our daughter in the flesh. We adopted you as an orphan when you were but too small to walk and raised you as our own. I hope you know, however, that you are the daughter of our heart and our love, and shall ever be so."

Elmáriyë listens to these words and receives them in silence—with heart both pained and surprised—and her parents give her time to reflect upon them, to think about them, and to let them echo in her heart however they must. "I thank you for telling me this," she softly begins. "I do wish that I would have known a long time ago, and I am hurt that only now do I hear this from you. However, I am grateful that you both have chosen to share this with me, however long delayed." She pauses and reaches deep inside herself to the love deeper than the pain that she feels, looking tenderly at both of them. There is sorrow, yes, and surprise—almost shock—but she cannot forget the profound love that they have shown to her, and this above all rises to the surface within her now and colors even this pain that she feels. And so she continues, after a long silence, "I do know that I am the daughter of your heart and your love, and you will always be the parents of my heart. My love for you shall not lessen. But I also know now very deeply, through the experiences of the previous three years and what I have come to know during this

time, that there are bonds so much deeper than the bonds of blood. You will remain my family, even if not in the flesh."

At the words of her daughter, Gjerínda places her hand over her mouth, as if to hold back a surge of strong emotion, and then allows herself to say, "Oh, that is a relief to hear. I was so afraid that you would be angry with us—that you would not forgive us for withholding this from you. I waited so long to tell you—we waited so long—partly because we feared that it was too late to do so without hurting you."

"I...I am hurt," Elmáriyë responds. "There is no way that I could not be. But, no, I am not angry with you. No...it is just...it is just that this will take time for me to process. I need to think about some things, to make sense of them in my heart. It is a change in the home that I thought I knew. To believe one thing and then to be told that another thing was always the case is quite a change, and my heart will take time to come to terms with it. And I do wish I had known all along." She looks at both of them. "Just give me time to make this truth my own. I hope that you understand."

At these words, Gjerínda begins to cry, silently, with tears streaming down her cheeks, and Telrán himself shifts uneasily in his chair. They see now that their choice to conceal the circumstances of her birth and adoption had forced Elmáriyë—completely beyond her own choice or knowledge—to believe a lie. And the revealing of that lie could not but cause pain. They are grateful that Elmáriyë is who she is, so sensitive and forgiving and loving of heart, but as they witness her apologetic struggle with receiving their disclosure, they only grieve the deeper that they had withheld this truth from her until now.

"Is there anything, anything at all, that we can do to help you?" Gjerínda asks. "To ease your pain or to help you come to terms with this?"

"I would like to know more about the circumstances of my birth and my adoption," Elmáriyë says quietly. "I think that this, more than anything else, would help."

"Yes, yes," Telrán says, clearing his throat. "Do not worry. We took you only out of desire for your welfare, out of pity."

"Pity?"

"Yes, though, er, that may not be the best word for it."

Her mother steps in and attempts to explain, "It happened when your father, I mean, Telrán—"

"It is alright, *Ma*. He *is* my father."

"Right, yes, of course... So, as I was saying, it happened when he was returning from a trip to Helása. He came across a carriage on the side of the road—and it looked to have been in an accident, or had been—"

"It had been attacked," Telrán concludes. "All persons in the carriage had

been slain, with the exception of a small child, still a babe, crying in her mother's arms... And I could not just leave you there alone, to die. I picked you up and brought you home with me. We sought counsel with others and tried to consider what was best for you. But suffice it to say that, when all was said and done, we decided to raise you as our own daughter. And this, precisely, is what we both desired to do."

"Thank you," Elmáriyë whispers, tears now in her own eyes, clinging to her lashes and gradually breaking free to stream down her cheeks.

"We knew that we had to tell you, even if we were much too late in the telling," Telrán says.

"Yes, thank you for telling me," says Elmáriyë, "but also thank you...for saving me."

"My dear..." Gjerínda reaches forward and takes her daughter's hands in her own. "If you have ever felt that you do not belong or felt as if this is not your true home, I apologize. We have tried everything we could to make you part of our family, wholly and truly part of our family."

"That is not it, truly," replies Elmáriyë. "I do feel part of this family. I *am* part of this family. If I have ever felt that I do not belong, it is not because of what you did, not even because the circumstances of my birth are different and different blood flows in my veins. No, it is simply because...because the home of my heart is not only here, with you, but also elsewhere, in devotion to the family that is both deeper and wider."

"We have sensed that in you for the longest time, from when you were but a small child," her mother affirms. "We always knew that your heart longed for more than we could offer you. I myself thought, or feared, that it was a longing for your lost family, but I see now that it is something else entirely. It is...well, it is that special something about you, that glimmer in your eyes, that spark in your heart, that restlessness in your spirit."

As these words linger in the room, Elmáriyë rises to her feet and goes to the door, opening it and looking out. She sees the stretch of land laid out before her, now bright in the early morning sun, grass glistening with dew, and she hears the chattering of spring birds welcoming the coming day. Somewhere nearby, a dove gently cooes its moaning lament, its gentle song, a contrast to the higher and louder voices of the other birds. They sing to one another, they sing to the sunlight; they seem content with the companionship that they keep. But the dove is different. For she sings alone, or perhaps with a single companion of her heart; she sings a deeper song of a more profound longing, as if crying out with yearning for one who is forever absent, or perhaps always present but just beyond her reach.

Elmáriyë turns back and directs her gaze to her parents. They are both standing now and looking at her. "Do you know anything about my original

family?" she asks.

"Unfortunately, we were unable to discover anything more about them," Gjerínda answers. "We had trusted individuals ask around in Ristfánd and surrounding settlements and did so ourselves as well, but we were unable to learn any more about the identity of the persons in the attacked caravan nor about those who attacked them."

"I did, however," Telrán says, "take a token from the hand of the woman who held you in her arms in death. And, when none could identify it, I decided to keep it as a relic for you when you were older. But only now does it find its way into your hands." He reaches into his pocket and draws something out, which glimmers softly in his hand before he gives it to Elmáriyë.

She looks upon it as it rests in her palm: a ring wrought of silver with a stone of emerald set within it, with designs of intricate beauty etched into the band all around, garlands of flower and leaf and, wrapped about amid the design, a tower or temple of some kind.

"I have never before seen designs like this," she says, as she inspects the ring, "nor does the architecture of this building which it depicts resemble anything I have encountered before."

"We thought the same," Telrán affirms.

"Thank you for...giving this to me," Elmáriyë says in a soft voice. "Thank you for saving a fragment of my past. I understand that I may never know more than I know now about my original parents, about my family, but you both have allowed the past to live in me." And, putting the ring on her finger, she concludes, "And for this I can only be grateful."

Chapter Ten
The Home of My Youth

Eldárien and Rórlain make camp under the canopy of stars, the sky unobstructed above them except for that part hidden by the mountains rising in the west, snow-capped but now a dull mass of black against the speckled firmament. They have traveled four days across the highlands, walking for most of the day with only one or two stops for rest and food. At night, they find the most sheltered places that they can amid the wide expanse of the land, which is barren except for scattered boulders, a littering of a few trees, birch and alder, and clefts in the earth through which run crevices or from which rise cliffs of dirt and stone, five, ten, sometimes fifteen feet high, only just as quickly to merge back into the flat and formless earth once again. It is as though the land was scarred in times long past by a great earthquake or by

torrents of water cutting their way rapidly across the land, tearing long scars into the earth or pushing up banks of higher ground from the uniform surface. But whatever processes formed this long stretch of land under the shadow of the high peaks of the Teldren range to the west and yet looking down on the hills and forest to the east as they make their way to the sea, no one now remembers. The Aldéra Highlands are a great shelf of land jutting eastward out of the feet of the mountains, a shelf that has broken into pieces and became creased, as if a piece of cloth were pushed simultaneously from both ends and wrinkled by the force exerted upon it.

The night is cold, but not as cold as it has been so far in their journey, and they sit around a small fire which crackles and sputters as it consumes the minimal amount of fuel they could find among the grasses and sparse trees of the highlands. Without tent or shelter, they have been sleeping with nothing but fur bedrolls to keep out the elements; but until now this has not been a problem, as not even a rain has come since they left the woods. The weather has been fair, a true onset of spring, however delayed. Yet as much as the pleasantness of the weather encourages them, they know that much of this warmth will be forfeit when they approach the foothills of the mountains. The numerous little springs that trickle down from these mountains, gurgling among the rocks, witness to the snows, some melting with the change in weather and yet many remaining unchanged even into the warmer parts of the year. Their water is icy cold, and the two men use it to refill their waterskins, to bathe, and to cook. But now, with a stream not far away whispering softly in the night, they sit together near the fire, its vivid light upon their faces and casting heavy shadows all about them.

"I still struggle to understand," Rórlain begins, "what exactly you hope to find in the barrow of Séra Galáptes. Shall we simply engage in combat any of these creatures should we happen upon them? And if so, what good does that do for us?"

"I was hoping, rather, to discover what may be disturbing their rest."

"It seems like a frail hope and a weak expectation."

"I grant as much," Eldárien says. "I have not much hope, but I know not where else to turn. If anything, we will have ruled out one avenue and will be able to direct our steps upon another."

"If that is all we have at the moment, then that shall be good enough," affirms Rórlain. "I do not have any better suggestions."

"It should be, I think, another four or five days until we reach the foothills," Eldárien says, changing the subject. "But even then, if my understanding of the landscape serves me correct, we will need to skirt around the base of the range—much more feasible than trying to climb it—if we are to draw near to Fálstead and the barrow of Séra Galáptes behind it. It is nestled

quite deep between the mountains, in a natural basin. So I expect another week and a half of travel, perhaps more depending on the speed of our progress."

Rórlain nods in response to these words, and the two men sink into silence for a while before he says to Eldárien, "I want to thank you again...for accepting me upon your journey."

"I am the one who should thank you," replies Eldárien. "As I have said before, I lead you into danger, perhaps even toward death."

"You also led me out of a place of death. My life is indebted to you both in gratitude and in justice, and so I shall follow you to whatever end."

"I wish you would follow another," Eldárien sighs. "I have led many men into danger and death, both their own and that of others."

Rórlain looks at him with questioning eyes but does not speak, as if afraid to force anything that Eldárien does not wish. Yet the latter volunteers the information freely, "If you are to travel with me, it is only right that you know the path I have taken to this place." And he explains to Rórlain his former role in the Imperial army and the circumstances leading to his return to Telmérion. He does not hide, either, the fact that, in the name of the Empire, he has acted with injustice and cruelty on the pretext of following the orders of his superiors. "The path that I walk now seeks to set right in some manner the ills that I myself have either perpetrated or ignored and to discover some way that I may be of aid to our hurting people." Looking deep into Rórlain's eyes, he adds, "I understand if this changes the way that you see me."

"If it changes anything," Rórlain replies without hesitation, "it only deepens my respect for you and my trust in the integrity of your heart. Thank you for speaking so openly with me."

"Perhaps I should have done so from the beginning."

"I understand why you waited, and I am content," Rórlain says with a sober smile. "In fact, there is something I should perhaps have told you as well. At any rate, it would be wrong of me now to hide it, hearing what you have told me."

Eldárien waits silently for Rórlain to continue, which he does shortly, after he has gathered within himself either the presence of mind or the courage necessary to speak.

"I too come from warfare, though it has marked your life and scarred your experience much more deeply than it has mine. Perhaps Father told you that I was away from home for a few years?"

"I think he mentioned it offhandedly at one point."

"Well, during that time I traveled to Minstead and sought to join up with the rebellion."

Seeing Eldárien's expression, he laughs softly and adds, "Worry not. We are

not enemies. Not in any way."

"Clearly," Eldárien says, "I am no longer fighting for the Empire."

"But you still have your oath."

"That I do." Eldárien breathes deeply and pauses in thought for a moment before adding, "But I know not what it means to be faithful to that oath under the present circumstances. Is that why we are not enemies? You think I will side with the rebellion?"

"No, that is not it at all!" Rórlain exclaims, raising his hands as if in protestation. "I am sided with neither the Empire nor the rebellion. I think we are much alike, Eldárien, not only in what we have learned from the experience of war but in our hearts' purpose. For we both side with Telmérion and her people."

"You speak truly," Eldárien agrees.

"And I can speak from the other side of the field of battle, if such an expression be allowed," Rórlain continues. "The night grows late, but I will share much more with you soon, as not only do you deserve to know everything—and it may help to guide us in our journey—but also because I *want* you to know. There can be no secrets between us, particularly not of a nature that could sever us from one another, nor from a sole intent toward a single goal. Indeed, I desire there to be among us not only a single goal, but a unified path to that goal."

"You speak with wisdom," Eldárien says, "and I will look forward to hearing more of your story soon. But you have already well gained my trust, so I despise not the time of waiting."

"Thank you," says Rórlain with a bow of the head. "And I hope that when you hear what I have to say, that trust will only deepen. No, not trust. What I mean is rather that our vision may align more and more in insight and intent, and thus our paths converge as our hearts have first been intertwined."

Eldárien laughs softly at this, not in humor or mockery but in gratitude and delight, and says, "Truly the crossing of our paths has been arranged by a vision much greater than our own. It is a boon far beyond my hope or expectation."

After this they speak little more before retiring for the night, and they depart not long after sunrise the next morning. By the end of the following day, the land begins to rise gradually, and the rocky crevices cutting through the earth increase both in number and in depth. Soon they find it necessary to navigate their way around these rifts, either scaling the cliffs or walking around them upon whatever grassy turf or level stone they can find, and this considerably slows their progress. Eldárien leads them further to the south even as they still progress toward the mountains, walking most often in a southwesterly direction, though even this, because of the terrain, often

becomes straight south or straight west, depending on need.

At last, after five days of travel, they come near to the feet of the mountains, with rocky slopes rising steeply ahead of them, grasses and various trees growing from the cracks in the stone like streaks or veins of color and life in the hard and colorless face. Here they turn directly south and follow along the line of the mountains, which, after passing around the base of a great cliff which rises above them to a snowy peak clothed in mist and cloud, begins to curve gradually southwestward. "It is not far now," Eldárien remarks. "We will be entering Galas Basin within a day or two, though we shall need to ascend quite a bit to reach it."

And this is true. In the late morning of the second day after this remark, the two men stand in the midst of a wide span of land that rises on either side of them, climbing up to mountains on both their right and their left with an escarpment cradled between them. The trees have returned now, too, and as they progress, the barren land is replaced by thick foliage and eventually by a dense wood. Here, despite the altitude, a great variety of vegetation thrives, ferns, carpets of avens, and tussocks of saxifrage along the floor of the forest, and trees of aspen and spruce and towering pines reaching up to the sky and creating a lush canopy overhead. Through this canopy and among the massive trunks of the trees, which stand like sentinels of the ages, light shines in shafts of visible light. The luminosity is made almost tangible, as it were, within the thin mist that blankets the basin, a glowing white sheet that dampens their clothing and their hair as they progress.

A couple days later, in the early evening, they draw near to Fálstead. As they crest a small hillock, they find themselves looking down upon the skeleton of the village, the structures of buildings long slumbering and now garmented in moss and vines and interspersed with young trees, all the while engulfed on all sides by the wider forest that clothes the basin nearly from mountain to mountain. Eldárien pauses and draws in a deep breath, allowing his eyes to scan the village which is laid before him in its entirety. Rórlain takes a step back and remains silent.

"Almost twenty years," Eldárien says at last. "It has been almost twenty years since I was last here."

His heart aches, and he tries to stifle the memories that threaten to engulf him were he only to allow them to spread. They must come, he knows, but not here, and not now. He intends to at least enter the village with Rórlain and to find what they shall find. He intends to at least make camp somewhere first, before giving free vent to his emotions, feeling what he must feel and thinking what he must think. He turns to Rórlain, "Well, shall we go?"

"Upon your word."

"Then let us descend. It appears deserted, so it may serve well also as a

shelter for the night."

They pick their way among the trees and foliage and stone, down from the hillock, until the land flattens beneath them and the first buildings of the village embrace them. Few are left untouched by fire, and most are hardly more than the rubble of a few remaining posts, perhaps a chimney standing alone in a pile of burned wood or a doorway of post and lintel with no door and no interior to protect.

"I am surprised," Rórlain says reverently as they walk among the ruins, an overgrown stone path hinting to its presence beneath their feet, "that this place has not since been inhabited."

"The Relihím have their own way of life," Eldárien replies, "and it seldom involves living in one place for long. No, having a stable village would not be their way. They could have taken it if they wished, but it seems it was enough for them simply to destroy. And I suppose there was little reason for others to come to this place to rebuild a village that was never their own."

"So why then do they cause such destruction?" Rórlain asks. "Is it truly just because those who are destroyed cannot fight back?"

"I fear that is part of it. And if there is no village left, it is not likely that others will come to occupy it. But I also think their lust for the things that were ours grew to the point that they wanted all of it—all, that is, which stirred their desire—and they burned the rest. There is also no accounting for the depth of malicious delight that a perverted mind can find in acts of violence and destruction."

Even in its shattered state, Eldárien recognizes the village of his youth, and before his mind's eye the ruined buildings are, as it were, again made whole. On its abandoned streets again walk the humble and beautiful people among whom he grew and learned and whom he had loved so simply and naively. He sees Sjót the blacksmith, pounding away with a hammer in the heat of the forge, sweat on his face and a gleam in his eyes, looking up and smiling to Eldárien as he walks past. He beholds Fára and her husband, Kómen, sitting on a log bench in front of their house, while their three children play along the path: Tûlka, Halía, and Kærk. Unconsciously, Eldárien steps out of the way so as not to interfere with the children's play, only to feel a new wound open in his heart at the realization that they are now nothing more than a memory within him, however vivid. As the two men move further into the village, Eldárien raises his eyes and sees the town square before them, a circle of cobbled stone with a statue in the middle—a statue now torn down and cast to the earth, with thick vines interweaving across it and the pedestal alone remaining standing. Here Eldárien kneels down and begins to pull away the clinging vines.

"Can you help me?" he asks, turning his gaze to Rórlain.

"Certainly."

When the vines have been removed, the two men look down upon the fractured figure of an ancient king, a crown upon his brow and a sword in his hands, elegant armor upon his breast and a cape on his back.

"Séra Galáptes," whispers Eldárien, and then he adds, with a gesture to the pedestal, "The inscription is there, in ancient runes."

"Was this his seat of government?" Rórlain asks.

"Oh, no... He lived higher in the mountains, in a city of stone which has long lain in ruin. It is said that dragons came from the north, from the highest peaks, stirred to jealousy by the achievements of men. That, along with the wars of humankind, and perhaps wars with something even more vicious than men, brought an end to the line of the once glorious Galapteäni kings. So ended the most noble kingship that the world has known, one blessed by the divines themselves." Eldárien pauses and sighs before rising to his feet. "And now what is it? Dust and ashes."

"The memory has been all but forgotten," Rórlain observes. "It is surprising that you recall so much."

"It is written deep in the memory of our people," Eldárien answers, "or it was. I am the last remaining of those who lived in this village for generations. Of course, the blood of this once glorious clan continues to flow in the veins of many, near and far, but by most our history is much forgotten."

"Your clan?" Rórlain asks. "But did not the Galapteäni rule before the clans were even born, in the ages before Telmérion became what it is today, or what it was even in the centuries of warfare?"

"Such history is shrouded in darkness, and we know very little. However, I think it is certain that the clans existed long before they were unified by Séra Galáptes, and even his own clan, I believe, went by another name. The Galapteäni, in these earlier years, were also caught deeply in the inter-clan wars that ravaged the land, and it was among them that arose one who was able to surmount bloodshed and to establish peace. Like so many others, our history is marked with unjust blood, but within it too can be found moments of heroism, justice, and peace." With this, Eldárien bends down toward the statue and says, "Will you help me lift it?"

"We can try."

Together the two men are able to raise the fallen statue from the ground and to place it again upon its pedestal.

"Even though they have departed, the dead deserve our respect," Eldárien remarks, and Rórlain knows that he speaks of far more than the statue of the ancient king alone.

"I would like," begins Eldárien, after a long moment of silence, "to be alone for a while. Would that be alright?"

"It is only fitting," Rórlain answers. "I will have a look around myself and perhaps find a good place to set up camp for the night."

"I shall find you soon enough."

"Certainly. Take your time."

Eldárien turns away and continues along the path, letting the memories return and wash over him again. If he had avoided recalling the early years of his life until this point, now that he finds himself here again in the very place of his most grievous loss, the longing stirs within him to return to it, to call it all to mind, to reverence and remember and abide. Is it not this longing which drew him here in the first place, which drew him to return here, to enter the village, to listen to its heart, when he could have easily passed by on the way to the barrow?

I know that I cannot move forward unless I am willing to look back, he thinks to himself, and he feels the desire enkindle within his heart to cast an anchor over the recent years of his life—years of bloodshed and war—to the purity and simplicity of his youth. If only it were possible to recapture it, even in small measure! With these thoughts, he raises his eyes and sees the remains of Aédin's house, now an empty and hollow shell. This man, his tutor and guide, had truly been as a second father to him from his earliest days. He recalls his face and his form now, with the eyes of his heart, and he finds himself transported in memory back into the past. Aédin's reddish-brown hair, thick and pulled back into a ponytail, dances in the breeze, with a few loose strands blowing about his face. Brushing these aside, he says, "One more time, my son." It is his usual manner of expression, though Eldárien is not his son; it feels fitting for both of them, a title of tenderness and affection, which in no way lessens the bond between Eldárien and Bierand, his father by blood. There is a joyful agreement between both men that they love and care for the boy, with one fruit only: that he himself feels by it doubly blessed.

"I'll get you this time," young Eldárien says, raising his wooden sword in front of his body and planting his feet firmly in the ground.

"Will you, now?" responds Aédin with a smile. He too raises his practice sword and waits for the younger to initiate.

They engage for a few swings, Aédin parrying Eldárien's strikes and yet being blocked in turn, until Eldárien succeeds in breaching his tutor's defenses and laying a blow against his chest.

"The match is yours," Aédin says, raising his hands in the air in a gesture of surrender.

"You gave me an opening!" Eldárien cries.

"Yes, but you took it. This shows that you are learning."

"But I want to beat you fairly."

"You did beat me fairly."

"I mean, I want to beat you when you are trying your best."

"I expect that someday you will. You are learning quickly and well." Aédin looks at Eldárien with a mysterious glimmer in his eyes and then says, "What say you to a little walk?"

"In the woods?"

"Aye, and upward."

"Upward?"

"Just a little ways, until you can see the whole village laid out before your eyes."

"What are we waiting for? Let's go!"

And so they walk up through the woods, through the dense trees and undergrowth, as the ground gradually rises under their feet. Before long, they come to a wide shelf of stone protruding from the earth like a rift from the mountain jutting into the basin of land in which Fálstead lies. Aedin leads Eldárien around its base and then helps him climb up onto the stone at the lowest spot.

"Come, we are almost there," Aédin says, gesturing for Eldárien to follow. He leads him along the top of the shelf, which rises quickly to their right, until the stone itself stands above the trees, reaching out like some great finger of the earth pointing toward the sky. "Here we are. Look."

Eldárien turns and gazes out in the direction in which Aédin gestures, and he exclaims softly, "Ah..." The entire treeline between them and the village is laid beneath their gaze, the tops of the trees swaying gently in the breeze and their leaves rustling softly like water. In the distance from which they came, the houses of Fálstead are visible, their wood or thatched roofs brilliant in the sun and smoke rising in spirals from many chimneys. From this vantage point, Eldárien can see the shape of the village and the layout of its paths, practical and yet elegant, a single main road down the middle with three branches on either side, almost like an eight-pointed star.

"Someday you are going to leave this village, Eldárien," Aédin begins, placing his hand on the boy's shoulder, "and I want you to remember what I have taught you. I do not mean the swordplay techniques, but the honor—the fidelity, humility, and spirit of service." He looks at Eldárien and the glimmer in his eyes turns into an ocean of tenderness, a torrent of love. "Man is very small and yet also very great. In this lies the mystery of every human life, your own as well as mine."

† † †

The memory fades, and Eldárien finds himself standing on the overgrown path, the ruins of Aédin's house before him and tears in his eyes. He stands silent and still for a while longer, unable to move, as the grief washes over him, hesitant to leave this place behind, to say a final farewell to his mentor,

but hesitant also to come to the home of his family, in which a threefold mourning awaits him. But he eventually stirs himself and forces his feet along the path, gradually approaching the house. And yet he stops short, thirty or so yards before it, at the place where the last words of his father were spoken and his life so violently taken. The images flash before Eldárien's mind, and yet they mingle with other images, unbidden, which arise before him, of the blood that he too has spilled, of the death that his own blade has inflicted. The two images merge in his mind's eye, and for a moment it is as if the two acts of murder are inseparable, identical, the butchery of his father at the hand of lawless brigands and the deaths inflicted by Eldárien's own sword at the command of his superiors, as an arm of the Empire's might. At this thought nausea overtakes him and he must restrain himself from vomiting.

He tries to think through what he is experiencing, but his mind is overwhelmed, and the images of violence suffocate him, and with them, a stinging feeling of shame and loss—loss not only of his family and friends, but loss of innocence, loss of the purity of truth and the tenderness of love, loss of being a person who is held by the light and by the light is led. He had assumed as a child and as a young man, rightly or wrongly, that he was sided with goodness, that his intentions and his acts were good, or at least striving toward the good. It is not that he consciously took pride in his acts or in what he understood of his heart's desires, but he did take consolation in them, a subtle but real haughtiness and smugness which is a temptation for every person upon this earth. Yet through the crucible of flame through which he has passed these last twenty years, the very roots of this tendency have been scoured and destroyed. And now, as he stands at the place where his father died, he sees his own heart divided, torn between good and evil, between light and darkness, aspiring toward goodness and yet falling short, seduced by darkness and making excuses out of fear or convenience or the blindness that clouds every human heart.

Despite his best intentions, he has fallen immeasurably short of his deepest desires and indeed has stained his hands with blood and his heart with evil. How then can he ever hope once again to stand on the side of goodness and light? How can a man who has chosen darkness ever be light or stand for the light? How can he find the peace of forgiveness and reconciliation, and become thus a wellspring of peace also for others? Surely such a thing is not even possible. While his heart is divided, tormented by these thoughts and feelings, another word breaks through, only for a moment, only for a flash, and yet its effect lingers within him: "*Lightborn*." The name carries within it all that Hiliána had spoken to him—all the words of light and love and encouragement—and they pour into him a current of hope that collides with the ocean of shame and despair that threatens to overtake him.

He tries to lean into this current, to grasp for some semblance of light in his heart, but he finds nothing within himself, nothing that is not sullied by evil. Then he turns beyond himself, as if reaching out with the hands of his heart to the light that lies beyond the darkness, and in this moment he realizes that his very reaching out is light, is goodness, however weak, however fragile. It is light reaching unto light, an inchoate seed of goodness and truth reaching toward truth undimmed and goodness unbounded, which is everlasting and full beyond the shadows of earthly life and yet shines its radiance upon all things. In this, a flame begins to burn in his heart again, his own and yet not his own, beyond him and yet within him, which he can never claim as his own and yet which has been entrusted to him as his most intimate truth.

After this the experience gradually fades, though lingering with him as if taking up residence somewhere deep within the recesses of his being. Raising his eyes, he looks about him, the rays of the setting sun now bathing the village in light, painting the air and the ruins and the trees and the sky with shades of purple and pink. He draws in breath and takes a step forward, and then another, and, gaining courage, comes at last to his childhood home. There are neither walls nor door, and yet he does not stand outside looking in. Rather, he enters the building, or what remains of it, the silhouette of its form still visible upon the ground, etched in ash. Looking around, he sees that nothing is left to distinguish his family home from any other, not a single heirloom or memento. The house was clearly gutted and then burned, and nothing now remains but rubble, foundation, and a stone hearth half-collapsed, standing like a lonely and wounded sentinel over the place where his family once gathered in love and security.

But he knows where his mother had lain the last time that he saw her in the flesh, already passed beyond the boundary of death, but her bodily form before him. He recalls her again, as if to say a final farewell, and then kneels before where she had lain, placing his forehead against the ground and closing his eyes, letting the love of his heart, so long buried and yet burning always in vigil deep within, spring forth and speak to her in the language beyond words.

Chapter Eleven
Questions and Answers

Eldárien finds Rórlain at the edge of Fálstead just as the last light of day is fading from the sky and darkness begins to cloak the land in deep shadow. He is not difficult to find, as he has already started a campfire whose light burns bright in the air, orange and yellow, and whose crackling echoes in the stillness of the slumbering village. He looks up when Eldárien draws near and says, "I have some water boiling. I thought you might perhaps like a bit of tisane."

"That sounds good. Thank you."

"Of course. Have a seat." He gestures for Eldárien to sit opposite him. "I thought now might be a good time for me to share more with you about my years in contact with the rebels—though that is not what they call themselves."

Eldárien takes a seat, grateful for Rórlain's delicacy in not prying into his experience upon returning to his home, even as he feels even by his silence both seen and cared for. What is required in this moment is for all to abide and to mature in silence, and in this offer to converse of something else, Eldárien sees an act of surprising and touching attunement on the part of his new companion. And so he replies, "They object to the title? What do they wish to be called?"

"Freedom fighters. Liberators," Rórlain replies. "Something of that nature."

"Perhaps we could find a compromise between the two extremes," says Eldárien. "They cannot claim to speak for all the people of Telmérion, but neither should they be labeled merely as rebels, for I am sure they wish to do more than rebel."

"You are, of course, entirely correct. It seems to me that to define oneself merely by what one objects to, by what one rebels against, is to mark oneself for disappointment or destruction, whether one succeeds or fails in one's goals. For with the downfall of one's enemy, one too will fall."

"I am interested in knowing more about this movement," Eldárien says. "I know very little, as I have been away from Telmérion since before the rebellion began. But I also want to know your story and the path that you have walked. I leave it to you to share both in whatever way seems most fitting to you."

"And I am happy to speak concerning both matters. I departed from home shortly after the Minstead uprising," Rórlain begins, "and traveled thence to

see for myself what had caused the ferment and to discern if there was aught that I could do."

"Were you already favorable to rebellion before this?" Eldárien asks. "Or, perhaps better said, did you have disfavor for the Empire?"

"My purpose was mixed from the beginning, as had been the experiences of my life," replies Rórlain. "I was born and raised in the Cára'fel Woods, as you know, and so the greater part of my life's experiences have been of the wild and of my family alone within it, with outside contact in the main only with the handful of other families that make the woods their home. But that is not all. Clearly my parents thought it important for me to know firsthand something of the wider world, and this I did experience at different times and for differing reasons. I traveled to Ígny not only for supplies but also to stay for longer periods. For example, I stayed for a duration of four years in my late adolescence, working for some woodworkers in the area and learning the manner of such labor from them. I suspect that my parents also hoped that I would find a wife during this time.

"Much later, after about ten years had passed, I traveled south to Thæme, Rhóvas, and Ristfánd, staying a while in each place. It was in Ristfánd that I first made contact with currents that could be called rebellious or revolutionary. Of course, I had encountered individual or corporate unrest before, but now I encountered much more. If you do not know, much of the manpower for the Minstead rebellion was channeled from Ristfánd. The cities are far from one another in distance and yet close in intent and in nature. I learned of this in conversation with members of the so-called 'Guild of Freemen.' They have a secret network in the city, and they often seek out newcomers whom they introduce to their activities. They keep watch on them for a few days to learn of their leanings and make contact if they think it a profitable endeavor."

"Why only newcomers and not those native to Ristfánd?" Eldárien asks.

"I assume it is because a refusal will cause less ripples that way. Often they focus on travelers who intend to stay but a short while—aiming to give them a very different reason for their visit and even a reason to stay and join the movement. But they also recruit long-time residents, old and new, if they seem trustworthy and, of course, share the revolutionary leanings of the guild. In this case they are simply doubly cautious in breaching such a conversation."

"All of this secrecy sounds very unappealing to me," remarks Eldárien.

"Granted, it is off-putting," Rórlain agrees, "but also necessary. Under the peaceful veneer of the Empire's control lies a strain of violence, and any who were discovered were often crushed immediately, and not in the most peaceful or reasonable ways. But this only fueled their vigor and their desire for

rebellion." He looks at Eldárien thoughtfully for a moment and adds, "People's capacity for toleration is astounding and disconcerting. The way that the people of Telmérion have accepted the occupation of the Empire now for two hundred years, and yet also the way that the people of Ristfánd have tolerated both the Imperial presence and the rebel presence without taking any sides—as if neither was of any importance to their daily lives—is incredible."

"I think the ordinary person does not consider who rules from 'on high'," says Eldárien, "as much as how this influences his immediate concerns: his daily nourishment, his ability to work for what he needs, his capacity for entertainment and a comfortable life, the peace of his town or village, and his freedom to marry whom he wishes and to raise a family according to his heart's intent."

"In that you are right, though of course not wholly. Man is not a wholly self-centered creature."

"That also is true."

"Regardless," Rórlain continues, "the Empire excels not only in leaving the daily lives of its subjects much the same as before but in greatly enhancing them. This makes the Empire's presence, to the ordinary man or woman, seem as something acceptable or even desirable."

"My path was a little more convoluted, but in many respects similar," Eldárien says. "I joined myself with the Empire in the hopes of bringing peace where before there had been bloodshed, of somehow stopping any more villages from suffering what had happened to mine. I did not know—though perhaps I should have, were my heart wiser—that I would become instead one of those who inflict death unjustly rather than one of those who prevent it."

"Many, indeed most of us, have been blinded by the Empire's tactics," Rórlain says, and then he corrects himself, "or rather, we have welcomed the benefits brought by the occupation of the Empire and accepted, as regrettable necessities, the negative implications. After all, on the surface the positives far outweigh the negatives. What is a little tax paid yearly to the tribune in comparison with legions of soldiers protecting our lands from brigands and beasts? What is the foregoing of jurisdictional autonomy in comparison with the peaceful coexistence, and at times even authentic cultural fusion, that the Empire's presence has made possible?"

"But what you are saying is that there is a black underside?" asks Eldárien.

Rórlain sighs and then says, "There is, and perhaps there always has been. Or perhaps it is only in recent years that things have begun to change. I wish I knew. I wish I knew what truly happened two hundred years ago and why the clan leaders of old surrendered their power to the Emperor and his legate. Was the black seed already present, and the ill-intent? Or have things only

gone awry in our own lifetime?"

"You learned nothing of this in your time in Minstead?"

"Those who lead the rebellion have been blinded by the desire for power and are fueled by hatred and vengeance. The rebellion is now like a fire that is too strong, too hot to be extinguished, even were the leaders shown that their course is wrong or misguided."

"So they fight, in truth, for themselves and not for the people of Telmérion?" asks Eldárien.

"That is sadly in large part true," Rórlain agrees. "Often the most vocal proponents of the 'people' are the ones who speak most only on behalf of their own wishes. In this case, it seems to be a mixture of the two."

"Who then shall speak for the people?" Eldárien muses, more to himself than to Rórlain. "If the Empire speaks for the Empire and not for the people of Telmérion, and if even the rebellion speaks more for itself than for anyone else, who then will speak for those who have no voice or whose voice is too weak to be heard amid the clamor?"

"A just question... And now you know why I left the rebellion," Rórlain says. "But I wish I knew the answer to that question. For I departed in disillusionment, in pain, because I knew our fight was not entirely just, and not because I had a better solution. At present, the only path I know is to walk, my friend, with you."

"And I am grateful to have you by my side," Eldárien says, reaching forward and placing his hand for a moment on Rórlain's shoulder. "And thank you for telling me all that you have thus far. But please continue now. You learned of the revolutionary movements while in Ristfánd. But you did not join then, did you?"

"No. The spark was kindled then, you could say. But it was only with the conflagration of the Minstead rebellion that I was stirred to action. I did not tell my father what I was doing or where I was going. I told him only that I wished to seek someone to wed so that our homestead could continue to exist in the coming years. I knew that this was something he desired, so I was confident that he would let me go. He did not know why I had yet to marry, and I had not told him. It was something I could never put into words, either to myself or to another."

"You still cannot do so?" Eldárien asks.

"That is true," says Rórlain softly. "I am not sure that I can. Suffice it to say that I felt that a different purpose lay ahead for me, and that a wife and children would hinder such a purpose when it came."

"That is truly all?"

"Not much to go on, is it?"

"Actually, it reveals to me a great deal about your character."

"You believe so?"

"Yes. Rare are the men who would remain as you are in expectation of an 'unknown' that may or may not come in the future and for which they hold themselves in expectation."

"Well, I always knew it would come, whatever 'it' may prove to be."

"Then may it indeed come," Eldárien says, "and may it be all that your heart has sought and desired all these years. You are truly more of a marvel to me the longer I know you."

"You praise me too highly," Rórlain says with downcast eyes. "For me it was nothing. Many act on vague intuitions or murky hopes, longing for more than their present life offers. A person is not tempted to seek out what he has never much desired. My path has often been like this, and my desires have remained simple throughout my life. It is not that I have neither desire nor capacity for marriage, only that my heart is inclined toward, and feels drawn to, something else." He pauses and his eyes glisten thoughtfully for a moment before he continues speaking, "In fact, only now, after encountering you, have my horizons begun to widen in a way far different than I expected, giving me, as it were, renewed hope of an answer."

"We have seen and done very little as of yet," Eldárien laughs.

"But a large purpose carries you wherever you go, Eldárien," Rórlain says in all seriousness. "A part of this is the depth and sobriety of your own intent, but part of it is...well, part of it is something else. I cannot quite name it, at least not yet."

"Well, I accept your words as you speak them, then," Eldárien replies. "But let us return to your story. How did things unfold when you came to Minstead?"

"I arrived a few months after the first sparks of rebellion caught fire," Rórlain answers. "By then, the city of Minstead was entirely under rebel control, and the Imperial forces had withdrawn their occupation to the outlying towns and villages. Widespread armed conflict had resolved itself to small skirmishes in the plains or the woods or along the roads. The rebels fought with guerrilla tactics, hiding out of sight and waiting for a passing Imperial patrol or caravan, seeking thereby to thin their numbers or to cut off their supply. The forests and roads were dangerous places, not only because of the possibility of fighting, but also because the Imperial forces were becoming restless, suspicious, and eager to eliminate this threat. I myself did not know of the situation at the time, of course, and only learned the details after arriving in Minstead. They told me that I was fortunate to have made it to the city without being stopped and interrogated by an Imperial patrol.

"Suffice it to say that I joined with the rebels immediately. They are a fighting force far different than the soldiers and knights of the Empire—more

a band of farmers, blacksmiths, lumberjacks, and ordinary citizens than trained fighters. Training was done in whatever time we could spare, but many of us fought without ever having trained with a blade. There was no trial period, no apprenticeship in warfare. They were more concerned with the possibility of having a rat in their midst and questioned us thoroughly—and watched us keenly. But as for fighting, they simply placed weapons in our hands and assigned us to a group in the wilderness. That is where, in a company of thirty rebels, I had my first and only taste of battle and of death inflicted by men upon men. I was involved in two encounters, both of which were ambushes of patrols of Imperial cavalry. They were short affairs, and neither time did I get into physical proximity with the enemy. Most of the Imperial soldiers were felled by arrows—mine included—before we engaged them in armed combat. Only three of the men in my group were lost in these encounters, while we slew a good thirty trained soldiers, a few of whom were knights."

"It seems like the rebel tactics were quite effective," Eldárien says.

"They were at that time," Rórlain replies, "though I imagine things have changed quite a bit since then, as the Empire has learned to counter their enemy."

"Did you ever make the acquaintance of any of the leaders of the rebellion? Wýgrec Stûnclad, for example. It is good to know the manner of warfare being waged, but above all I wish to know more about the reasons that fuel the conflict, about what drives those who fight in this war."

"Wýgrec has taken up a kind of leadership of the city, or at least he had when I was there. He acts as a sort of clan leader, or even more, as the unnamed or soon-to-be high king of Telmérion. I did not speak to him directly, in person, but I had contact with many of his confreres. They said that the fight was against the injustice of the Empire, not only in response to particular actions of oppression, but also in the deep conviction—which all shared very strongly—that Telmérion belonged in the hands of the Telméric people alone, and that the best way to facilitate this was through a high kingship entrusted to a man who, wounded with his people's wounds, could represent them and speak for them."

"That sounds reasonable and even touching upon the surface," Eldárien observes. "Are they Wýgrec's true reasons for fighting?"

"I believe that he believes they are, and I would not criticize this, at least to a degree," says Rórlain. "But things may be more complicated than that as well."

"Do you know what first catalyzed his fight against the Empire?"

"That is actually common knowledge. But I suppose I should not expect you to know, since you have been away from our land for so long."

"It indeed seems that I have missed a lot."

"The events behind the rise of Wýgrec Stûnclad are evident, though it is uncertain how deeply he is moved by the personal circumstances of his life or how deeply these personal circumstances simply led him to a conviction of the evils of the Empire."

"To what are you referring?"

"Wýgrec lived in a small village not far from Minstead," Rórlain answers, "and he was a blacksmith of high repute. Many from the surrounding regions turned to him even before the smiths of their own towns. It seems that the Imperial knights and soldiers also often relied on him for work, whether the simple fitting of horseshoes or the repair of arms or armor. And one of the knights stationed in the Minstead guard would frequent his smithy. Eventually it became apparent that this knight came for more reasons than metal. He had taken a liking to the blacksmith's wife. All came to a head when the knight brought accusations against Wýgrec before the regional governor. I am not aware of the nature of the accusations, but suffice it to say that Wýgrec was imprisoned in Minstead, under Imperial guard, while said knight took his wife as his own, and against her own will, it seems."

"It is a grievous and sorrowful story," says Eldárien compassionately. "And it is also illuminating. For it is true that Wýgrec has deeply personal reasons to fight, and probably a great deal of anger spurring him to do so. And yet it is also likely that the very actions of the knight who treated him thus, and the fact that he was allowed to bend the law to fit his own lusts, awakened Wýgrec to a sense of the injustices perpetrated under the very gaze of the Empire and in its name."

"Precisely."

"Thank you for your explanations and your sharing, Rórlain. This is quite helpful for me, though questions still remain. I am sure that there will be more to say as we continue to journey together."

"I am grateful I was able to be of some assistance to you," Rórlain says. "And I will be happy in the future to share whatever else comes to mind or to answer any questions you may have."

"But for now, let us get some rest," concludes Eldárien, absentmindedly running a hand through his hair in weariness both physical and emotional. "Tomorrow we make for the barrow and will find what we shall find."

† † †

Eldárien awakes with a sword to his throat. Dawn has not yet come, but the early morning light has begun to illuminate the sky, and when he opens his eyes, he sees a heavily armed man standing over him, with similar figures not far behind him. His garb is that of a lawbringer, an officer of justice in service of the Empire, and his face is marked by cruelty. This Eldárien sees

immediately as he looks up and lets the sleep fall away from his eyes.

"Stand," the man growls. "I will not take a man lying down."

Eldárien rises to his feet and tries to take stock of his surroundings. Perhaps a dozen men stand before him, all outfitted with armor and weapons. And before the he feels exposed, as Eldárien himself, under his leather shirt, wears only his mail hauberk, in which he had learned to sleep long ago, and his sword lies on the ground beside where he slept, now unreachable. Rórlain, however, stands in the shadows about a yard or two behind Eldárien, fully armed and with fire in his eyes. The man who had awakened Eldárien sees him but gives him no notice. Instead he speaks and addresses Eldárien.

"My name is Irilóf Vándirel, deputy to the great lawbringer, Lord Dærhórn, and I speak and act in his name and with his full authority. We have come to arrest Eldárien Illómiel, the captain who has betrayed his duties to the Empire," he says, with haughtiness in his voice, as if his office has given him some privileged access to life beyond ordinary men, "and our orders are to take you either dead or alive. It matters little."

"Then, if you allow my companion to go free," Eldárien responds immediately, "I shall give myself up willingly."

"No," whispers Rórlain through gritted teeth. He knocks an arrow and aims it at Irilóf before anyone else can move. "If you try, you shall fall where you stand."

In response, the man simply laughs, though he does not take a step forward or reach for his own weapon. "We have a rash one here, don't we? Do you not realize, peasant, that you are outnumbered ten to two? If you were to strike me down, you would just as surely and quickly fall at the hands of my men. And perhaps your friend here would lose his life in the process. We wouldn't want that, now would we?"

"Rórlain, please," Eldárien says quietly, with a wave of his hand indicating that he should lower his bow. "We have no other choice."

After a moment of hesitation, Rórlain lowers his weapon, though he leaves the arrow knocked on the string.

"Good, good," the man says. "Things should not be more complicated than necessary."

"Can you at least tell me why I am under arrest?" Eldárien asks.

"Surely you know? And surely, indeed, I have already stated the reason?"

"I sent a letter requesting removal from the military and release from my oath, or a new discernment of its terms."

"An unusual and illicit favor, and you left without its being granted. Far be it from a knight of the Empire to withdraw his oath in the face of battle. It is a sign of the greatest cowardice."

"You do not speak truly," Eldárien says. "You must know that this is not

what led me to such action. May I at least face a court of law when we reach Brûg'hil?"

"Brûg'hil?" Irilóf replies, raising his eyebrows. "That city is a long way from here, and much could happen on the road. No, we are going to Ristfánd, and there you shall face trial. But I suggest you prepare yourself for swift execution."

"There is another lie that I detect in your voice," Eldárien says, ignoring the man's words.

"And what might that be?" replies Irilóf. "You speak with arrogance in the face of the might of the law. So speak quickly, that we may be on our way."

"You have come to take me alive. Whatever the reason may be, it is important that I still draw breath."

Irilóf laughs again, and Rórlain growls angrily in response.

"Ignore it, Rórlain," Eldárien whispers. "It is the weak who must laugh to prove their superiority."

"Silence your tongue before I remove it from your mouth!" cries Irilóf, turning suddenly from mockery to rage. The two men understand clearly the message: the man who stands before them is weak, in both laughter and anger. But the weakest men are capable of greater evil than the truly strong, and so they both withhold any response and remain silent.

At last Irilóf continues, "Yes, you are correct, traitor. You are needed, but only as a tool in service of greater purposes. And once you have served that purpose, we shall need you no longer. Indeed, then you shall be a manifest enemy and will not be allowed to live."

"You speak clearly of your plans before your foe is even subdued," Rórlain says.

"It is because he knows I will not resist," says Eldárien. And the to Irilóf, he repeats, "Let my companion go free, and I will surrender myself willingly."

What follows these words happens so quickly that there is hardly any time to react. Irilóf cries out, "Take them both!" and the men accompanying him charge forward, drawing their weapons. Eldárien raises his hands in surrender, and Rórlain hesitates, raises, and then finally lowers his bow. Soon both Eldárien's and Rórlain's hands are bound behind their backs, and their legs are tied together so that they cannot run without hindering each other: Eldárien's right leg to Rórlain's left, with only six inches of navigable rope free between them. Their weapons are also confiscated in a bundle carried by one of the guards.

"So where, in truth, are we going?" Eldárien asks when all the movement has stopped.

Irilóf replies, "We go to the barrow of Séra Galáptes."

Chapter Twelve
Secrets in the Deep

The company almost immediately departs from Fálstead, walking more or less single file—with the exception of Rórlain and Eldárien, for whom walking in such a way is impossible—through the woods to the northeast. The entrance to the barrow is not far, and as they walk Eldárien cannot help but remember the last time he passed this way: fleeing for his life from the brigands who destroyed his village and slaughtered all of those whom he loved. He asks, shortly after leaving the confines of Fálstead, "Why are we going to the barrow of Séra Galáptes?" and receives a reply from Irilóf in the usual haughty voice, "Why would I tell you? You shall know when we arrive." And so they walk in silence as the morning sun rises higher among the trees to the east and the deep shadows of early morning gradually lighten, revealing the shapes and textures of the foliage of the woods, wet with dew, a chiaroscuro of light and darkness upon them in the interplay between sun and shadow under the thick canopy of trees.

It seems obvious to Eldárien that his captors know the location of the barrow and need no assistance finding it. He takes advantage of the time and of the silence to reflect, grasping in his mind and memory for some sense of why they might be leading him here, and also for a plan to escape—or even simply for a way to get Rórlain away. But he finds nothing. If only they would take him to Brûg'hil or even give him a fair trial in Ristfánd, then he would hesitate less to go with them into custody and even jail. He had known the possibility of such an outcome, though he admits to himself now that he did not expect it—indeed he had thought it very unlikely. Has the Empire truly changed this much in the time since he first departed from the shores of Telmérion, or has he been blind to its nature all along?

Traveling at a moderate pace, a little over half an hour passes before they come to the entrance to the barrow. They pass first by the sinkhole in which, so many years ago, Eldárien had unwittingly fallen, and not much later arrive at the entrance to a cave yawning wide in a great cleft of rock, a triangular space formed by two immense slabs of stone. Indeed, as they near the entrance, the land rises all around them, rocky crags protruding from the earth, between which they must navigate. And here they find a narrow stream, a rough depression in the earth with a couple inches of water trickling noisily over rocks, flowing from the cave's gaping mouth.

Suddenly, as they come within fifteen yards of the entrance, Eldárien re-

members. His mind is drawn to the amulet that hangs now around his neck and which he has worn, almost without exception, every day for close to twenty years. He is connected to this barrow, for good or ill. But how could this be of importance to the men in whose custody he now finds himself or to those whom they serve? What would the Emperor or his legate, or anyone else for that matter, want with the crypt of ancient men dead for a thousand years? Does this have something to do with the vrû'ádach, or is it another matter entirely? Finding that these thoughts only serve to confuse him still further and to stir anxiety within him, Eldárien turns away from them and tries to focus upon what is happening before him and around him. But the words of the inscription upon the amulet ring now in the ears of his mind: *Aïn Telmerië ya suría.* "For Telmérion and her people."

The company stops at the mouth of the cave, and Eldárien turns his head and looks for a moment at Rórlain, whose face betrays distraction—he is likely running through his mind searching for a way of escape—but also determination. He has by no means surrendered to their fate. Their eyes lock for a moment, and Rórlain simply nods, as if in encouragement or to say something beyond words, though Eldárien is not sure exactly what he intends to communicate. Many of the armed guard sit among the large rocks strewn about the cave's entrance, but Irilóf turns and looks at his two prisoners, placing his hands on his hips. A few birds chatter away in the trees nearby, and their song mingles with the rhythm of the creek which flows through the midst of the company of men. There is a moment of expectation, a pause, as if all present, including the captors, draw in a breath before a deep plunge into cold water or into unknown darkness.

"I must thank you, for you have made your capture incredibly convenient for us," Irilóf says at last, with laughter again in his voice. "Not only did you not notice us following your trail—which we did for many miles—but you slept without watch or guard. Indeed, you came to the very doorstep, as it were, of where we wished for you to be. It saved us the trouble of dragging you all the way here in chains, only to dispose of you once our goal was achieved."

"I stand defeated in the first two," Eldárien whispers, looking straight into Irilóf's cruel eyes. "But I do not understand the meaning of the third."

"I suppose you should not," replies the latter, "though if you were a bit less dull in mind, perhaps you could guess."

"Lord Deputy," one of the armed guards says, turning to Irilóf and interrupting their conversation. "Is it your wish that we all enter the barrow of the ancient king?"

"Are you afraid, my man?"

"No, sir. I only wonder if it would be good to set a watch."

"What could possibly happen in such an abandoned place? We are in the middle of the wilderness," Irilóf says. "But go ahead: pick two guards to remain here while the rest of us enter."

When this is done, Irilóf gestures to Eldárien and Rórlain, waving his hand toward the darkness that awaits them between the slabs of stone. "After you."

They enter through the cavern entrance and into the dark interior chamber within, which Eldárien has seen in the past and which—as he looks around—remains as he remembered it. Through shafts in the high ceiling overhead, rays of light filter into the chamber, golden-white against walls and floor of dark stone. Thick vines grow among the rock, and, to the left side of the room, the stream gurgles from a narrow crevice—like a wound or scar in the very flesh of the mountain, from which its blood has not ceased, for many years, to flow. At the back of the chamber, perhaps thirty yards from the entrance, are the doors to the barrow, sealed, as far as anyone knows, for a millennium. They are engraven as a majestic archway of cold stone with a great tree etched upon the doors and a depiction of rays of light streaming forth from its center, from the trunk of the tree; the light spreads from the seam where the two doors meet to the very edges of the doors, both outermost and topmost. Along the arch, which encompasses the doors from floor to keystone to floor, is runic writing ancient but legible. Indeed, the entire design looks to have hardly aged at all. It seems that this barrow in its entirety (Eldárien remembers the candles and the dead themselves) experiences the passage of time differently than the rest of the world.

Irilóf and the other seven men enter directly behind the two captives, and they freely inspect the chamber. Eldárien notes their expressions. It seems that none of them have been here before. After a few moments, Irilóf turns to Eldárien and commands, "Open it."

Eldárien replies, "I truly do not know how."

"But you have been here before, have you not?" Irilóf asks.

"What makes you think that?"

"Do not play games with me. There are a sufficient number of persons who know of your special 'treasure' and know also where you discovered it."

"Tell me what you mean," Eldárien says flatly.

"You are truly going to do this?" Irilóf growls.

Eldárien stands his ground. He has only told a handful of persons throughout his life of his experience in the barrow, and all of them he trusted deeply. As for the amulet, he has kept it a secret from all except those whom he has encountered since returning to Telmérion. Of course, it could have been seen any number of times—during changing, during training, or even simply slipping out from underneath his shirt during the ordinary affairs of life. But what would distinguish it greatly from any other pendant or

memento? And even if its age and the runes upon it were noted by someone as marking it as a unique and ancient artifact, how would they trace it here?

"I do not believe that those in whose command I act were mistaken," Irilóf continues. "It has long been known that the captain from Fálstead carries a token of his clan from ages long past. Only recently, however, did anyone expect it could be more than that."

"To whose command do you refer?" Eldárien asks. "Lord Dærhórn?"

"Dærhórn?" muses Irilóf. "I did say I represent him, and I do. But no. My orders come from higher."

"From whom?"

"You ask many questions, and I really do not understand why you expect I would answer them."

"I will be dead soon anyway, so what harm is there in me knowing those responsible for what befalls me?" Eldárien asks.

"*You* are responsible for what shall befall you," Irilóf smirks. "And *that* command indeed comes from Lord Dærhórn, or at least part of it does. For the rest, you shall go to your grave without knowing."

"Have it your way," Eldárien sighs.

"I will, and gladly." Irilóf now begins to pace slowly before the two men, looking at them with his hands locked behind his back. Eldárien notices that Rórlain is watching his every move, though he has remained silent throughout this entire exchange. Irilóf eventually speaks again. "Your little token only fell under the gaze and interest of certain...important...persons when their aims led right to your doorstep. And then a little—how shall we say?—*persuasion* was necessary to convince people to talk."

"How could anyone be forced to talk if there is nothing worth their hiding?" Eldárien asks.

"You mean how could they talk if you tried to keep it a secret? Or rather, if you kept *most* things a secret?" Irilóf stops pacing now and looks directly at Eldárien. "Anyone will talk if you give them something that they want in exchange, whether that is the desire for gain or the release from suffering."

"You are sick."

"Me? I did not play a part in such...tactics. That was the work of others. I am just the one who gets the glorious role of finally unlocking these secrets."

Eldárien tolerates this conversation, surprised as he is that Irilóf is speaking so much of things it is obviously better (for him and those he serves) to keep confidential. Still, he cannot see a way out of this predicament, and it is only a matter of time before Irilóf becomes more aggressive. Suddenly, Rórlain speaks, "Why do you gloat as if you already have victory? You play the fool."

"There are only two fools here," Irilóf replies without hesitation, "and I am not one of them." He does not answer Rórlain's question but pauses and

then takes a step toward Eldárien. "I do grow tired of this, however. So if you will not give me what I desire, I shall take it by force." With this he begins to search Eldárien's clothing. "I know it must be on your person, since my men already checked your other belongings."

Eldárien is surprised that he had not noticed this. They must have rummaged through his pack quickly while they were preparing to depart from Fálstead, or immediately upon their departure, after which they left it—and Rórlain's too—where they had set up camp.

When he comes to Eldárien's neck, Irilóf laughs. "You *wear* it! Now that I did not expect."

Eldárien grits his teeth and bows his head, his heart sinking, though he had expected this moment to come, and Irilóf removes the amulet from his neck and holds it up in his hand.

"Why not? It has no power," Eldárien says.

"No power? We shall see."

Irilóf turns away and walks to the arched doorway of stone. Eldárien and Rórlain draw near to watch whatever he is about to attempt. He runs his hand along the seam between the two doors and stops at the center, the very space from which the beams of etched light are depicted to emanate. He runs his fingers then along what appears to be a groove in the stone and then inserts the amulet into the groove. It is a perfect fit. The sound of a deep rumbling follows immediately upon this act, and the doors swing outward of their own accord, scraping against the rough floor as they do so.

"Well, that worked splendidly," Irilóf says, with a laugh. He turns back to Eldárien and Rórlain and pulls the amulet over his own head, letting it rest openly against his breast. Then to his men he says, "Let us descend."

"What about the prisoners, sir?" one of them asks.

"Bring them," replies Irilóf. "It will be impossible for them to escape if they are in the belly of the earth with us. And they may yet be of some use. Yes, and their presence may bring yet another boon, as what they witness will instill a healthy fear into their hearts."

"Witness?" the man says. "But..."

"Not everything...of course not everything, you idiot. I know what I am doing."

With that, the company prepares to step through the open doorway and into the utter darkness that lies beyond. They draw from their packs torches which were clearly prepared for this purpose and set flame to them. Then, all together, the ten persons walk forward into the barrow.

They find themselves first in a narrow hallway of rough-cut stone which descends gradually under their feet. It would indeed be impossible to see anything were it not for the light of the torches, since the walls of the cavern

are without chink or crack. Eldárien and Rórlain, of course, cannot hold torches, but they are surrounded by light and walk forward—having no other choice—with the rest of the men. Soon the hallway turns sharply back upon itself, progressing in the direction from which it came, but this time lower and deeper. The flat sloping of the path eventually gives way to stairs, descending steeply with walls to the right and the left. They follow these stairs —cautiously because they are not easy to take, particularly in the patchy, flickering light of the torches—and come at last to level ground again. Here the walls fall away beside them, and they step into a large underground chamber, much larger than the entrance chamber, though completely dark, with no native sources of light whatsoever. Here, even with the torches, they can see neither walls nor ceiling. They stand only in a patch of dim light staring into surrounding blackness.

The atmosphere is cool now, with that unique scent and feel proper to air long trapped underground. Nonetheless, this air is also surprisingly mobile, as a subtle breeze, more like a breath from the depths of the earth, stirs across their faces. The sensation creates an eerie sense of space, as if one were reaching out into darkness hoping to find an object to stop one's fall, only to encounter nothingness. "Search the chamber," Irilóf says, sending two men to the left and two men to the right, and two straight ahead, while remaining himself, with the last man, at the side of his captives. Seeing that they are now guarded by only two persons, Rórlain spares a meaningful glance at Eldárien, who simply shakes his head. Even if they were to escape from the two men at their side and to make it blindly—in complete darkness—back to the entrance of the barrow, two more men there await. Even if it was not Irilóf's intention, stationing guards at the entrance of the cavern was one of the easiest ways to dissuade the captives from attempting escape.

"Come," Irilóf says, pushing Rórlain forward, which forces Eldárien to stumble also, "let us continue on."

When they reach the far end of the chamber, a distance which is impossible to gauge in the darkness, though it is so large that the torches of the other men have become hardly more than glowing specks like fireflies in the distance, they stop. "To me!" Irilóf then cries, and his voice echoes repeatedly against the walls and ceiling of the cave. They stand and wait while the others make their way to the call—which must be repeated to help them find their way, though it seems apparent to both captives that all of this is proceeding according to a preordained plan. "What has been found?" Irilóf asks, when everyone is together.

"Nothing," one replies.

"It is the same for us," says another

"We found a doorway," answers a man from the last group, who had pro-

ceeded to the back of the chamber near which they are now standing. "It is not far from here, only further along this wall."

"It looks then like the barrow has not yet begun," observes Irilóf. "This must be some kind of antechamber or gathering-space, though I do not quite understand the reason for its size." He then turns to Eldárien, "Do you know what this room is for? And more importantly, do you know what awaits us as we continue?"

"I have never been here before," Eldárien replies softly.

"You may forfeit the lies," Irilóf answers. "We all know that you have been here."

"No, I mean that I have never been in this part of the cavern. I never entered through the main entrance, nor did I know how to unseal the arched doorway."

"How then did you get in?" Irilóf says, his eyes glistening in the torchlight as he looks intently at Eldárien.

"I fell."

"You fell?"

"Yes. Through the sinkhole."

"What sinkhole?"

"The one around which we walked when drawing near to the entrance of the cave."

"Oh."

Eldárien cannot tell if Irilóf believes him or not.

"Fine," he continues after a long moment of silence, and then he turns to one of his companions, "Gérdric, you lead the way. Prisoners, follow along behind us. Malrûn and Kíllen, guard the prisoners."

And so they proceed, finding again the doorway—quite small for being the sole exit from such a massive chamber—and passing through it into another tunnel. This one is short in length, only fifty yards or so, and soon they find themselves walking into a chamber that seems radiantly bright in comparison with the pitch-blackness from which they have come. Some raise their hands to shield their eyes from the light; but soon they all adjust and realize that the chamber in truth is only bathed in a dim half-light, with rays of dappled sun streaming in from a hole in the ceiling high above them. Directly under the shaft in the ceiling is a pool of water, whose face is still and unmoving, though it glistens in the places where light falls upon it.

"Your sinkhole?" Irilóf asks.

"Yes," replies Eldárien, memories rushing upon him once again. He sees no reason to hide it, so he adds, "The burial places are only a bit further on, at the other end of the chamber." He then asks, with little expectation of an answer but with the knowledge that Irilóf loves the sound of his own voice,

"What have you come here to do?"

Irilóf turns, and anger again flashes in his eyes.

"I have come to find the means to destroy my enemies and the enemies of the Empire! What do you think?"

Eldárien does not know why he says this and is at a loss as to the import of his words. Turning away, Irilóf then speaks to all, "Let us waste no further time."

As they walk, Eldárien notices that Rórlain seems even more restless and distracted than before, and he whispers to him, "What is wrong? Are you afraid?"

Rórlain turns his head and looks at his friend, offering him again a gaze full of meaning, flicking his eyes for a moment as if to gesture to his own hands tied behind his back. Eldárien then understands, though he finds it incredible. Somehow, it seems, Rórlain has managed to undo the ropes binding his wrists. After Eldárien nods quickly in acknowledgment and understanding, both men turn their gaze forward again and continue to the edge of the chamber, to the passage that Eldárien had taken the last time he was here. The company stops and inspects the runes etched over the entrance.

"What does it say?" one man asks.

"How would I possibly know?" Irilóf replies, but he is cut off by Eldárien's quiet voice, sounding in a chant-like tone:

> "Among the shadows lie
> the many fallen under blade of foe
> or by illness smitten, or age's plight,
> awaiting day's coming, dispelling night."

All turn to look at him, faces marked by surprise, some perhaps even by fear. Kíllen says, "Descendant indeed of the mighty clan of old. Do you people of the Galapteäni still live lost in ages past?"

"We are all of us descendants of ancient clans," is Eldárien's terse reply, and with that they proceed. As soon as they come among the tombs, the familiar sense of peace that Eldárien had experienced the last time he was here returns. No one else indicates that they feel it. Rather, to his anger and indignation, the members of the company find no qualms with digging among the bones of the dead for ancient treasures, or even perhaps out of mere curiosity.

Clenching his jaw, he tries to turn away, but the words come out of his mouth unbidden, "Are you looking for something?"

"Oh?" Irilóf glances at him. "No. Or rather, not something that can be found among the corpses of ancient men."

Eldárien shakes his head and attempts as they continue forward to focus on the light of the ever-burning candles, clinging to the subtlest hint of peace

that lingers still underneath his anger and frustration.

"Are these never extinguished?" he hears Gérdric say ahead of him.

"The candles?" replies another man. "It is an old legend that they do not. But maybe our hosts have instead lit them just for us. Regardless, rarely have I encountered something so eerie and unsettling."

Hosts? thinks Eldárien.

"Let us split up," Irilóf says when they have proceeded deep enough into the tunnel that it begins to branch off into others of similar shape and size, candles also flickering in the distance within them.

"Are you certain that is a good idea, Lord Deputy?" Malrûn asks, standing close to Eldárien's side. This is the first time that Eldárien tangibly feels the man's fear, and indeed, through this, he becomes aware of the fear of all the men. But why are they afraid? They are only in an ancient cave filled with the tombs of the dead. The living have nothing to fear from the bones of their ancestors.

"Aye," replies Irilóf. "I am certain. They must be here somewhere, and we need to find them. Just remember what you are to say."

"They?" Rórlain thoughtlessly asks.

"*That* is none of your business," says Irilóf. Then he turns back to Malrûn and says, "Actually, bring the prisoners ahead of us into the deepest tunnel. I..." he pauses, and his eyes betray malicious intent, "I loathe the trip to Ristfánd. If something were to *happen* to them here, then, of course, it would be unfortunate, albeit convenient for all involved."

"Y-yes, Lord Deputy," Malrûn says softly, his voice strained.

"Kíllen, go with him."

"As you wish."

The four men proceed along a side passage, among the slumbering bodies of the dead, for a good ten minutes. As they walk, Eldárien senses something else mingling among the peace and militating against it, as if it seeks to suffocate it out and replace it. The feeling is fear. It is not a specified fear, however, like the fear of imminent death which both he and Rórlain are expecting but hope to avoid. No, it is rather *fear itself,* a constriction of the heart, a dulling of the mind, which threatens even to suffocate and paralyze the body. As he tries to navigate this sense, he becomes aware that the others feel it too. Or rather, he becomes aware that it saturates the air around them, like an invisible fume poisoning the atmosphere.

"I think we should...go back," Malrûn says. He turns and looks imploringly at Kíllen, and then his gaze falls upon Eldárien. The latter sees the terror in his eyes, as if he is on the verge of either bursting into tears or breaking into flight. And then Eldárien notices for the first time that the bundle carrying his and Rórlain's weapons is tied to Malrûn's back—certainly a mistake

on Irilóf's part. He knows that Rórlain is aware of it too, and he is afraid of what his companion will do in an attempt to get the weapons. Yet then again, perhaps something indeed should be done.

"Malrûn," Eldárien begins, his voice gentle, kind, and encouraging, "I implore you to allow us to go free. I assure you that we will do no harm to you. Indeed, if I can, I will help you back to the entrance of the cave."

He sees confusion mingle with the fear in Malrûn's eyes. It is evident that he is not thinking clearly and cannot make sense of Eldárien's words or discern his intent in speaking them.

"I wish nothing but to aid the people of Telmérion and of the Empire, insofar as both may be sought in truth," Eldárien continues. "Surely you wish for the same, do you not? You are from Telmérion like the rest of us, so why punish a man who is your brother?"

"Do not listen to him," Kíllen growls. "He is trying to take advantage of...whatever it is...in this place." His voice grows thick with anxiety as he tries to force the words from his mouth.

"I assure you we wish only well," Rórlain adds, and Eldárien is surprised to hear fear in his voice too, though he is clearly doing his utmost to shrug it off. As he stands in this suffocating atmosphere, Eldárien cannot help recalling the sense of darkness and dread that he had felt upon coming to the abode of the eöten. Does a similar darkness now reside here? Before he can think any further, however, he hears a voice coming from further down the passage —not from whence they have come, but ahead of them. He tries to make out the meaning of what is spoken, but it is not words, not an intelligent language of any kind, but a vocalization of intermingled grows, garbled with guttural noises and raspy breathing. All four men unconsciously take a step back.

The source of the voice draws near with a sound of shuffling footsteps, and soon becomes dimly visible among the vigil candles before being fully unveiled as it steps into the torchlight. It is not human, or at least it is not a *living* human. In the form of a man, it stands on two legs, arms hanging limply at its side and chest heaving as if breathing laboriously. But its flesh is desiccated, rotted away from muscle and bone and hanging loosely from its frame like torn clothing. Hollow cheekbones protrude under empty eye sockets from which nonetheless a keen gaze fixes itself upon them. Under this gaze one feels as if being watched and judged by pure darkness itself, and found wanting, and at the same moment one feels hollowed out by an abyss of anguish, evil, and despair which pierces the very soul.

"Who are you?" cries Kíllen, drawing his sword and holding it in readiness before him. "What do you want with us?"

The creature answers in the same guttural noises and takes a step forward. To the men's surprise and fright, other similar figures now appear behind it,

and their voices meld together with the first almost like a chorus of throaty chanting, or like five or ten men all together retching and vomiting out their meal at the same time. The combination of the sight, the sound, and the atmosphere of fear and despair engulfs the four men, and they turn to flee. Rórlain releases his bonds, hiding his freedom no longer, and bends over and cuts the rope joining their legs (where he found the knife Eldárien does not know). Then he rises up and grabs Eldárien by the arm. "Let's go!" he cries.

Without even glancing at the two now separated captives, Malrûn and Kíllen fly past them and run ahead down the passage, with Eldárien and Rórlain following close behind. Then the worst happens. Before they come to the end of the tunnel, where it joins again with the main path, they find themselves face to face with more of the dead-yet-living creatures. They are trapped. The two guards, after only a moment's hesitation, attack the beasts, and the hallway is filled with the sickening sound of metal cutting through their rotted flesh. At this moment Rórlain rushes behind Eldárien and, in a matter of seconds, looses the bonds from his hands. Then a human cry echoes through the tunnel, and Kíllen falls to the ground as three of the creatures leap on top of him, poised as if to devour him. Malrûn backs away from the beasts, swinging wildly, and collides with Eldárien, who loses his balance and almost falls down. Instinctively he reaches out his hand, grasping for something to stop his fall, and his fingers close around the bundle of weapons on Malrûn's back.

Glancing over his shoulder, Malrûn simply cries, "Take them! I don't care. Just help me!"

Soon Eldárien has his sword in his hands and its scabbard again over his shoulder, while Rórlain slips his axe in his belt and then knocks an arrow on his bow, loosing it into the swarming mass of bodies assaulting them. And then he releases another, and then another.

Eldárien tries to charge forward, to push back the beasts that are now overcoming Malrûn and threatening to drag him down, but as he does so he feels a claw-like grip on his own shoulder. Turning, he realizes that the beasts have caught up with them from the other end of the tunnel. He swirls his body around and, in a fluid movement, hews the arm from the creature's body, and it falls limply to the ground. To his astonishment, upon contact with the creature's flesh, the blade of the lightbringer again glows with bluish light, even as the severed arm dissolves into nothingness. Lunging forward, Eldárien cuts deep into the creature's chest, and, with the fatal blow, its entire body collapses like dust, as though it passes through centuries of decay within a matter of seconds.

Seeing this, the other beasts—on both sides of the men—hesitate and begin to howl in voices like wolves or wild dogs, or rather like something unlike

anything but itself, a horrid noise that fills the men with terror, as does every gesture, sound, and action of these abominable creatures. Eldárien raises the lightbringer in the air and cries out, "In the name of the Light, I banish you. Flee from us, you fell beasts!"

They do not immediately respond but instead look startled and confused, raising their hands to their faces as if to shield them from a blinding light. "I said depart from us!" Eldárien yells again. With this, he leaps forward toward the main tunnel, cutting down the creatures as he moves. With cries of intermingled fear, hope, and desire, Malrûn and Rórlain join him, rushing forward to his side. In only a matter of moments they have broken through the crowd of beasts and come into the main tunnel. Turning back and raising his sword, expecting a fight, Eldárien is surprised to find that the remaining creatures slink back into the darkness of the passage and disappear from sight.

Malrûn collapses on the ground, breathing heavily and weeping. Eldárien kneels down beside him. His forehead is bleeding slightly, and his long blonde hair, hanging down over his face, is stained red in places.

"Are you gravely hurt?" he asks.

"It is nothing serious," Malrûn answers in the midst of his tears. "Nothing but hands and teeth, and yet they so easily overpowered us... How do they...?" but his voice trails off into silence.

"It is alright now," Eldárien tries to assure him, "for they are chasing us no longer."

"But what of Kíllen?" Rórlain asks. "Shall we seek for him?"

"He has fallen and he shall not rise," Malrûn says in a hoarse whisper. "I saw that much for myself. Let us therefore go with all haste. I regret leaving his body, but saving our own lives is more necessary at present."

"Then let us leave this place," Rórlain says, looking down the passage in the direction of the chamber of water into which Eldárien had long ago fallen.

"Yes, but not that way," Eldárien says, rising to his feet and helping Malrûn to stand. "There is an exit not far from here, through the great hall of the king."

"Then let us go. There is no time to lose," whispers Rórlain, his axe clutched tightly in his hand. Then, turning to Eldárien, he says, "Wait. Where is your bow?"

"Ah..." Eldárien sighs, turning to Malrûn, "it is still in the bundle."

"Take it," breathes the latter. "I am sorry for all that has been done to you, and for my part in it."

"Malrûn..."

The man pulls the bundle off his back and gives the bow and the quiver full of arrows back to his previous captive. "Thank you. Let us go," Eldárien says, placing his hand upon Malrûn's trembling shoulder for a moment. They

do not walk now but rather run down the narrow passageway at full speed, afraid that the confusion of the creatures will fade or that they will otherwise rediscover their original boldness. But the men are halted at the doorway to the great chamber by the echoing voice of Irilóf.

"I beseech you, great and ancient king, to aid us in the cause that we have chosen."

Looking into the chamber, they see that Irilóf stands, alone now, with the corpses of his men scattered around him, before one of the creatures from which they had just fled. That is their first impression, but it soon becomes apparent that the reality is otherwise, for this entity is larger, far larger than would be the living corpse of a man. It stands a good two or three heads taller than Irilóf and looks down upon him with the same eyes of darkness, sockets from which horror and malice gaze.

"Why do you speak to me in such words?" the creature, to their astonishment, replies, though in a similar guttural voice.

"I address you on behalf of our great emperor, Maríndas IV, Lord and Ruler of all lands that are under the sun and above the earth," Irilóf replies. His voice is not haughty now, but strained, touched by the same fear that has now permeated the entire barrow. But he does not yield to it and continues to speak. "My Lord wishes to revive your reign among the people of Telmérion, since none of the people of this land—lost and weak as they are—can justly rule themselves. He wishes," Irilóf finds it important to add, "only for the good of the people of this continent."

"You misunderstand me," replies the creature of darkness. "Why do you address me as the ancient king?"

"You stand here upon his very burial place... S-surely it is you?" Irilóf answers, stuttering.

The creature then laughs a terrible laugh devoid of all mirth or lightness. Irilóf has found his match in mockery. "I am no ruler of men," it says after its throaty cackle has died away, "but I am sovereign beyond all who call themselves rulers, in past, present, or future. And I understand the things that are said between your words, where you are unwilling to speak. And I have already sought council with the greatest of our order, and I have awaited your arrival, knowing that you would come. So return to your petty emperor and tell him that we are willing to cooperate with him and his aspirations for as long as it serves our purposes. Or rather," the creature laughs again, "tell him the words he wishes to hear. We will march with you to whatever place you desire."

"Very well. I-I thank you. We shall soon bring the might of the Empire—and your might, great one—to the city of Ristfánd," Irilóf concludes. With this he steps away from the creature and looks about the hall, clearly searching

for the way out. Seeing it, he scurries away like a rat freed from a trap and is gone.

"Should we go after him?" Rórlain asks, in a whisper, at Eldárien's side.

"How could we do so?" Malrûn asks.

"A just observation. Shall we then return the way we came?"

"I wonder if we could, " Eldárien begins.

"You don't think you can fight that beast, do you?" says Malrûn, interrupting him.

"I do not know. But I do sense in it a power far greater than I have felt in any of the others." Eldárien pauses and thinks for a moment and then nods. "We have a better chance to escape this place unharmed if we return the way we came, even if we must pass again through the unknown darkness. Risking our lives in direct and certain conflict with such a creature would be worse than anything else. Let us make haste, for our own sake as well as for our people. We need to warn others about what we have witnessed today."

Chapter Thirteen
Questions Unanswered

The guards are absent from the entrance to the barrow when Eldárien, Rórlain, and Malrûn step into the light of day. They look around cautiously, blinking in the brilliance of the midday sun, and try to decide the best course of action.

"Do you think the rest of the company survived?" Malrûn asks anxiously.

"I...I fear not," Rórlain answers, his voice soft and hoarse after everything that he has seen. This is twice now in a short amount of time that he has tasted the closeness of death in the dark places of the earth. "To all appearances, Irilóf was the only one to leave the cave besides ourselves. Perhaps the...creatures...took them as well."

Eldárien interjects tenderly but confidently, "They did not survive."

"How do you know?" Malrûn asks.

"Their remains were scattered upon the floor of the great hall. Neither of you saw it?"

"I was quite occupied with other things," Rórlain observes.

"Understandably so," Eldárien says, turning to look upon his friend. "I also want to thank you for saving my life. Already in a short amount of time you have done for me what I once did for you, and have repaid the debt in equal measure."

"We are beyond speaking of debt, Eldárien," Rórlain replies, with a gen-

tle smile, which dispels the fear that has lingered in his face until this moment. "I will be here for you as much as I am able. The bond of blood and life shall endure, and if I can protect you by any righteous means at my disposal—even with my own life and blood—I shall not hesitate to do so."

At a loss for words, Eldárien simply nods in silence.

"You said," begins Malrûn after a few short moments, visibly moved by Rórlain's words, but also clearly grieving in his own right, "you said that they did not survive."

"Yes, I saw it myself," replies Eldárien. "I do not know what happened while we were in the tunnels, but they were all there in the great chamber. It looks as if Irilóf was unable to subdue that creature or engage it in dialogue until it was too late for his men. You have my profoundest sympathy and condolences for your loss. I imagine some of those men were your friends and companions, and were perhaps even dear to you. I know what it is to experience the death of those whom you have long called brothers-in-arms."

Bowing his head, Malrûn says quietly, "Some were indeed long time companions, though I regret to say none did I have the privilege of calling 'friend.' Nonetheless I do grieve, and your compassion is appreciated."

"I know that these words are deeply important, as shall be many other words of deliberation concerning what we have witnessed and what it means for our future," interrupts Rórlain. "However, perhaps we should find a more sheltered and hidden place before we continue this conversation."

"That is wise," Malrûn says. "Is it...would it be acceptable if I accompanied, at least until we decide what to do concerning this incident?"

"I would not conceive of it being otherwise," says Eldárien. "There are also some questions I wish to ask you, if I may."

"Of course. Let us proceed."

"Where shall we go?" Rórlain asks.

"Our traveling gear is still in Fálstead," Eldárien says. "It is not the most secret place, but it will be difficult to make it far without our supplies."

"To Fálstead then," says Rórlain, "and if we encounter Irilóf on our way, it may indeed be for the best. It would be good to nip in the bud whatever has begun to grow here this day."

"It has not just begun..." Malrûn whispers, and the other two look at him in surprise. "But I shall tell you more of that when we have come to a more fitting location."

† † †

The return path through the woods to the ruins of Fálstead is without incident, though Eldárien experiences a wave of weakness and fatigue wash over him as they walk, and he knows that Rórlain must feel the same. Not only have they experienced a multitude of emotions this morning, ranging

from fear to anger, from terror to relief, but they have also not eaten since the evening before. Now that the immediate threat has passed, Eldárien feels shaky, as if his legs could easily give way beneath him.

Judging by the position of the sun, it looks to be about an hour or an hour and a half after noon when they enter the bounds of Fálstead. The night before they had slept in the remains of a gutted building, one that provided the most shelter possible of all the village's skeletal remains. And here they return, collapsing beside their belongings and, after a moment of respite, rummaging through them for rations of bread and dried meat, which they freely share with Malrûn.

At first none of them are inclined to talk and they eat in silence. Rórlain is the first to speak, his hands laid across his lap and his body hunched over, as if carrying a heavy weight. "Are these creatures....human?" he asks. "Or were they at one point? And if so, what are they now?"

"Man was made to be man, both in life and in death," Eldárien answers, after a moment for thought. "though he may be raised up unto light or debased unto darkness. Through union with forces outside of himself, he may become more than he is or less than he is. What then of these creatures? Are they men who have become wedded to darkness? But if so, I wonder: how do they live? For light alone is life. What force has brought them back to life...or brought them to life for the first time? It is evidently a power of darkness and not of light, and they a mockery of existence and not its true substance."

"You have clearly thought much about this even before the events of this day," remarks Rórlain, rubbing his forehead and sighing. "There are so many questions... But you are right that these entities did not feel...like human beings."

"Like the distant echo of human beings, perhaps?"

"Exactly. They seem a mockery...like a puppet show."

"Do you know anything, Malrûn, which may help us in this matter?" Eldárien asks, turning to him. "You said that not everything we encountered today was a first discovery."

"Aye, I do know something," he replies, shifting uneasily. "But I too must thank you for saving my life."

"It seems you have saved us as well," Eldárien says. "You could have acted very differently than you did today."

"How are we to know that we can trust you?" Rórlain asks. "Until now we have been companions in fear and the desire for survival. But what trust is there now that we have found some unity or peace between us? What do you truly have hidden within your heart?"

"Rórlain," Eldárien says before Malrûn has a chance to answer. "Is suspicion the appropriate response at this time?"

"I think that it is. We have no grounds at all to trust Malrûn."

"None except that he spared our lives and gave us our weapons freely?"

"Yes, and this he did only to save his own life."

"May I speak?" Malrûn begins, interrupting the exchange between the two men.

They turn to him, and Eldárien says, "Of course."

"It is right of you to be suspicious of me," he continues, "for I have given you little cause for trust until this moment. It is true: what I did in the barrow was spurred by fear. But I mean that in more ways than one. I was afraid not only of those creatures—let us call them vrû'ádach, for that is what all have taken to calling them in rumor, though few know what they truly are. But I was also afraid before the creatures ever appeared: afraid of doing what I ought."

Eldárien nods his head silently at these words, as if they are exactly what he had expected to hear. Malrûn continues, "I am a coward. I admit it freely, with shame of face and heart. For I knew that our purpose in coming to the barrow—and our plans in your regard, sir captain—er, Eldárien—were amiss. Allow me to speak with you now about precisely these things. Then you may give trust freely or withhold it, as you see fit."

"Very well," Rórlain replies. "I assure you that I shall judge fairly."

"As shall I," Eldárien adds, "as I was in a similar situation to yours not many months ago." Rórlain steals a glance at Eldárien, as if to urge him to withhold even this judgment until the story has been told.

Malrûn clasps his hands tightly—and anxiously—across his breast and begins: "Justice has fled from the land." He pauses, as if startled that such words came from his mouth so clearly and so viscerally. "Ah, forgive me. I speak of an awareness, an experience, that I have had for a long time but of which it has been taboo to speak, forbidden under threat of great penalty. I am a guardian of the law, a servant of justice. Or such was I supposed to be. But what ought one to do when the law that one serves is betrayed by the very ones whose authority exists to protect it, to apply it with righteousness and moderation? Indeed," he hesitates again, as if struggling either to decisively make a judgment or to give voice to it in speech, "not only is the law being betrayed, but...corruption has come to touch the law itself. If beforehand the failings were of individual men against the justice of the law, since the law is within the power of men to change, the law itself can come to express not the nature of goodness that binds us all but the wishes of the few who are in power."

"And you say that this has happened or is happening?" Rórlain asks.

"Yes. It has happened, or perhaps it has always been the case but my eyes have not been open to see it until recently."

"Are you referring to the law of the Empire or to the laws of the clans of Telmérion?" asks Eldárien.

"I refer to the Empire," Malrûn replies, "though the clan leaders, as far as I understand, have little choice but to go along with whatever the legate decides —or what he communicates from the Emperor."

"Why?" Rórlain inquires.

"I know not. All I can say is that the lawbringers have begun executing 'justice' upon the heads, not of those whose crimes are more grievous or more inimical to the good of all, but whose aims seem contrary to the sovereign rule of the Empire and...er, certain other aims which those in the capital of Brûg'hil feel, but the nature of which we know nothing about."

"You really cannot speak more specifically about these...aims?" asks Eldárien.

"I am afraid not," Malrûn sighs. "As you have seen today, there is a plot that finds its origin in the highest reaches of the Empire...that is, if Irilóf's words are true. He speaks in the name of the emperor himself, seeking the aid of these...vrû'ádach...these creatures...to bring violence upon the cities and settlements of Telmérion."

"He is probably reacting to the violence of the rebellion," Rórlain states, "and seeking a means to crush all resistance to two hundred years of virtually unquestioned rule. His words in the barrow indicated as much. And that is easy to do when you live across the sea and never see the faces of those whose lives shall be destroyed by the violence which you command."

"But consider the *means* of doing so," Eldárien emphasizes. "How could he intend to buy victory at such a price? And I lament that men such as Irilóf, who do not have the privilege of commanding death from across the ocean, cooperate with such an abominable plan."

"It is a terrible cost," Rórlain agrees. "Considering what we saw today, there are even more questions than answers. And knowing these creatures, how could anyone expect them to fight on the side of men? It seems to me that all they know how to do is destroy."

"That is precisely the thing," Malrûn says. "This is not the first time that the vrû'ádach have made themselves known, though their activity has occurred mainly to the west of the Teldren mountains, around the location of Minstead, where the rebellion began. It is, however, the first time that I have seen them in the flesh. And they are," he closes his eyes and draws in a deep breath, "terrifying beasts."

"So you are implying that they *do* take orders from the emperor or his legates?" Eldárien asks.

"I think we saw as much today in person," Rórlain interjects. "Though I do admit that only one of them, perhaps their leader, seemed at all amenable

to dialogue and cooperation. Perhaps the rest simply blindly obey their leader."

"It may well be that what we witnessed today marked the beginning of the cooperation between the vrû'ádach and the Empire," says Malrûn. "It seemed to be a first contact in my estimation. But I do wish I knew who, or what, their leader was. He was intelligent, though not a man, not a living man, and not the size of man, either..."

"He felt like *more* than a man," Eldárien says pensively, "and yet also so much less."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that he was more powerful, even perhaps greater in intellect, greater in the capacity to control events and to force his will. But he was wholly lacking in goodness, wholly devoid of truth, if it may be put that way."

"It may indeed," says Rórlain. "I think we all felt it, though you perhaps more clearly than either of us. We have seen the way that your blade glows upon contact with the forces of darkness. This only deepens my firmness of purpose—and my gratitude—in following you and aiding you in whatever way I may. I must admit that it also raises certain questions, more of curiosity than of anything else."

"And perhaps those questions will be answered soon, when we have a chance to speak together after these more pressing matters are concluded. Regardless, a single sword is as nothing against hordes of the undead, or whatever they may be."

"Aye," Malrûn says, "but it was a great aid in saving us this day."

The three men sit silently for a long moment, each caught up in his own thoughts and feelings, the afternoon sun wheeling slowly overhead and warming the forested valley pleasantly. Eldárien breaks the silence when he says, "So let us return to what we have established: it appears that there is an agreement of sorts, whether one side is coercing the other or both are benefiting from the arrangement, between the Empire—I assume, considering the evidence, the very person of the emperor—and these creatures of darkness. And somehow the Imperial leaders have succeeded in enlisting their might in the cause of crushing the rebellion. This, it seems to me, is the import of their targeting Ristfánd next. Malrûn's words about the activity of the vrû'ádach around Minstead strengthens this conviction. For, according to my limited knowledge, the two centers of the rebellion," he glances quickly at Rórlain and then looks away, "are Minstead and Ristfánd."

"That has become common knowledge," confirms Malrûn. "Only a few weeks ago, an overthrow of the Imperial government was attempted within the ghetto of the city. It was swiftly put to a stop but marked the beginning of open rebellion in Ristfánd."

"So now the manifest activity of the rebels has spread across the mountains and is no longer located only along the Finístra range?" Rórlain asks.

"That is correct," replies Malrûn. "It has remained a small-scale conflict for years—more territorial than anything else, though we—or rather the Empire, forgive me—suspected that it had deeper roots and would spread."

"And now that it has begun to spread, they intend to take drastic measures to nip it in the bud," Eldárien says.

"Exactly," Malrûn agrees, "but perhaps they also wish to benefit from this rebellion."

"How so?" Rórlain asks. "What does the Empire have to gain that it does not already possess?"

"A good question." With this Malrûn rises to his feet and begins to pace back and forth slowly, clearly trying to follow a train of thought. Eldárien sits and thinks as well, while Rórlain draws out his waterskin and drinks deeply of its contents.

"How do you know about the revolt in Ristfánd, Malrûn?" Rórlain asks after a while. "For if it was only a few weeks ago, I do not imagine you were present when it occurred."

"I was not." Malrûn stops pacing and turns to Rórlain. "I know through carrier pigeon."

"But why you? Were you not following our trail during that time?"

"No, I was not," Malrûn explains. "We were in Ígny at the time. We only picked up your trail in the woods of Cára'fel. You see, Lord Irilóf is one of the most important players in the Empire and remains informed of all major events."

"So he received a carrier pigeon while in Ígny," Eldárien says, "and you were in Ígny...for me?"

"This is correct," answers Malrûn. "We arrived after you had already departed. It is a good thing that you had not lingered there any longer than you did, I suppose. Even today it appears that you were saved only by bizarre chance. Without the intervention of those terrible creatures, I fear what would have happened to you."

"Chance..." sighs Eldárien thoughtfully, remembering again the words of Hiliána. "It is indeed most fortunate that things aligned as they did, though I grieve for those men who lost their lives in the process."

"Would that things had turned out differently, and all of us had walked away from this day unscathed," Malrûn affirms, lowering his eyes. After a moment has passed he looks up and meets Eldárien's gaze, continuing to speak, "I see clearly now the injustice of your condemnation. You are not a threat to the Empire, and indeed—I hesitate to say it—it seems that the Empire is a threat to the people of Telmérion."

"So we may yet *need* to be a threat to the Empire," Rórlain interjects. "If we must choose sides, you certainly know where I shall stand."

"And though both Eldárien and I have previously stood on the other side of the line," Malrûn responds, "I think you will find us now standing with you, Rórlain."

"I loathe war," Eldárien says, "and I wish that there was some way to prevent it. But what I have witnessed today is beyond anything I could have expected or imagined. I do *not* intend to be a 'threat' to the Empire, but I *will* stand and fight for our people if the forces of darkness—and an Empire aligned with darkness—seek to conquer and destroy us."

"It sounds like we all agree," Malrûn observes. "However, unlike Eldárien, I am not hesitant to fight. In fact, I have a great deal of anger within me. Anger at those who have forced men like myself into silence and submission for so long. Anger at those who have turned the Empire into what it is now."

"You have not been on the battlefield, I assume?" asks Eldárien.

"No, I have not."

"And you have not seen villages destroyed and innocents slaughtered at the edge of the sword?"

"I have witnessed the aftermath of such loss, though in less extreme form, in the lands marked by the rebellion," Malrûn says.

"By whom? The rebel forces or the armies of the Empire?" Rórlain asks.

"The answer should be apparent. Why would the people of Telmérion slaughter the citizens of their own towns and villages?"

"So they are doing even here on our own soil," Eldárien says, "what they wished to be done in the lands of Tel-Velfána?"

"It seems so," Malrûn confirms, "though it has not reached such a degree as there. I think this is because Telmérion has been 'stably occupied' for so many years already. Less drastic actions are called for. But it nonetheless seems a viable strategy for the Empire to eliminate the possibility of forceful resistance by 'pruning' the population of those considered dangerous."

"And yet what is about to happen in Ristfánd appears to be more than 'pruning'," Rórlain interjects.

"I fear so," says Malrûn in a quiet voice, sitting back down and running his hands through his hair.

"By the way," Eldárien begins, turning to Malrûn, "how did you pick up on my trail and discover us here in Fálstead?"

"We followed the path westward and gained information from an old man who lives in the woods," Malrûn answers.

"Father?" exclaims Rórlain. "You did not harm him, did you?"

"That man was your father? He was mishandled...but unharmed," Malrûn says. "I am sorry. It was apparent to Irilóf that he was hiding information,

and Irilóf threatened him. It was all I could do to restrain the Lord Deputy's hand. Your father did not betray you and withheld his tongue, though his expressions told us enough to assure us that Eldárien had been there and thence traveled further west with one other man in his company. Combined with what we already knew of his origins in Fálstead and what we—partially wrongly—assumed of his relation to the barrow of Séra Galáptes, we knew where to search. In the highlands, we picked up on the trail of two men and increased our pace in the effort to catch up with you. This we did just outside of Fálstead, on the eve of yesterday, and we bode our time until this morning, when we made the capture." Malrûn pauses and sighs. "I am sorry for everything."

"It is in the past now," Eldárien says. "No one in Ígny was harmed either, correct?"

"We found no one in Ígny who gave us any leads at all," Malrûn explains. "It was only luck and intuition that had us travel along the western road—intuition about your destination and your intentions."

"Well, you were partly right, and that disturbs me," Eldárien sighs.

"But what about our path now?" Rórlain says, attempting to turn back to the earlier topic of conversation. "So far those dear to us have been unharmed, but for how much longer? How long until Ígny itself becomes a target? How long until the innocent men living in the countryside and the woods are seen as threats to the Empire's sovereignty?"

"I know not," replies Malrûn. "All we can do is act according to what we now know to the best of our ability and judgment."

"I agree," says Eldárien.

"And what do you propose we do?" Rórlain asks. "I will go with you where you see fit, and I trust your judgment."

"I myself intend to make haste for Ristfánd," Eldárien says. "Someone must warn them, and we do not have the convenience of carrier pigeon. Then, when there, we shall stand at the side of the people, come what may."

"I agree with that course of action," Malrûn says.

"Do you intend to join us?" Rórlain asks.

"What do you suggest?" inquires Malrûn, looking at both of them.

"I think that you should instead travel west," Eldárien replies. "Someone needs to take this information to those who fight for Telmérion in the lands already touched by war, and even to the capital itself."

Malrûn nods and says, "That is what I had thought as well. I have traveled extensively in the lands west of the mountains, so it is clear that I would be the best candidate for this task. It is also true that I may yet be able to bring some influence to bear among confreres who still side with the Empire."

"Be careful," Eldárien says, "for if your activities are discovered, you will

certainly be branded and hunted as an enemy."

"I understand. But I also cannot simply continue acting as I did before. I intend to inform both the rebel forces and any men aligned with the Empire with whom I may carry some influence. They need to know what we have witnessed today, so that they may judge for themselves and take appropriate action."

"It is a dangerous path," Rórlain says. "Are you confident that you shall remain faithful in the service of the people of Telmérion?"

Eldárien glances at Rórlain, but gives him space to voice his lingering doubts and suspicions.

"I trust not in my own strength," Malrûn answers, "but I can assure you that everything I have said to you today I have said in truth. I do not intend to sneak back to the Empire to betray the counsels we have shared together. It is not as if that would make a significant difference anyway, yet I shall still do nothing of the sort."

"For me it might make a difference," Eldárien says.

"Ah, that is true..." Rórlain replies. "I hope that today is the last time, Eldárien, that you find the firm hand of the Empire bearing down on you and pursuit hot on your heels. I shall do my best to make sure that is the case." And after a moment of hesitation, Rórlain continues, "You have my trust, Malrûn, and I expect you to remain faithful to it. I trust in Eldárien's eyes more than in my own in this case, as I know that he sees more than I do of the character of men. If he trusts you, so do I. And you, truly, have given no cause to withhold this trust."

"Thank you, Rórlain," Malrûn replies, visibly moved. "Thank you, Eldárien. I do hope that we will see one another again, wherever our paths may lead us. Look for me with those who fight for the people of Telmérion, for once my matters with the Empire are settled, that is where I shall be."

Chapter Fourteen
Moradóch Steppe

Malrûn departs shortly after their conversation is concluded, accepting from Eldárien and Rórlain some provisions and wishing them well on their journey to the southeast—to Ristfánd—while they wish him the same on his journey westward. They are deeply aware that both directions lead into danger, even unto death, but they do not hesitate, for each man feels stirred to haste by the events of that morning, such that if they could take the wings of eagles to fly to their destinations, they would not hesitate to do so.

The sun is beginning to dip into the western reaches of the sky when Eldárien and Rórlain leave Fálstead, and the day is still comfortably warm, with only a slight chill in the air. The woods are quiet, with hardly a whisper of a breeze, and their travel is accompanied by the voices of birds and insects singing and chirping to the coming evening, eventual twilight, and night's rest. By the time they are deep in the forest, veiled on all sides by thick trees and foliage, they both feel a sense of relief which they did not expect, not only to be moving away from the events of the day and the horrors that dwell under the mountain, but also to be hidden from prying eyes. Knowing that they were followed for over a week without realizing it disturbs them both, and they travel more cautiously now, as if their senses have been sharpened and their awareness heightened. Eldárien's long-trained instinct for survival and stealth—after years not only of tutelage in the army of the Empire but also of vivid experience in the heavily-forested lands of Tel-Velfána—returns in full force. He must fight back feelings of anxiety which are rooted in more than the recent encounter with Irilóf and his men, tracing their way in the deep feelings of his heart to the countless sleepless nights spent in his military camp fearing an ambush, and even more to those times when blood was spilled because of his own miscalculation, or what he perceived to be so.

This is compounded by the fact that he feels deeply responsible for Rórlain, though he knows that Rórlain feels the same way about him. The man looks up to him, trusts him, and follows his lead, and Eldárien is afraid of leading him astray, of making him walk into danger and pain, into loss and death. But he also recognizes that precisely this is what Rórlain wishes: to accompany the man who saved his life and to somehow repay the blood-bond by protecting and saving him in turn, even if he is called upon to do it many times over. For in Rórlain's mind this is not a bond that is paid once and for all—for then the deed would already be done, as Rórlain has saved Eldárien

in the barrow of Séra Galáptes. No, this is a bond that surpasses "debt"; it is not a matter of repaying someone to re-establish equality between the two. Rather, what Rórlain seeks and what Eldárien himself feels in his heart of hearts is that now their lives have been woven together, sewn like two pieces of cloth drawn together with a single thread, and that now they share one destiny, in life and in death, in faith and in valor.

The fact that their care and responsibility for one another are reciprocal comforts Eldárien greatly and eases his anxiety. The bitterness and fear that remain in him because of his failures in the past—and even more his blatant infidelity to the truth—still sting him and linger like a sticky web. But as he walks in silence with Rórlain at his side, he feels a different emotion—and a different word of the heart—begin to make itself known and felt. He also feels more "held" than he has in many years, held, in all of his weakness and insufficiency, by that voice which he heard in the darkness where all threatened to be lost and yet where all was found again: "Your path has been seen and marked out." He unconsciously reaches for the amulet around his neck, only to remember that it was taken from him and now hangs around the neck of Irilóf. Instead he simply presses his hand to his heart, as if to touch that glimmering light, that flickering flame, that was placed inside of him and burns gently and firmly even when he is not aware of it.

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When they come to the edge of Galas Basin a few days later, they find themselves standing on a high plateau looking out over a wide stretch of land. Even from their vantage point they can discern that the landscape before them is rugged and uneven, mostly barren though scattered with vegetation of various kinds, and housing small groves or copses of trees in and among the folds of the land.

"The Moradóch Steppe," Eldárien says. "It is a name, however, that covers an extensive area. Before us lies an extended plain with a great diversity of landscape, vegetation, and wildlife, with land flatter in some places and rougher in others. It stretches out before us as far as the eye can see. I have crossed it twice, but only along the main Márdas road. That is a long way from here. The journey that awaits us now is much further than the one we have just taken."

"I have crossed it before as well, but further to the east, nearer to the ocean and to the lands around Lake Ilína. Our path has only begun," Rórlain adds, "though it would be good to have some horses."

"In that, I agree with you."

"Are there any settlements nearby, or even perhaps a farm, where we could hope to purchase a mount or two?"

"The steppe and its surroundings are in fact more widely populated," El-

dárien replies, "than the central lands of the Galapteäni, which we have just traversed. I wish that I had a map with me, however, because I do not know the land well enough to say for certain what we will or will not find. If I recall correctly, there is a village—Criseä—nestled at the foot of the mountains to the southwest, not a long way from here. But it will definitely put us significantly off course to go in that direction. There are also a number of settlements in the steppe itself, though we could easily pass them by without knowing unless we find a road and follow it."

"How likely would that be?" Rórlain asks.

"Quite, actually. I would be greatly surprised if we were somehow to miss the roads that weave across this land. We are almost bound to find one running south or southeast, and we can follow it when we find it. In that way, we will be most likely both to pass through a village as well as to find our way directly and safely to Ristfánd."

"So the question is: which route is fastest," says Rórlain, "to walk to Criseä and find horses as quickly as possible, though losing time by moving closer toward the mountains rather than further from them, or to head as straight as we can toward Ristfánd and hope to find horses at the first settlement we come upon?"

"That is the question indeed," Eldárien sighs pensively.

After a few moments of silence, Rórlain asks, "What are you thinking?"

"I am conflicted... How much money do you have?"

"My father entrusted to me a good one-hundred menaë," answers Rórlain.

"That is quite a bit. More than enough for two horses," says Eldárien, while Rórlain rummages in his pack to draw out the coins.

"Er...he *did,* but..."

"What is the matter?"

"I am afraid that they have been—"

"Taken..." Eldárien concludes. "It must have happened when one of the guards searched our packs, unless, of course, you simply happened to misplace them."

"I suspect not," Rórlain says. "I have not touched them since leaving home, and they were wrapped in a satchel at the bottom of my bag."

"Well, regardless of what transpired, we do not have them," says Eldárien, "though I hope that wherever we find horses we shall be able to convince their owners of the pressing nature of our journey."

"That is true. I only wish it were otherwise."

"As do I. Most men in our land who own horses do not keep them for sport but out of need and utility. Yet at the moment, I cannot see another way."

"So," says Rórlain hesitantly, "which direction shall we travel?"

"Considering everything...let us strike out into the steppe and head straight for Ristfánd, or as straight as we can manage."

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The land gradually descends along a vast escarpment for a number of days until leveling out into a wide expanse of plain stretching to the east and the south, while to the north and west lie the highlands and, beyond them, rising to the meeting of earth and sky, the mountains. The two men move away from the mountains now, more or less straight to the southeast. And despite the overall lay of the land being level, the going is not easy, for the earth is rugged, pock-marked, and with wide rifts of stone or shelves of earth similar to what they had seen in the Aldéra Highlands, only larger, steeper, and darker in color. Here the stone is rich in saturation, a dark brown or gray, sometimes almost black, with glistening ore veins of lighter color within it. Throughout the grassy, thickly vegetated surface of the land also lie many earthy cliffs and crags, large and small, in which flourish various bushes and vines and the roots of ancient trees—trees which are now gnarled, hardened, and wrinkled, but which still reach up with a wide span of branch and leaf toward the sky.

Often they find it necessary to deviate from their course simply because the land is gutted with gorges and ravines, and they must follow along them, either at the upper ridge or walking along the base, with walls to their right and their left. Sometimes they must walk for hours in a direction that they do not intend, only to attempt to make up the time by progressing as straight as they can afterwards. All of this slows their course, and they fight discouragement that the already long and slow journey is still further delayed. On the seventh day after departing from Fálstead, they are wakened by a heavy rain, with lightning flashing between the thick clouds above them and thunder echoing across the plains. And though the lightning and thunder cease, the rain continues for the entirety of the day, drenching them and slowing their progress still further.

They cannot make a fire that evening, and they also finish the last of their rations—a handful of dry grain each—which they have already consumed as sparingly as they can without harming their health. So it is with dampened spirits that they both seek shelter under the outcropping of a large shelf of stone, changing into the driest clothes that they can find in their wet packs. They crawl under furs to attempt sleep, both because the air is chilly and in order to keep out the wetness that saturates the air and blows upon them like a thick mist, even though they are sheltered from direct rainfall. When they wake in the dim and gray light of morning the next day after a night of restless sleep, it is still raining heavily.

After gathering their belongings they depart without breakfast and clam-

ber back up to a high point in the land to get a better view of the path ahead of them. But a dense white mist cloaks the landscape, veiling it almost entirely from sight, and they can see hardly more than thirty yards ahead of them in any direction. "At least it is not especially cold," Rórlain says, trying to encourage himself as much as Eldárien. "Spring rains are better than a winter that never lets go."

Eldárien has long begun to regret the choice he made at the edge of the basin overlooking the plains—the decision to strike out southeast rather than to head back toward the mountains and the village of Criseä. And this regret stirs in him experiences of similar "miscalculation" from the past, similar failures, and as they walk throughout the day, the rain and fog feel to be not only around him, outside of him, but also within his own mind and heart, blinding his vision and oppressing his spirit. As he tries to navigate through the fog within his own being, just as they pick their way among the rocks, grasses, and crags of earth on their way across the plains, Eldárien realizes that he has felt *different* since encountering the vrû'ádach. Since gazing into their eyes of blackness, since hearing their voices of anguish, since confronting again the very proximity of death and the suffocating assault of darkness, he has felt a *weight* upon his heart.

He tries to name it or to make sense of it, and he cannot. He attempts to shake it off, but it clings to him more tightly than coiled rope or an insect burrowing into his flesh or an illness difficult to cure. When he and Rórlain stop to make camp that evening, they are weak and exhausted, having had nothing to eat all day. The rain still falls from the sky, less intense now but steady nonetheless. And this time they do not have the convenience of a natural shelter of land and must make do with their own bedrolls and cloaks, which are already wet from the ceaseless downpour of the last two days.

Eldárien lies curled up against the earth, his head hooded and buried within the bedroll, but for many hours he is unable to sink into sleep. He listens to the soft pitter-patter of the rain against earth, stone, and fabric and the occasional rumble of distant thunder, and he is grateful, too, when he hears the heavy breathing of Rórlain beside him. But it is well after midnight when he too finally sinks into sleep. And then he dreams.

Dark faces without eyes stare at him, and their gaze is so intense that it seems to burrow into his very soul, suffocating him and filling him with dread and despair. He tries to turn away, to divert his own gaze, but he cannot. His eyes are locked with the eyeless-eyes—the empty sockets which nonetheless see—of these wretched beasts. Do they see, or is it only his imagination? Or does something else, someone else, see through them, as if looking with their eyes?

As he struggles to turn away, to flee from this horrifying gaze, Eldárien

hears a voice echoing around him—far different from the voice of Hiliána, which had spoken *within*—but also more oppressive, more assaulting, and harder to resist. It says to him but one word: "Murderer." And in an instant the staring creatures are gone, and Eldárien finds himself falling into blackness, as if into some bottomless abyss under the earth. He flails about, grasping wildly for a handhold, a rope or rock or branch. But there is nothing.

And suddenly the scene shifts, and he stands before a peaceful village at the edge of a forest, watching men, women, and children go about their day. He hears the echo of a blacksmith's hammer against metal and the lowing of a cow and the laughter of children and their song and the chattering of women as they walk together to market. He stands, again rooted to the spot and unable to take his eyes away. He stands, unmoving, eyes wide open, while someone steps forward—steps forward from the very spot where he stands—and begins to walk toward the village. Eldárien looks at this person, and it is he himself, wearing a heavy breastplate, pauldrons, and gauntlets, with a shield in one hand and a sword in the other. Along his right temple is a long braid, and along his left, two knots, the marks of a captain.

A moment more, and this captain is joined by a whole company of soldiers, dressed in armor and bearing weapons, and together they pass through the village like a wave of the ocean at high tide or like a destructive storm blowing in without mercy or calculation. It does not take long, a few minutes at most, and the village is stained in blood, quiet and still, a graveyard of unburied dead.

† † †

Eldárien awakes with a start, gasping for air, and finds Rórlain bending over him, the dim light of morning shining behind him. "Are you alright?" Rórlain asks. "A dream, I suppose?"

"Yes..." Eldárien breathes and tries to sit up, but his body rebels, as if paralyzed, throbbing with pain. "I..."

"What is it?"

"I think I might be—" and before he can get the words out, he retches and vomits on the grass, though nothing comes out but a bit of stomach acid and spittle.

"Can you help me up?" he asks, after spitting the bitter taste out of his mouth.

Rórlain crouches down and places his arms under Eldárien's, around his body, and lifts him up into an upright position. He stands, unsteady on his feet, the world reeling about him.

"You feel ill?"

"I don't know if I can walk..."

Rórlain looks around pensively at their surroundings. The rain has less-

ened now to hardly a drizzle, and patches of blue sky appear between the low-hanging gray clouds. It is shortly after sunrise, but the day is colorless. Eldárien, however, has always loved rain and the rich saturation of color and texture that pervades land and leaf and flower whenever the atmosphere itself is bathed in rain, drenched in the perspiration of sky and air. But now he can hardly keep his eyes open, and his head slumps against his chest.

"Should I..." Rórlain begins, hesitantly, "try to find a horse? Or should I carry you? Or we could rest here for the day..."

"I don't know," Eldárien says, "but I need to sit down."

Rórlain re-situates Eldárien's bedroll and then helps him back onto it.

"You also need to eat," Rórlain adds. "We both need to eat."

"Perhaps let me rest a bit more," Eldárien replies. "You could hunt in the area throughout the morning. I am sure that there are rabbits or foxes in the plains, and even deer or elk."

"I will do that," says Rórlain, "though I am hesitant to leave you alone—particularly in this state."

"Right now, it seems we do not have a choice."

And so Rórlain departs, leaving his pack behind but with his bow and quiver on his back and his axe in his belt. Eldárien pulls his bedroll over his fevered, aching body again and closes his eyes.

After midday Rórlain returns. Eldárien is awakened by the sound of his movement and opens his eyes, looking up into a clear sky with a figure silhouetted against it. Rórlain crouches down and pulls something from his shoulder—two rabbits tied together at the hind legs. Seeing that Eldárien is looking at him, Rórlain says, "I found something."

"Good..." Eldárien whispers, and his eyes close again.

He awakes and returns from blackness to the words, "Can you eat?"

He looks up to find Rórlain's kind face looking down upon him, the sound of a light crackling fire behind him.

"I need to try," he answers. "Help me sit?"

"Of course."

He is able to eat only a few bites before feeling nauseous again, even though he is able to hold in the food. "We can try again this evening," he says softly. "Thank you, Rórlain."

"I am glad that I found us something, however small." Rórlain takes the plate of food from Eldárien and glances at the sky, saying, "The rain is gone, at least for the present. Would you like to try to move, or do you need to rest some more?"

Eldárien laughs quietly and replies, "Both..."

"I should have expected such an answer."

After thinking for a bit, Eldárien says, "Since we have food enough for to-

day, let us stay here. Regardless of how I feel, we will set out tomorrow and hope that we come upon a settlement or even just travelers on the road."

"Very well," Rórlain agrees. "Is there anything else that I can do for you at the moment?"

"How are we concerning water?"

"We have plenty. And even if our skins are empty, there is a fresh and clear pond filled by the rain not far from here."

"I will drink some more tonight," says Eldárien. "Why not rest yourself? We have been pushing ourselves hard now for weeks."

"I do not know if I could sleep," Rórlain replies, "though I would be grateful for some rest." And with this, he sits down on the grass and lays back, staring up at the sky and running his hands through his curly black hair. "How far across the steppe are we, do you know?"

"Not very far. It is a wide expanse."

"I see."

"But it is dotted, as I said, with hamlets and homesteads," Eldárien adds, "so we can have hope of finding some aid soon."

"Let us pray that hope is proved true," sighs Rórlain, closing his eyes and crossing one ankle over the other with his hands behind his head. Eldárien shivers, certain that he has a fever and worried not only for himself but for Rórlain. If he cannot travel tomorrow, what are they to do? Perhaps they could survive like this in the wilderness for a long time. But what about the need to get word to Ristfánd as soon as possible? Should he send Rórlain ahead while he himself remains to recover? No, he knows that Rórlain would refuse the offer and would insist instead on carrying Eldárien on his own back.

Only the new day will tell.

† † †

Eldárien feels slightly better upon waking at first light on the following day. He is able to sit on his own but still feels almost too weak to move. The day dawns clear and warm, and Rórlain is already awake, sitting by a fire from which the smell of cooked rabbit emanates.

"Do you think you can eat?" Rórlain asks.

"Yes I do."

"Good. I have heated the rest of the meat and also found some herbs to season it with. They should be good for the stomach."

"Thank you, Rórlain," Eldárien says, "for staying by my side."

"I would not leave you here in the wilderness alone!"

"I know...and I mean more than just yesterday."

Rórlain looks at Eldárien silently, his eyes speaking in response, and then turns to the food, placing some meat on a plate and handing it to Eldárien.

"Eat lightly," he says. "We do not want you losing your food again."

"Last time there was nothing to lose," says Eldárien.

"True, but this time there is."

Eldárien is able to finish the whole plate of rabbit and herbs and feels much better for it. He also experiences another wave of gratitude that he does not walk alone but has Rórlain at his side. Yet now comes the moment to see if he can physically walk, despite the weakness that still lingers in his body. Rórlain helps him to his feet and rolls his bedding up afterward.

"Allow me to carry your pack," he says, tying the bedroll to it, lifting it, and swinging it over his shoulders.

"That is a lot to carry," Eldárien says, eyeing his companion. "Two packs, along with your bow, arrows, and axe. Do you think you can do it?"

Rórlain paces in a circle and opens his arms wide, as if to prove the point, saying, "See? I am doing it."

"Indeed," Eldárien sighs, with a subtle smile. "We shall see what you say in a couple hours." Then he pulls his own sword and bow over his shoulders; at the moment, their weight is more than adequate.

And so they set off, their faces to the sun, and the grass, shrubs, and flowers glistening in the morning light as the last bit of dew evaporates from blade, leaf, and petal. After they have walked for an hour or so—which Eldárien finds easier than he had feared—the land begins to rise, rocky and rugged, with scattered boulders littered here and there and birch, spruce, and rowan trees interspersed among the stones. The rowan trees are past flowering, and their white flowers have now been replaced by rich bundles of red berries. Rórlain approaches and feels a few berries between his fingers, commenting, "I think they should be ripe enough to eat, though these berries need to be cooked before being consumed."

"Let us gather some, then," Eldárien replies. "Hopefully we will be able to find something to go with them, whether flesh or fruit."

"Or vegetable," Rórlain adds. "There is a great deal of wild foliage in these plains, much of it edible. That is quite fortunate considering our situation."

After gathering some berries, they continue on their journey. They walk until the sun is high in the sky, and Eldárien feels energized by the movement, though his head throbs continuously under the exertion. A little after midday, they climb to the crest of a rise of land and see that they are on a ridge between two stretches of plain, one behind them to the northwest and the other rolling into the distance before them to the east and the south. And to their deep gratitude, they see what appears to be a thin line of road winding its way through the midst of the plain before them, north to south, hardly more than a brown and gray line among the rich greens and yellows of the vegetation of the steppe.

After resting for a few minutes, they descend the ridge at an angle and then, when the land again becomes more or less level beneath their feet, set their course straight for the road. They reach it in just short of an hour, and, after looking along it in both directions, Eldárien remarks, "This is not the Márdas road, but I expect that it will meet up with it further to the south and east. This is a very good sign."

"How many more days of travel until we come to Ristfánd?" Rórlain asks.

Eldárien thinks for a moment, trying to calculate their approximate location, and says, "I have never been this far west before, but assuming that the main road is only ten or twenty leagues further east—where I have been—I could say that we are nearly straight north of Ristfánd. All that is necessary now is to travel south-southeast, until coming to the main road and then to follow it directly south until arriving at our destination."

"How long is that?"

"I do not know how far south we are, so I cannot really say. A long time yet. Weeks."

Rórlain sighs and then says, "Less with horses."

"Exactly," Eldárien agrees, "less with horses."

Chapter Fifteen
Seeking Aid

"Can we rest for a bit before continuing further?" Eldárien asks, sitting down at the side of the road.

"Most definitely," replies Rórlain, crouching down beside him. "It is past lunch time already, and we have both eaten very little over the previous few days and more." After a moment, he adds, "How are you feeling now? It seems the fever has subsided."

"It has, more or less, but I still feel quite weak, and there is a throbbing pain in my head. But above all, I am quite grateful that this sickness was not longer-lasting or more debilitating."

"I suppose it was due to the weather and the diet, neither of which have been conducive to health?"

"I know not what else it would be," says Eldárien, resting his head in his hands and closing his eyes. The area along his temples is pulsing with a sharp pain that makes it difficult to keep his eyes open, particularly in the brightness of the midday sun.

"Is there naught that I can do to ease your pain and discomfort?" Rórlain asks, compassion in his voice.

"I think I am already beginning to recover," Eldárien assures him, "but I think some food would help both of us."

"We have the rowan berries," proffers Rórlain, "though they are not much. I could take an hour or two to hunt, if you wish it."

"No, I do not want to delay any longer." Eldárien presses his head between his fingers, gently massaging the sides of his forehead and along the edges of his eyes. "But I could do with a bit more rest. Could you cook those berries? They will have to be sufficient to hold us over until this evening."

"That I will do." With this, Rórlain rises to his feet and goes about gathering fallen branches to build a small fire, while Eldárien lays back against the grass and tries to sleep.

After a small repast of berries they depart again and follow the road to the south. The land has become more level now, though still scattered here and there with stones and trees, and tall grass waves freely in the wind on either side of the road, with speckled red and yellow flowers in full bloom dancing among the grasses. The afternoon is much harder going for Eldárien than the morning was, and it becomes necessary for them to regularly stop at intervals so that he may rest. At evening twilight, he collapses on the road from weakness, and Rórlain insists on making camp for the night. He catches a fox just as darkness begins to enshroud the land and cooks it for their evening meal.

In the morning, Eldárien's state has greatly improved, and both of them are grateful that the illness was indeed, to all appearances, short lived. And things promise soon to improve even further, as around nine o'clock they come upon a farm a short ways off the road to the east. They follow a narrow and winding dirt path to the main building, with wheat fields on either side of them. There is also a stable not far away from the house with three horses and, in an enclosed pasture further back, a small herd of cows. Rórlain knocks on the door and they wait for a minute or two, but there is no answer.

"Perhaps they are around the back," he muses, "or working in the fields, and we just missed them."

"You may go ahead and look," says Eldárien. "I am going to sit here for a moment."

"Good. You get what rest you can," Rórlain says, turning to go. "With any fortune, I will be right back."

Eldárien sits upon the ground, even though there are crates and boxes near the entrance to the house which he could use. He pulls his pack off and sets it before him and readjusts the baldric of his greatsword over his shoulder. Then he hears a voice from behind him, "So you are just going to set up camp right on my doorstep, are you?" He turns and sees a man step out from the doorway into the sunlight.

"My apologies," Eldárien says, rising to his feet with effort. "We meant no

intrusion. My companion is only out back looking for the owner of this property—which I suppose you are. If we found no one, we were soon to be on our way."

"Well, you have found someone," the man says, his voice unfriendly, "though I still suggest you continue on your way."

"Please, could you listen to me for only a moment?" Eldárien asks. "We only seek aid in an important endeavor."

"Why would I wish to aid you?"

"Because our cause is just. We make haste to Ristfánd with pressing news of great importance to the well-being and safety of all in the city."

"That is a new one," the man says, incredulously.

"I speak naught but the truth," affirms Eldárien.

"Then prove it. What is this 'pressing news' of which you speak?"

"War soon comes over the mountains, and, within only a short matter of time, we fear that armies shall march upon Ristfánd."

"And what care is that of mine?"

"Surely you—"

"Surely I what?"

"They are your own people," Eldárien says, trying to restrain his frustration. "Would you not wish to aid them in whatever way you may?"

"I would perhaps aid them if I knew there were a problem," says the man, leaning against the wall and crossing his arms over his chest. "But I have no reason to trust a wandering vagabond."

"I am not a vagabond. I was once a soldier in the Imperial army but departed from that office some months past. And now I see that great violence is planned toward the people of Telmérion, and it is my duty to prevent it if I may."

"If you may? Then why do you wander through the fields on foot, armed like brigands, and with no tokens to prove your trustworthiness?"

"It is only a recent development, and..." Eldárien falls silent. It is clear that the man has no interest, not only in helping him, but even in listening to him. At this moment Rórlain returns and, seeing the man, walks to Eldárien's side.

He then says, "Good day, sir, we wish blessings unto this household."

"Keep your blessings for yourself," the man replies without hesitation. "The only thing that I desire from you is that you vacate my property immediately."

Glancing at Eldárien, Rórlain opens his mouth to speak and then promptly closes it again.

"We are only in need of a couple horses to speed our travels to Ristfánd," Eldárien says. "That is all."

"You wish to make a deal? What do you have that I would want?"

"Very little, I am afraid. We have only what you see."

"We had coin, but it was—" Rórlain begins.

"You *had* coin," the man emphasizes. "But you do no longer. No matter. I need no coin. I live from the fruit of my own labor. Now depart from me."

"Why are you so hesitant to help us? We seek to prevent the loss of many lives," Eldárien says.

"My reasons are my own. Now be off with you."

"But may I at least ask if there is another settlement nearby where we may seek aid?"

"There are plenty of houses around here," the man answers, "but don't you go interfering and trampling all over people's property."

"What about an inn or even a hamlet?" Rórlain asks.

"I do not travel much, but most inns in the area are along the Márdas road, and that is a good one-hundred or more miles to the east, on the far side of the Kvír Canyon."

"Thank you for your time," Eldárien says, and he and Rórlain turn to go.

The man says nothing more but stands and watches them depart until they are once again on the road heading south.

"Why did he...?" Rórlain asks, but his voice fades out before he has even voiced the question.

"I do not know," replies Eldárien. "He was both cautious and angry. It could be for a specific cause or simply because he had no desire to help us. Regardless, we have no choice but to continue on and try somewhere else."

"We could also take the horses and leave sign that we intend to return them," Rórlain says. "The need is desperate, and I am sure once he hears the truth about Ristfánd, he will understand our motives. When we bring them back, we can bring payment, and extra for the inconvenience."

"No, we cannot do that," answers Eldárien. "I am still weak, but we can walk. And above all, a path toward the light can only be pursued by means of light. Darkness, even darkness under the guise of good, has no place within it. If anything, this is a lesson that I have learned deeply."

"As you say," Rórlain concludes. "I am sorry to have suggested it. We will simply need to trust that help will be found elsewhere."

The road begins to turn to the east now, and they follow along it hopeful that the Márdas road indeed lies in this direction. Within the next five or six hours, they pass by a handful of other houses, but none of them have horses that they could even request. So they continue on until it is nearly dark, and, just as the streaks of sunset light in the sky are fading to formless black, they come to an intersection where two roads meet and, to their delight, an inn. A sign hangs over the door, weather beaten but legible:

Springsummer Inn and Taberna

"Interesting name," Rórlain remarks with a smile.

"I suppose it is fitting, considering the time of year," Eldárien says, "though we are a couple months too early."

"Or maybe it refers to both seasons," Rórlain laughs, "and then we are right on time."

"Regardless, I am glad we are...finally..."

"Yes." Rórlain looks at Eldárien for a moment. "Here we can get some hearty food and a good bed. I just wish we could stay for a longer time until you are fully recovered."

"The only thing that will fully help me recover, I think, is bringing word successfully to Ristfánd," Eldárien says. "The worry that more lives shall be lost on my account is weighing upon me greatly."

"And that burden is not on your shoulders alone, Eldárien," Rórlain responds in a quiet voice.

"I understand. Nonetheless, it feels like it is."

"Come, let us go inside."

The door swings with a loud creak when Rórlain pulls it open, and as they enter they find that the front room of the inn and taberna is nearly empty. Two men of rugged appearance sit together talking quietly, steaming drinks on the table between them, and a woman sits on a stool alone at a counter speaking to an aged and heavily-bearded man, who appears to be the innkeeper. A stained apron stretches across his broad, barrel-like chest, and he holds a ring of keys in his hand. Rórlain and Eldárien watch as he removes one of the keys from the ring and hands it to the woman, who then turns away and ascends a flight of stairs at the other end of the room.

They approach the counter themselves and the man greets them with a toothy grin, "Good evening, sirs. My name is Sádric, and I am the man you need to be talking to around here if you require anything in terms of lodgings or refreshment. Be you travelers looking for a place to rest for the night?"

"Yes, we are," Rórlain says. "We have traveled quite a long ways, from the base of the Téldrens, and seek both shelter and nourishment."

"I have just the thing to remedy that," the innkeeper says, "a place in our main sleeping room and a hearty meal. What say you?"

"A hearty meal would be just the thing," Eldárien says. "However, we came upon some unfortunate circumstances on the road, and our money was stolen. I do not wish to mislead you, so I say outright that we have no means to pay, unless there is something else that we could give in exchange for your hospitality."

"You seem like friendly enough folk," Sádric says, though suspicion creeps subtly into his face, "but I am not accustomed to giving out services for free. This establishment is my livelihood, after all, and my wife and young ones at

home depend on what I make here."

"We entirely understand," Eldárien replies, "and we would pay you at this moment if we could. Perhaps we could make some sort of arrangement?"

"First, tell me your business."

Rórlain sighs almost imperceptibly and then answers, "We travel to Ristfánd on pressing business, with news of the civil war in the west. We are aligned with neither faction, but have a warning to bring to the people of the city the arrival of which it would be well for you to hasten in whatever way you may."

Sádric looks at Rórlain in silence as he ruminates on these words, one of his eyebrows raised as if this helps him to think. "So you say you are in haste for the city? That is a long ways yet."

"We know," Eldárien says. "The circumstances of our journey are unfortunate, and we travel by the quickest means at our disposal."

"You have some horses out front, I imagine, which will need stabling?" Sádric asks.

"Unfortunately, no," Eldárien replies. "That, too, we wished to ask you about."

"And with nothing to give in exchange for them?"

"Indeed."

"Well, you both are asking a lot for very little—or rather for nothing."

"The horses we will return to you," Rórlain says, "and we shall also return, at earliest convenience, with twice the amount we owe you or shall send it to you by another means."

"I think," Sádric says, eyeing both of them for a long moment, but his expression softening again to the warmth that it showed at the beginning, "I think that you are telling the truth. This is a small inn in an out-of-the-way place, but I see enough people come through here to learn a bit about travelers and about the ways of men, both good and bad. And you do not have the smell of bad men."

Rórlain laughs at this and comments, "But we probably do smell like something else. We have been now without shelter for many weeks."

"Well, I hope that the warmth of my inn may serve you both, whose faces are both warm and kind, and that you may continue your journey in peace and with all speed," Sádric says. "But first, let me get you something to fill your bellies. Please, have a seat. And while you eat, I will see about horses. I cannot promise anything, as I myself do not have any, but I shall see what I can do."

"You have our gratitude," Eldárien replies. "We cannot express that deeply enough."

They seat themselves at a table in the corner of the room, and, within five

minutes, an aged woman appears from a door at the back of the room, behind the counter, and brings out two bowls of hearty soup that she sets before them. She returns a moment later with a loaf of rye bread and some cups of thick tisane made of a rich combination of spices and herbs. It is already quite late in the evening, and soon the two men who were seated nearby rise from their seats and depart through the door outside, leaving Rórlain and Eldárien alone.

"You sounded quite discouraged in your remarks as we stood outside," Rórlain says as he eats.

"Concerning bringing word to Ristfánd?" asks Eldárien.

"Yes."

"It is not the present that discourages me so much as the past. For the affairs of the moment, all we can do is walk in trust and hope. The past, however, lingers and continues to afflict me and weigh me down."

"What precisely continues to remain with you," Rórlain asks, "if you do not mind me asking? Is it what you already shared with me concerning your years in Tel-Velfána?"

"I think that is it, yes..." Eldárien answers, though uncertainly. "I still keenly feel the weight of my own inadequacy, my own failures. I refer to the miscalculations or the poor directives, the blind-spots, which often caused suffering or even death for my men. But I also feel the weight of my responsibility for the deaths of many warriors of Tel-Velfána, who would still be alive today were it not for my obedience to the harsh military commands of my superiors. I knew that war was not about eradicating one's enemy, but that is precisely the way that, for all practical purposes, the Empire had begun to wage war in Tel-Velfána. And I am complicit in that."

After receiving these words in silence, Rórlain says in response, "It seems to me that, on the field of battle, the threat of death on both sides can dull one's inner sense, the voice of the heart, and make it easy to act out merely of the instinct for survival."

"That may be true," Eldárien retorts, "but as I said concerning the vrû'ádach, I say also concerning this: a man always remains a man, even on the field of battle. And I knew well what I was doing. It was not a decision made in the flurry of the moment, but a command with which I grappled, wrestled, and disagreed before deliberately carrying it out."

"I am sorry," Rórlain says, correcting himself. "I did not intend to excuse or explain away your actions. That is one of the worst things that I could do for you, since if you were to accept such a suggestion—as if absolution for your wrongdoings came from me—then you would never find true freedom. I myself cannot offer you that, and I apologize that I unconsciously tried to do so." He sighs and adds, "But I do offer you a listening ear."

"And I appreciate it, Rórlain," says Eldárien, and then, after a long and thought-laden pause, he continues, "There is also this sense that has been recurring to me ever since our time in Fálstead, or even before. In my mind's eye, it is as if the destruction of my hometown—and the destruction of many similar settlements throughout our history and the history of other nations—is being accounted unto me. It is as if I myself have committed it, as if it has happened at my own hand and at the edge of my own blade."

"But it has not happened at your hands. Why do you feel that way?"

"Perhaps it is simply my heart's way of acknowledging that I *am* capable of such actions. It is my way of taking responsibility for my capacity for such evil."

"And thus a way of distancing yourself from it?"

"No..." Eldárien breathes. "Quite the opposite, in fact. I do not distance myself from it, for I think the contrary is really called for: to recognize, to accept, that such a capacity is part of me, such a woundedness and blindness of heart."

"I think I understand," Rórlain says, "but it also remains true that you have *not* committed such atrocities. Correct?"

"That is true," replies Eldárien. "Such was precisely the command I received at the end of my time in Tel-Velfána, and which I rejected. The commander of my regiment insisted on 'scouring the countryside' and eliminating all possibility of uprising or resistance. And this involved the murder of countless innocents. So you are right: I have not become personally responsible for such actions. And I do—and must—distance myself from them in every thought, disposition, and action of my life." He pauses and runs his hands through his hair, deep in thought, as if trying to tap into a profound inner wellspring that will allow him to enunciate in words something that has eluded even his conscious awareness. At last he says, "But I still recognize that I am *not* unlike other men—in no way better than any man who has walked this earth. We all share the same humanity, with both its wounds and its aspirations, its beauty and its ugliness. And it seems to me...it seems to me that precisely acknowledging this bond with other men, this likeness to other men, allows my own fidelity to the light, to beauty and truth and goodness, to in some way be healing also for them. Yes, even for those who *have* committed atrocities, who have yielded freely unto such evil, my own actions for goodness can...how do I say?...lift them up..."

Rórlain receives all of this and does not immediately respond. There is a long moment in which both men simply sit together, reflecting on Eldárien's words and trying to understand their import and their meaning. When he does speak, Rórlain says, "So you are saying that you want to succeed where others have failed? Or, let me phrase it more appropriately: you desire to

remain faithful where others have betrayed, to choose good where others have chosen evil?"

"The words do not quite match the intention," Eldárien replies. "It has nothing to do with acting differently from others. In fact, it is more accurate to say that I want to draw ever closer throughout my life to the darkness of this world, not in evildoing but in compassion. And yet this is a compassion that is not at 'arm's length,' but shares in the inner state of those many who experience darkness first-hand, in their very life, in their very person. Only then can I also desire to remain faithful to the light, and to choose goodness, not only where they have failed, but on their behalf and for their sake, and indeed as one of them. If such a thing is possible."

Rórlain turns back to his food as if he does not know how to answer this, and in fact he does not. The feelings and aspirations that Eldárien expresses are both new to him and beyond his comprehension, though perhaps with time and experience he shall find a doorway into their meaning and mystery. For his part, Eldárien does not expect either understanding or an answer, for he hardly understands himself. How could he expect his companion, as good a man as he is, to understand and to explain these deep matters of his own heart? Thus, both men lapse back into silence and finish their meal without another word. Sádric returns and approaches their table soon after.

"Let me give you first the good news," he says. "I was able to find a couple horses for you. You said you travel with news about the war which needs to reach Ristfánd with haste?"

"Yes," Eldárien replies.

"Is it favorable to the Empire or to the rebels that your message reach its destination?" asks Sádric. "I need to know at least this much."

"It is favorable to the people of Ristfánd and their survival. And in that respect, I suppose it shall be indirectly favorable to the rebels and even to the Empire insofar as it is actually a custodian of peace and order—though that, precisely, is the matter that our message bears upon."

"You have heard that there was conflict in Ristfánd some weeks back?" Sádric asks.

"Yes, we have heard indirectly," Rórlain says. "And the message we carry is a warning of more grievous conflict to come."

"If what you say is true, then I wish to aid you in whatever way I may, that such word may reach Ristfánd swiftly. The horses, however, do not belong to me, and my neighbor is not interested in letting them go without a price. He wishes to speak with you in the morning. That, I suppose, is the bad news."

"Very well," Eldárien says. "But there is something else, perhaps even more prudent, which you could do for us."

"What may that be?"

"Regardless of how quickly my companion and I can travel to Ristfánd, as long as word itself reaches the city, perhaps most of the damage of our delay can be averted."

Rórlain looks at Eldárien and says, "Do you think they would believe the message we have without hearing from us in person?"

"I know not," replies Eldárien, "but I would rather send word that is not believed than not send word at all. We shall continue to travel with haste either way, that we may speak in the flesh with those concerned." Then he turns back to Sádric and says, "Do you think you could have a message sent by courier, or whatever the fastest means at your disposal may be, to the authorities in Ristfánd?"

"This is just a small intersection of but a few houses," Sádric says. "Couriers rarely pass through here. And I would be hesitant to trust your message to just any travelers who say they are going to Ristfánd. After all, simply trusting the two of you is a great deal."

"I understand," Eldárien whispers, bowing his head and thinking for a moment. After a while, he looks up and says resolutely, "I think that getting the horses is currently the best and only option at our disposal. It is true that, with exception of carrier pigeon, which the people of Telmérion simply do not use, no one will ride faster or harder to deliver the message than we ourselves."

"I agree with that judgment," Rórlain says.

"Then let us hope this neighbor of yours is favorable to our cause," says Eldárien. "What is his name?"

"His name is Sójen. I shall introduce you to him at first light on the morrow," Sádric says. "Though for now, allow me to show your place of rest. You shall be the only persons staying tonight, so the room shall be your own."

† † †

In the morning, Eldárien wakes feeling worse than he did the day before and is overcome by weakness as he tries to rise from bed. He attempts to shrug it off, pulling on his boots and getting to his feet anyway, though he must lean against the wall for support. He then dons his mail hauberk over his linen gambeson and, over that, his cloth tunic and overshirt, fastening the front with trembling fingers. He sees through the paned window nearby that it is still dark outside, though Rórlain is not in the room. As he makes his way down the stairs to the taberna and entrance, Eldárien sees him sitting at one of the tables in conversation with Sádric. Upon his approach, both men turn to look at him.

"Good morning, Eldárien," says Rórlain. "Sádric has offered to give us some provisions for our journey."

"It is not much," Sádric adds, "as the harvests have been less this year than

they have in many years, but I do have some to spare. And your friend here let on that you have no food for the journey. Considering your errand, I thought a bit would be better than nothing."

"Thank you, Sádric," Eldárien says. "That is actually a great help. I wish that we could pay you for your assistance."

"Mine is a small inn with few visitors. So I am glad to help whom I may," responds Sádric, and he turns and glances out the window. "Daylight should be coming soon. Shall we go?"

"Yes," says Rórlain. "Let us hope this meeting proves favorable."

"I suspect it will," Sádric comments. "Sójen strongly supports the rebel movement, so I recommend you speak to him in that light. Surely that will sway him to your cause."

"We will speak the truth," Eldárien says, "but it seems that this truth shall be palatable to him, namely the truth concerning the welfare of the rebels in Ristfánd."

"And more than the rebels," says Rórlain. "This concerns all the citizens of this land, not only those who take up arms and fight. For any man or woman may die by the sword, whether they wield one or not."

"But surely the violence of the war shall not reach to the common folk such as myself," Sádric says. "What quarrel would they have with ordinary farmers, laborers, and innkeepers?"

"I wish your assumption were true," Rórlain says, "but the violence has already done so west of the mountains. There is cause to expect it to do so here as well."

"That is actually something about which I wished to speak to you, Sádric," says Eldárien. "But let us wait until we are together with Sójen, so that the topic need be addressed only once."

"As you say."

Sójen is already in the stables feeding the horses when they arrive. He is a weathered man at the meeting-point between middle age and old age, with thick hair graying towards white, and a bushy beard. He wears the attire of an ordinary laborer, though in his eyes glint intelligence and a tendency toward deep reflection.

"Hail, friends," he says as they approach, "for that is what I hope you are."

"That is our intent," says Eldárien, reaching out his hand and clasping Sójen's in greeting. All then introduce themselves to one another. After this, Eldárien continues, "Sádric has spoken with you of our cause, though I imagine you wish to know more."

"He told me that you intend to bring news to Ristfánd that is favorable to the rebels?"

"That is true," replies Rórlain. "We bring word of warning concerning a

planned attack on the city."

"And how did you come by such knowledge?" Sójen asks. "I see that you are both natives of Telmérion, but many men of these lands nowadays seem to belong more to the Vælírian Empire than they do to their own nation. Where does your alignment lie?"

"We are aligned with the people of Telmérion," Eldárien answers. "And we wish to prevent the great loss of human life which we fear will be inflicted at the hands of the Empire."

"And how did you come to the knowledge of this threat? Did you overhear Imperial plans, or did you intercept a courier, or in some other manner?"

"By a fateful coincidence, we witnessed the plans being made," Rórlain says, "and we have hence made haste across the plains toward Ristfánd. For in the counsels we overhead, that city was the intended target of their attack. But we are without mounts, and that has greatly slowed our progress."

"In what circumstances did you overhear these plans, and from whence did you hail?" Sójen asks.

"You ask many questions," Eldárien replies, "and rightly so. It is just of you to be cautious, for oft it seems that trustworthiness has all but deserted these lands. But I assure you we mean no ill. Rather, we intend to prevent ill, to spare the lives of many."

"I understand. But you do not answer my question."

"Yes, of course," Eldárien continues. "This indeed leads to something about which I wished to speak with you—and with you too, Sádric. For my companion and I were at the base of the three great peaks of the Teldren range, in the Galas basin, when we encountered what stirred us on this quest."

"That land is all but deserted, is it not?" Sádric asks.

"Aye, it is," says Eldárien. "My hometown was there once, long ago, and it was upon my return there that we encountered soldiers of the Empire—a lawgiver and his company, to speak more precisely. However, it appears that he was acting in more than one capacity. In what I am about to say, I ask for your patient hearing. For if it seems that Rórlain and I are reticent to speak freely, it is because of what we witnessed while at the base of the mountains."

"Continue, for we are listening," Sójen says.

"We witnessed these men making their way into an ancient tomb under the Gorójin mountain. Perhaps you have heard of it: the barrow of Séra Galáptes? There we saw in the flesh the terrible creatures that people have taken to calling vrû'ádach. Has word also come this far east regarding such beings?"

"Yes," Sójen says, "though it is all but distant echoes and rumors."

"The creatures are most certainly real," Rórlain says, "whatever manner of

beasts they may be. But the unexpected result of what we witnessed, the conclusion that has spurred us to such haste, is that a deal was struck between the lawgiver—or rather between the emperor whom he represented and in whose name he spoke—and a leader of these creatures. They agreed to march on Ristfánd together, thus to conquer the people of Telmérion and to return them to Imperial rule."

"So these beasts," Sójen asks, "are a tool used by the Empire to crush the rebellion?"

"It seems so," Eldárien replies, "though I do not know how willing a tool they shall be."

"You were correct in your estimation," Sádric says. "What you share with us is almost beyond belief. Is it true that these creatures are the living dead?"

"They are like in appearance but different in feel," answers Eldárien. "We know not precisely what they are, only that they are dangerous. Even with only their flesh, they can destroy a man. If they were to be armed, their ability to crush human life would be greatly multiplied."

"For me, the fact that such a story beggars belief only lends toward its credibility," Sójen concludes. "What would you gain from inventing such an outlandish story? But if what you say *is* indeed true, as I believe it is, then your journey requires as much haste as you seem willing and eager to give it. I assure you that my horses shall be at your disposal for as long as you need them. If you find yourselves unable for whatever reason to return them, I shall consider it but an investment in the good of our people. But if circumstances allow you to bring them back to me, then for that I shall be grateful."

"Thank you, Sójen," says Eldárien. "We shall do our best on both accounts: to ride quickly to Ristfánd and to bring or send your horses back to you unharmed."

"May you be blessed for the aid you render us this day," Rórlain says, "both of you. We must now gather our packs and be on our way."

"Of course," Sójen agrees.

"There is one further thing that I wish to mention before we prepare to depart," interjects Eldárien. "When the armies of the Empire and the forces of these creatures march upon the city of Ristfánd, whatever the manner of their approach may be, it is likely that they will pass through these and neighboring lands. I fear what they may do with any whom they encounter —even those who wish only for peace and who do nothing to hinder their progress."

"So what would you have us do?" Sádric asks.

"I leave that to your prudent judgment," says Eldárien. "I do not wish to sow panic or fear among the people. Nonetheless, when there is cause for fear, whenever the threat is truly real, then having fear is better than having none.

For only fear confronted and overcome can give birth to both courage and prudence."

"We shall do what we can to spread the word of what we have learned today in the wisdom that time and reflection provides," Sójen says.

"And as for ourselves," Rórlain adds, "we shall bring word to whatever settlements we pass through on our way, as time permits."

"Very well," Sójen replies. "As for what lies immediately before you upon your journey, you will need to pass through the canyon to the east to find the main road. It is but a handful of miles beyond the opposite ridge. The road that I assume you followed to us shall lead you directly there. When you have come to the main road, follow it to the south. That shall be the fastest path unto the city. But be wary, for Imperial patrols have been gradually increasing in the region, and the last time I visited Ristfánd, a few months past, a checkpoint was set up but a few leagues north of the city."

"That is the path that we shall take, and we shall do so with caution," says Eldárien. "Thank you again for your assistance. It has proved invaluable."

Chapter Sixteen
Like the Wind

After gathering their supplies, Eldárien and Rórlain set off on horseback, their faces to the early morning sun. The land before them is flat, an almost uninterrupted plain stretching to the east, dotted with farmland of wheat and beans and strawberries, and pastures for livestock as well, interspersed with groves of trees and ponds or small lakes that glisten in the sunlight. But according to the word that they received, they know that the land shall soon fall away beneath them, revealing a canyon hidden in the flat earth, only to rise again to flatness on the other end. Neither man has been to this canyon before, so they know not its appearance nor its size, though for the sake of the speed required in their journey as well as the fatigue that they still feel, they hope it is not too great. Eldárien in particular feels this fatigue, and more than fatigue, this persistent illness that has been clinging to him since his dream days before. He is unable to hide his pain and weakness, and Rórlain notes it, though they do not speak of it.

Five or six miles further on, the earth suddenly opens before them, revealing a wide rift in the ground, with rocky walls littered with loose stone and crooked trees and, in places, outcroppings clothed in richer grass and vegetation. They pause along the edge of the ridge and look out over the canyon. It appears to be a mile or so deep and at least two or three leagues across—a

significant delay in their journey, though one eased by the fact that the road they have been following snakes its way down the face of the cliff and climbs back up on the other side, marking out a clear path for them to follow. However, even if the path across will not be hard to find, its nature will slow their passage, for a winding road, with numerous switchbacks, is much slower than a straight road going unhindered to one's destination.

A soft breeze whistles through the canyon and cools the otherwise comfortable, almost stuffy air that envelops them as they begin to descend. Birds call in the surrounding trees, and the scent of spring foliage is strong, carried up from the canyon by the breeze, intermingling with the sound of birds and the sunlit scenery in a symphony of smell and sound and sight. Eldárien is heartened by the warmth and the beauty, and a measure of his weakness departs from him. Riding now on horseback also allows him to gradually recover his strength without the need to exert himself by walking. The horse's steps still feel jarring to him and send a throbbing pain through his neck and head, but, almost as if sensing his pain, the horse treads as carefully and softly as it can. Yet Eldárien knows that once they come to the other side of the canyon and find flat ground again stretching out before them, it would be wise to spur the horses on to greater speed. It is not that they expect the joined forces of Empire and vrû'ádach to attack so soon—that may be many months ahead yet—but that they know the sooner the message is delivered, the more time there will be for the people to prepare and the more likely any disaster shall be averted.

As they come to the floor of the canyon, the air grows dense and warm and the breeze stills, stirring the branches of trees above them but leaving the ground and its foliage almost untouched. In such a cold land as Telmérion, this may be one of the warmest places of all, here where the brilliant light of the sun is refracted off the rocky face of the cliffs and magnified in its intensity, while these same cliffs dampen the bitter chill blowing in from mountains or sea. But even now, in the late (albeit delayed) springtime, the air is no more than pleasant and certainly not hot. Eldárien raises his countenance to the light and welcomes the warmth upon his face, feeling rejuvenated by nature's caress. He looks around and drinks in the stillness and quietude that surround him, the trees and plants as if slumbering for a midday nap under the rays of the sun and the great stones of the earth unmoving, welcoming the weary traveler for a rest. He feels a desire to stop in the canyon for a moment and almost speaks to Rórlain to ask if he wishes to sit and take their meal here in this quiet place before continuing on, but he knows that they must continue without delay.

At first he feels disappointed that they must continue on without pausing to cherish their surroundings and to rest themselves. But as the horse

continues to walk, its hooves crunching softly along the path and its body breathing and swaying underneath him, and as he looks around, opening all of his senses to the beauty of the canyon, he feels a surge of gratitude just to be in this place, for however short a time. He need not linger here, as if trying to cup in his hands beauty that would only slip through his fingers and depart; in the desire to grasp and possess it, such beauty would only slip away. Rather, when he welcomes it in passing, just as every person who has ever lived within time has had to do with each fading moment, it somehow continues to live inside of him, to take up its abode in his heart, insofar as such a heart remains pure and free in its love, reverence, and affection.

At this moment, Eldárien's thoughts are interrupted by Rórlain, who, riding a few yards in front of him, turns back and looks at him. "Would you like to stop here for just a moment?" he asks. "It is midday now, and I thought it would be good to have a bite to eat. However, all of the food is in your horse's pack."

"Is it indeed?" Eldárien remarks. "Let us hope that we do not become separated, then."

"I will not let that happen if I can help it."

They stop and tie their horses to a nearby tree beside the path, where they can drink from a small pond no more than five by ten feet wide, hidden among the trees. Unpacking a bit of food, the men begin their midday repast, Eldárien leaning back against the trunk of an old oak and Rórlain pacing back and forth in the dappled light and shadow of the trees.

"How are you feeling?" Rórlain asks, after a couple minutes have passed.

"The sunlight and the riding are both doing me good," answers Eldárien. "I hope that I am finally shaking off this illness."

"That is good to hear. I too feel fatigued from the events of the previous weeks and our trek on foot across these wild lands. But I know that your illness is something else entirely."

"Maybe it is no more than fatigue," Eldárien says, "or my body's way of processing the events that we have witnessed and of which we have been a part."

"Perhaps so."

They depart again after less than fifteen minutes, both glad for the pause in the journey but eager to continue. The path to the top of the ravine on the opposite side of the canyon is much slower-going than the path down had been, though the horses greatly ease the difficulty, shouldering as they do all the burden of the ascent. Eldárien pats his horse along the head and mane in a sign of grateful acknowledgment and says, "I wish that Sójen would have told me your name, if he gave you one, or that I would have asked. I suppose I could call you a name myself. What do you think it should be? How about...

Aéglir? It means 'steed of the wind' in the ancient tongue. That is what I hope you are, and that you shall ride like the wind when we have need of your speed."

† † †

At the top of the ridge the road runs straight before them, and they stir their horses on to a canter, with the afternoon sun behind them and scattered farms and homesteads to their right and left. They ride on until twilight at a good pace, pushing their horses within reason, until they come to a hamlet nestled in a grove of trees. Here they see another inn and enter it to share the news that they carry. After a thorough explanation and a favorable response, they depart again without delay. For another three hours they continue east before finding a copse at the side of the road in which to rest for the night. In the morning, a light drizzle wakes them, and they eat a quick breakfast and mount their horses to continue their journey. Eldárien again feels his health improving, perhaps by the physical rest granted from riding rather than walking or because they again have adequate provisions. As such, even the dampness that pervades his clothing and soaks his hair is unable to dampen his spirits. He begins to feel a spark of hope concerning their journey, and, though the future itself looks bleak—as a war with mysterious forces of darkness seems all but unavoidable—he takes comfort in the moment and its purpose. They ride for peace and protection; they ride to bring warning and to save human life. And for now, this is enough.

By afternoon the sky has cleared and the sun shines unobstructed except for a few wisps of white cloud moving lazily in the breeze. As they ride, the land before them begins to slope downward, and they soon find that they can see for a great distance. A wide expanse of plain lies open before their gaze, bathed in the daytime light, and in the distance, near the very limit of sight, they see what appears to be a village built at the edge of a forest. It will take them at least another two or three days to reach it, but it appears that the road they follow shall lead them straight there.

"I think that is the Márdas road," Eldárien says, "and the village of Mórda'Fiána. We should be able to replenish our supplies there, I hope."

"And to bring word to the people," adds Rórlain.

"Indeed."

On the eve of the third day they come to the village, about sixty houses built of rough hewn stone, most with thatched roofs, well constructed but plain. The barking of a dog greets their arrival, warning them as it watches them pass, but it falls silent again when they have moved on beyond its owner's house. Almost every home has an enclosed garden in the front or the back, though it appears that the crops are few. They also pass a couple pens of bleating sheep and some chickens, but otherwise the village is quiet and

still, the workday over and day leaning into night. It appears that trade in this town is minor, and everything that they witness speaks of self-sufficiency off the produce of the land and the mutual interdependence of the villagers between themselves rather than their reliance on commerce with other settlements.

"I suppose an inn shall again be best?" Rórlain asks.

"If I remember correctly, there should be one at the intersection of the two roads," replies Eldárien.

"So this is indeed Mórda'Fiána?"

"Yes. I have passed through here before, coming from north to south or south to north. It is my first time arriving from this direction, but the village is unmistakable."

They come shortly to the inn, which is named *Bard's Beard,* and enter through the front door into a much more crowded room than they had encountered in the nearly empty *Springsummer Inn and Taberna*. They are immediately surrounded by the murmuring sound of numerous conversations, by the clanking of plates, utensils, and cups, and by the chords and melodies of a lute being played softly in a corner, accompanied by a low male voice intoning lyrics which they cannot make out among the din. There are twenty or thirty people in the room, seated either at a long counter or at round tables cramped tightly together nearly from wall to wall, leaving very little room to walk. Eldárien smiles as he sees a young serving boy, perhaps in his early teenage years, holding a platter of food over his head as he tries to squeeze through a narrow opening between two tables, though the look on his face indicates only that this is totally ordinary. It seems that all persons in the inn are well accustomed to the cramped space and find it cozy rather than inconvenient.

"Welcome to the Bard's Beard," a voice calls to them, followed swiftly by the appearance of a short man in his middling years. "You look like travelers. My name is Fórthas, and I am at your service. Are you seeking accommodations for the night and perhaps a hot plate of food?"

"We are travelers, yes," replies Eldárien, "though I am afraid that we cannot afford your services. We have come rather to bring a message to the people of this village."

"You speak in a grave tone," says Fórthas. "Are you sure you do not need anything?"

"As I said, unfortunately we have no money. However, I would like to speak with the proprietor for a few moments."

"Well, I am he, but I don't have time to be standing around talking in the evening like this. And that's not to mention that you seem rather suspicious coming in here without money and yet wishing for a serious conversation.

What may your business be?"

"We bring news of the civil war which may be important for the people of this village, as for all the lands east of the mountains," Rórlain says. "We wish not to startle you nor anyone else. But perhaps we could speak with the mayor of the town?"

Fórthas eyes them for a long moment with concern in his eyes. "You recruiting or something?" he asks at last.

"No," says Rórlain. "We only bring a word of caution and warning about the spread of violence."

"War is spreading. Always spreading," Fórthas says, as if chanting to himself. "But it's been years already, and it has never come close to us. What would either the Empire or the rebels have to do with a small village such as ours?"

"The Empire plans to march east in battle array, and though they make for Ristfánd, it is likely that they will pass this way," says Eldárien, loosening the restraint in speech that he and Rórlain have been trying to maintain until this moment. "And if they do come this way, I fear for the lives and well-being of the inhabitants of this village. At the very least, I doubt that your crops and livelihood will be left untouched."

Fórthas mulls this over for a while and looks about him. They cannot tell whether he is simply impatient to return to his customers or if he is worried about the conversation being overheard. "Let me tell you something," Fórthas begins in a quiet voice. "Don't you come bringing worry to our peaceful people. But... Well, tomorrow I will introduce you to our mayor. Tonight, however, if you truly cannot pay, I ask you to find accommodations of your own."

"That is only fitting," says Eldárien. "We did not ask for them and are content to sleep outside, beyond the confines of the village."

"Very well then," Fórthas says. "Come by again in the morning, but not too late. Arrive before the day's work gets its wheels turning, and I will take you by the mayor's house."

"Thank you," Eldárien and Rórlain both say with slight bows, and then they turn and depart from the taberna, with more than one pair of eyes fixed upon them as they leave.

"It is amazing," Rórlain comments when they are back on the road, their horse's reins in their hands, "that every man may respond so differently to the same news."

"Indeed," replies Eldárien, "but he is only an innkeeper. The care of the village is not his. I trust we shall receive a very different response from the mayor when we meet him tomorrow."

"I would go back into the taberna and have a seat simply to listen to the

bard and to see if he has a beard," comments Rórlain, "but I think we have already stirred enough suspicion as it is."

They both laugh softly at this, and then Eldárien says, "But I think you are right. It is best to let it rest for the moment. Perhaps you could sing something for us instead."

"You have a beard as well as I," says Rórlain. "And perhaps your voice is better than my own. I sing like a croaking frog."

"I highly doubt that. But I would be happy to sing a little something after we have made camp, though it will not be a taberna song, and I have neither lyre nor lute."

"We will just have to make do, then," says Rórlain, placing his hand on Eldárien's shoulder. "But seriously, I would love to hear whatever song you wish to sing."

"Then I will sing."

The two men find a cluster of trees a five minute ride from the village and here tie up their horses and make camp. Uncertain of whether the land is owned, they refrain from gathering wood and making a fire. But the air is comfortable enough and they have dry provisions enough that it is not necessary. The night will be cold, but nothing they cannot endure, and keeping a fire stoked throughout the night requires a great deal of attention which they would rather devote to sleep.

"So let's have the song," Rórlain says after they have eaten.

"Very well." Eldárien rises to his feet and looks out across the empty plains and fields, now darkening fully into night. "As I said, it is not a taberna song nor even a song for feast and dance. It is more a lullaby or a hymn. I learned it from my mother."

"Take your time."

Eldárien continues looking out into the darkness and clears his throat. Then he begins in a low voice, tracing out a tune that is more a chant than a melody, sound placed purely at the service of the words and their meaning:

The mountain passes swept with snow
sing silently of sun's swift rise,
and of moon-song in the night's serenity,
lullaby of history's longevity, come to a point,
here.

Snowfall, heavy and soft—soft accumulation,
heavy resting over earth, buried silent, still,
under the blanket that blinds the eyes, so radiant,
yet in the night, so dark, so still.

Snow-melt, trickling over muddy earth in spring's sweetness,

melting multitudes of murky pathways
tracing their ways through the earth, to lake and stream,
streams that take their way downward as temperature rises,
and the bird's song accompanies all, harbinger of coming dawn.

Sun and moon, snow and water, earth and sky,
and the singing of the dove, bird of longing,
and the tittering of little birds, endless jubilation,
for with the coming of the spring comes Dayspring:
Dawnbringer, slumbering under earth, heavy and light,
arises as the everlasting Day, and life he brings.

† † †

The next morning the mayor, a man by the name of Hásin, does indeed listen to their message and receive it in all seriousness. After they have recounted to him the events that they witnessed, he replies, "This is a grave matter indeed, and I thank you for making a point, even though you ride for Ristfánd, of bringing word also to me. Mórda'Fiána is the largest village hereabout, and so I will take it upon myself to relay this message to all the settlements in the plains. I will even send a rider east to the towns along Lake Ilína."

"Thank you," Eldárien says. "And I trust that some in these villages will bring word even further."

"Oh yes. It is likely that within a matter of a month or two, there will be no village east of the mountains, from Rhóvas to Galá'jad, that will be without knowledge of the threats that lie before us. In fact, I suspect that this news shall stir the hearts of many who have been idle in passing judgment on the civil war or who have sided with the Empire to join those who fight with the rebel forces. Whether they intended it or not, the Imperials have sent a clear message to all of us: the Empire is a danger to the people of Telmérion, and we can no longer remain indifferent."

"I fear that you are right," says Rórlain, "though I think this is more than just a conflict of rebels and Imperials. For the rebels alone shall not be the only force fighting for the safety and freedom of our people."

"What do you mean?" asks Hásin. "Surely we need to join our efforts in order to stand a fighting chance against the dangers before us?"

"Yes, you are right. But the rebels fight not only to protect the people from threats, but to bring about a new order. Their political goals, at least at present, are, I fear, inseparable from their intent to fight for the people, and not all shall agree with the former, even if they need the latter."

"What other choice would we have?"

"At this point, I know not," concludes Rórlain. "But your words, and even your questions, reveal wisdom and a thoughtful mind, Hásin. May you find

light soon regarding the right path to take for the welfare of the people whom you represent."

Hásin nods at this and says, "May that indeed be true."

Then Eldárien speaks, "There is one further thing that you and your people can do at present."

"What is that?"

"It is a delicate issue, for it requires a balance of the desire for self-defense and the need to aid in the greater cause."

"You need men to take up arms and aid in the fight?"

"Yes, and in Ristfánd specifically. I fear that we shall be facing a most difficult battle. The numbers of our foe we do not yet know, but the intent of destruction seems clear, and the force shall be appropriate to the intent."

"But we need men here to protect our towns and villages as well," Hásin says. "That is indeed the issue."

"Yes, although I do not think you will have any hope of successful martial defense on your home turf, even were you to retain all your men and give them whatever weapons you may," Rórlain says. "A force that marches to attack the city shall easily pass through a small village, like fire through a wood."

"Then our only chance is to flee before they arrive," Hásin says.

"I believe so," agrees Eldárien. "You must be on alert for any signs of their approach and make known to your people a plan by which you may escape them—a plan of both speed and stealth. Perhaps the woods to the east may provide some protection, particularly if you prepare hiding places in advance."

"That is wise. I shall put that into effect as quickly as I may. And I shall also ask roundabout for men willing and desirous of traveling to Ristfánd to fight."

"At this point, however, let the choice of men be free," says Eldárien. "There is no need for a draft as of yet, since we do not know enough either about the enemy's forces nor their strategy, nor, for that matter, what means of resistance yet lie before us in Ristfánd."

"I do not know that I would be able to effect a draft if I tried," Hásin says, "since I do not have an army into which to draft. All depends on the attitude of the leaders in Ristfánd and, in fact, in the west."

"Communication will be difficult and slow," Rórlain says. "But word has also been sent west, so we shall see what unfolds. You are right, though. A unified force is stronger than a divided one."

After the conversation has concluded, Hásin treats Rórlain and Eldárien to a meal and gives them whatever small provisions he can afford, with the apology that the harvests have been quite poor and there is very little to spare. Then they mount their horses again and set off along the Márdas road to the

south. And as they ride over the coming days, the landscape continually changes before them, as flat plains clothed in fields and pastures give way to rolling hills garmented in trees. Though houses dot the countryside, the road is almost deserted, and over a period of four days they only encounter three other groups of travelers, two on horseback and one in caravan. The next they encounter, however, is an Imperial patrol: two armed soldiers riding side by side to the north, their armor glistening in the sun. Rórlain catches sight of them in the distance and warns Eldárien in advance. They then guide their horses off the road and into the midst of a dense grove of trees, where they wait and watch as the soldiers pass by. When they are back on the road heading south, Rórlain asks, "If there is indeed a checkpoint standing between ourselves and Ristfánd, how do you recommend we get past it? Your face, I fear, is too well known, that we would be running a risk trying to pass directly through."

"I agree," says Eldárien. "But I do not think we will have a problem. I doubt that they have set up a perimeter the entire way around the city. If we depart from the road and pass through the wilderness, we should be able to drawn near to Ristfánd easily enough."

"I hope you are right."

They draw near to the city on the sixth day since leaving Mórda'Fiána: passing the crest of a rise of land and looking down from a hill upon a wide basin that descends unto the sea, they see Ristfánd before them, stone bulwarks bright in the light and wooden houses numerous, tightly clustered together within the city while also dotting the landscape roundabout. The city, though still small in the distance, is nonetheless much larger than any of the settlements that they have yet passed through, home to close to twelve-thousand inhabitants. As they look down from their vantage point, Eldárien notices that at the base of the hill on which they now stand is what appears to be a barrier of some kind, a fence or perimeter of wood and stone, though they are too far to discern more clearly the exact manner of its construction.

"That must be the Imperial checkpoint," he says, pointing.

"Then we should leave the road before drawing any nearer," replies Rórlain.

"I agree. We will ride around to the west. I do not know how wide the barrier may go, or if there are patrols in this area, but we cannot very well attempt to pass straight through."

They lead their horses through the forested hills until they come to a narrow albeit deep trough in the land, as if once home to an ancient river that has now dried up, splitting the land from the mountains in the west to the road in the east and beyond.

"Further up, if I am not mistaken, this small crevice becomes a wide and

fertile valley in the mountains," says Eldárien. "I do not know why it is now bereft of flowing water. Last time I was here, it was a fast, flowing river."

"Perhaps it was dammed up for some reason," Rórlain suggests.

"I cannot think of any other possible cause."

They find it necessary to dismount from their horses and to lead them by the bridle along the edge of the trough in search of a fitting place to cross. The sides are steep and rocky, littered with sharp and loose stones, but without any vegetation to provide a hand-hold or guide. Only after a good two or three miles do they find a depression in the earth gradual enough that they can guide the horses down into it and up again on the other side. As they mount their horses again and make their way to the south, the landscape undulates beneath them, less hilly than the previous few days of travel but still rich in shape and texture, and clothed in thick grasses and trees, particularly aspens and conifers.

"Do you think we are far enough from the checkpoint to avoid detection as we try to move southward?" Eldárien asks.

"I did not see anything that would indicate otherwise. And I would be surprised if they supervised travel this far from the road," answers Rórlain.

"I suppose it all depends on how firmly they wish to prevent unhindered travel to or from the city. I am not sure even what the purpose of the checkpoint is. Patrols are normal, but never in my memory of either life or history have I known of Imperial checkpoints in our land. Sójen said that it was set up months back, so it is not a response to the uprising in the ghetto. It predates that."

"Perhaps we shall learn more when we make it into the city."

"Indeed. Let us hope that we have no trouble finding entrance nor locating a custodian of the city who is favorable to our cause."

"Do you know anything about the mayor of the city and his inclinations?"

"The hæras of the clan of Rhóvas makes his home in Ristfánd, and it is he who is acting governor of the city as well," says Eldárien.

"You are, of course, correct," says Rórlain. "I had forgotten that the clan leadership is located in Ristfánd, even though it began centuries ago in Rhóvas."

"But as for your question," continues Eldárien, "I fear that he shall be sided with the Empire. I believe that all of the hærási are, or at that least they do not speak openly against the decisions and commands of the Imperial legate, nor against the counselors who are appointed to them by the Emperor. I suspect, however, that the picture is quite a bit more nuanced than that, and I would not be surprised to find, whether here in Ristfánd or in the leadership of other clans, those who would be happy to openly resist, even the hærási themselves."

"So shall we risk speaking to him?" Rórlain asks. "If he is unfavorable—and, worse, if he is sided entirely with the plans of the Empire—that could be the end of our message-bringing altogether."

"That is true," answers Eldárien. "It would be wise of us to act and speak with discretion, and this means concealing our purpose until we have gained a sense of whom we may trust within the government of the city, and indeed within the city as a whole."

"Do you have an idea of where we might begin?"

Eldárien thinks about this question in silence as they draw nearer to Ristfánd. He does not speak again until the walls of the city, a good twenty-feet high and built of large hewn stones quarried from the mountains, stand before them. The wooded land has now given way to cultivated fields and fenced pastures, small but numerous, which accompany the outlying homesteads surrounding the town, mostly single-story buildings of wood, though some are larger and exhibit greater wealth, built either of stone or stucco, with arched roofs and ornate gables decorated with carved statues of horse or hawk or other animal. Eldárien fears what shall befall the people of these farms outside the city walls when the attack comes. However, it is unlikely that conflict and death shall reach only outside the bulwark, but rather shall penetrate even within, to the heart of the city and its people.

"I think," Eldárien says at last, "that we should speak to the leaders of the temple rather than to those of the city, at least at first. I trust that they will hear our cause in justice and right and shall be able to help us proceed in wisdom."

"Of which temple in particular do you speak?" asks Rórlain.

Thinking again of the lessons and songs he learned on his mother's knee, and of her own tender love, Eldárien replies, "There is one great temple in the city that gives lifeblood more than all the rest. The temple of Nirániel."

Chapter Seventeen
Grave News

Elmáriyë rides into the city in the late afternoon and, after entrusting Fenárion to the stable master, walks to the temple. The streets are filled with anxiety, even fear, and she does not know why; but she also feels another emotion, which it takes her a large part of the walk to the center of the city to name: anger. Nothing appears amiss to her eyes, but her heart knows differently, and she is eager to speak with Cirien to hear the reason he called her home with such haste and to learn the nature of whatever has stirred the citizens of Ristfánd into such a state—if indeed these two are not one and the same.

She ascends the steps of the temple compound with a tangible sense of homecoming and pushes open the doors to the arched corridor of stone. Before turning to the right and making her way to Cirien's *rædra,* however, she steps into the vestibule of the temple and kneels for a moment upon the floor. The long stone sanctuary is dark and cool, with light filtering in subtly from the high, clear windows along the nave, and falling as a colored array from the large stained glass in the apse, bathing the altar in an intermingling of light, color, and shape.

When she comes to the grandmaster's reception chamber, she finds the door slightly ajar and hears a raised voice from within. It is not Cirien's voice, but one she recognizes yet cannot name. Taking a step away so as not to eavesdrop unintentionally, she rests her back against the wall and waits. But despite her efforts, the voice rises again for a moment, clearly in anger, and she hears the words: "You will be the downfall of us all, Cirien! Those of our members who sided with the rebellion need to be expelled from the temple. There is no place for lawlessness in our midst." Elmáriyë does not hear Cirien's reply to this accusation, but the voice is heard no more, and before long a person emerges from the chamber, red-faced, and passes by her with hardly a glance. She recognizes his face but knows not his name, a man of late middle-age, a wealthy man of the city.

After waiting for a few moments, she knocks on the door, still ajar, and it swings open a couple inches by itself, creaking on its hinges. Cirien looks up and smiles. "Ah, Elmáriyë. Please, come in. I trust you had a safe journey." She steps into the room and takes a seat before Cirien at the welcoming gesture of his hand. The room is well-lit, not only with lanterns hanging from the walls and a reading lamp on the table behind which Cirien sits, but with tall arched

windows behind him, lightly curtained with white cloth, though still allowing the golden rays of the fading daylight to filter in. The walls are lined with bookshelves, appearing messy and unkempt but in fact orderly, and racks of ancient scrolls tied simply with cloth or leather or protected by tubes of metal. A small statue of the goddess stands in the corner, as if resting in the dancing light of sun and flame.

"I did have a safe journey," Elmáriyë replies, "and pleasant. Fenárion is a good and docile horse."

"And how fares your family?"

"They are well, and we were all glad to see one another and to be together."

"But saddened at the shortness of your stay?" Cirien asks perceptively.

"That is so, but underneath the sadness gladness remains."

"You appear to have something else on your mind, Elmáriyë," Cirien says, looking at her with a glimmer in his eyes and running his hand through his long white beard. "What is it?"

"You have called me here for a reason," she replies. "Surely that is a more pressing matter."

"It is pressing indeed, but not so pressing that I cannot hear from you what is upon your heart. Recall what I told you when last we parted. Forget not yourself in the midst of your desire to care for others, for only from the fullness of your heart can you also give in abundance to them, and with true tenderness and love." He chuckles softly. "Those were not my exact words, I expect, but the meaning was similar."

"But if we hold back from love, clinging to ourselves in possessiveness and refusing others the gift of our heart and act, then care for self becomes nothing but a lie. It becomes an act of selfishness which leads to isolation, not to the fellowship which our hearts desire," Elmáriyë says.

"That is true," Cirien admits, "but that is not the danger which you face at present, my dear. You incline more to forgetting that you have burdens and cares of your own in your eagerness to carry the burdens of others."

"In a certain sense, aren't these cares, my own and those of others, so deeply united that they cannot be extricated from one another?" she asks.

"Yes, and no. The suffering of each man is his own, unlike that of any other. This is true. But what you say is even more true, more vitally true, without negating the first: the suffering of every man belongs to every other, and all we bear—indeed, all we bear both of pain and of joy—reverberates in the heart of every other. This you have learned well and will learn still more deeply. And I believe it shall be of great importance for yourself, and for many others, before the end." Cirien pauses and leans forward, a gentle smile on his face and the light behind him glowing softly in his hair. "But please, what is it that you carry with you as you return? Tell me if you wish, and then we can

turn to the other matter."

"I do wish," Elmáriyë answers. And she relates to Cirien the conversation that she shared with her parents on the morning of her departure from Telónis. She shows him the ring, and he inspects it with attention before handing it back to her. She slips it back onto her finger and finishes her account.

After she has concluded, he replies, "I am sorry that you did not know of this until so many years into your life. As for the riddle of your origin, of your family, perhaps light may be shed upon it yet. I wish I had known about it long before this, but then again, that would have set my intentions against those of your parents. So perhaps the way things unfolded was indeed best, though I wish they would have told you when you were younger."

"A part of me would wish for the same," Elmáriyë says, "but after the first surprise and its pain, I am at peace. When I reflect upon it, I would not really have it any other way than it has been."

"I understand what you mean," says Cirien. "But as for the future, I would like to look into the designs upon that ring—which I have noted in my mind, though I may ask to see it again—to discover if we can trace its origin. That is, if such a course of action is your wish."

"It is," Elmáriyë replies after a moment's thought.

"Very good," Cirien says, and then, pausing and sighing deeply, he shifts in his chair. "But now we must speak of something both grave and pressing: the reason for which I called you here."

"What is it?"

"Only days ago, there was an uprising in the ghetto, having long fermented in the silence and now finally bursting forth into word and act. And it was not just vocal complaint or the call for justice; no, it was an uprising in arms aimed toward bloodshed. I do not understand exactly what they intended with this, but the attack, at least in hindsight, had little hope of success. For them, I think, it was meant to be but the beginning. However, I fear that they shall call down on their heads, and indeed upon all of us, the wrath of the Empire."

"So you have called me here to..." Elmáriyë falters as the images of death flood her mind's eye.

"I have called you here to treat those who are wounded and to comfort those who have lost the people dear to them," Cirien says. "But I warn you. It is a dangerous task, as the Empire has eyes fixed upon Ristfánd and would gladly crush any who appear to side with the rebellion."

"But we are servants of the goddess and members of the temple," Elmáriyë exclaims. "Certainly they would only expect us to do as her teachings indicate?"

"I hope that you are right. And that is what I am relying upon, though the danger remains. Are you willing?"

"More than willing."

"Of course."

"But tell me," Elmáriyë begins, "what sparked this action? And how many people were involved? Was it only certain persons in the ghetto, or was it a wider movement?"

"So many questions at once!" Cirien responds, raising his hands. "But I understand your desire for answers, and the pain that stirs it. All shall become clear in time. Let this answer suffice for now: this was a plan long conceived by the underground resistance operating in Ristfánd and a concerted effort of rich and poor alike, insofar as fraternal cooperation between them is feasible at all. It may have even been instigated by the leadership in Minstead; indeed, I believe that to be the case. That is the answer, but as I speak, another comes to mind, which I shall also give: the goal of this rebellion was to overthrow Imperial control in the city and to give sovereignty back to the people of Telmérion and the rulers of the Rhovánni clan."

"The hæras is a part of this movement?" asks Elmáriyë.

"At this point we do not know," Cirien replies. "We know not whether he was cooperating behind the scenes or whether the rebels intended to supplant him and to establish a new clan leader in his place. As I said, I trust that all will become clear with time. But for now, all we can do is act to relieve the suffering of the victims of the conflict."

"You answered more than you said you would," Elmáriyë observes. "Thank you for that. I will try not to worry unduly. So what would you have me do now?"

Cirien rises from his chair and walks around the table to Elmáriyë, taking her hands in his own and looking at her with deep kindness in his eyes. The light through the window is now growing dim as twilight deepens into night, but the light of his gaze remains undimmed and brilliant. "I would have you rest and be at peace," he says softly. "For tonight, try to settle into your new home again and sleep. Tomorrow I will go with you to the ghetto, and we will see what more may be done. I have been already, as have others, but it shall be your first time since the conflict, and I wish to accompany you."

With that he bids her goodnight, and she turns to go, shutting the door to the rœdra quietly behind her. The corridors are silent, and her footsteps lightly echo against the stone as she walks to her bedchamber, untouched since she was last in Ristfánd. It is a small room, eight by ten feet, with a paned window against one wall, looking out into a forested courtyard, though now veiled by a heavy curtain. There is a low bed, only a plank of wood on stilts with a straw mattress, and a side table next to it, on which are a washbowl and

towel. On the wall opposite the bed is a table littered with books, with paper for writing, ink, and a quill, and a glass lantern with a long wick steeped in oil. Tucked under the table is a rickety old wooden chair that creaks when its sitter moves.

Elmáriyë sits down on her bed and pulls her pack from her shoulders, dropping it softly to the floor. She then slides a wooden crate from underneath the bed and opens it: it functions as a dresser and wardrobe, and she arranges the clothing from her pack into it before putting the pack itself in it as well and returning it to its place under the bed. Then she leans her elbows against her knees and rests her forehead against her hands. She closes her eyes and lets out a deep breath.

Is this the path that has been prepared for her? To care for the victims of warfare and violence? She allows this question to linger silently in her heart as she listens, listens for the voice that speaks deeper than words. She feels afraid, not only of her own inadequacy, her own inability to help these people as they need, but also of the proximity to such intense suffering and loss. She has felt the pain even at a distance, and she can only imagine what it shall be like to touch it, to embrace it, to step beyond every veil and to be as close as possible in body to the people to whom her heart has long been close in spirit. But she knows, too, that she desires nothing more than this and has long done so. But as it comes to it, she is scared. She is scared, too, of the manner of the suffering and what it bodes for the future. Of all the forms of suffering that can be inflicted on a nation, war is perhaps the worst, the most all-pervading, and the most difficult to remedy.

She leans into prayer and lets these anxieties and fears fall away from her, or rather she lets herself fall, in all that she is and feels, into the warm embrace of the Love that holds her and carries her. And as she does so, her spirit finds greater rest, and her mind eases off of the thoughts born of anxious fear. Instead, she is carried back to the time she spent in Telónis, to the faces of her mother and father and siblings, to the wedding of her friends, to the stars glistening and dancing in the night sky. She recalls the conversation she had with her parents on the morning of her departure, both their tenderness and care as well as the pain she felt at realizing that the truth had been withheld from her for so many years. She is not angry with them, as she understands that they acted only out of concern for her and, once the secret was revealed, shared with her freely all that they could. The love in their eyes as they spoke to her, almost as if they would discover the truth of her past and give it to her were such a thing possible, moves her deeply now. With a surge of gratitude, she rests with the eyes of her heart upon their faces, absentmindedly touching the ring upon her finger.

Then the image of her parents' faces gives way to the face of Cirien, her

father in spirit, and she sees a similar love and tenderness in his gaze, though more profound because more deeply rooted. She remembers his face and his words as he inspected the ring taken from the body of her mother. Hope rises within her, and desire, that it may indeed be possible to learn something of her origin, something of the woman from whose womb she was born and of the man from whom she was sired. But then again, even if she never learns, it is an acceptable and understandable loss. For she has a home already, two homes in fact, and even one is already more than many have and more than many more will have if the war indeed progresses, robbing numerous children of their parents and turning them into orphans. And thus her most intimate personal thoughts and desires lead her again, full circle, to concern and compassion for others, and in her mind and heart it is as if the two blend together—what is most intimate to her and what is most intimate to others—while remaining distinct, like two lungs in a single body or like blood flowing in and out from differing limbs into a single heart, a heart that is her own but also more than her own, a heart that holds her most deeply just as, in her heart, she desires to hold others.

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In midmorning, Cirien accompanies Elmáriyë through the streets of Ristfánd, already noisy with sellers at their market stalls trying to barter their wares and with children playing in alleyways or the grass in front of houses—at least the laughter and play of children are still to be heard—and the rumbling of carts or the clopping of horses' hooves against the cobbled stones as they make their way out of the city for the day's labor. The city goes about its business as usual, though Elmáriyë knows that something has changed and that the normalcy of the daily routine conceals a fear and an expectation in the hearts of the people which were not present before. The slums are located on the northeast side of the city, in a section surrounded by a high wooden wall of rough hewn beams. There are two entrances, from the west and from the south, from the Beía road and the Hrélla road, respectively.

"It looks quite different on the inside than the last time you were here," Cirien warns as they come to the southern entrance. "Are you prepared?"

"Yes."

"Very well."

With this, they continue through the gateway, about ten feet wide, and follow the road into the ghetto. They are greeted immediately by stains of blood against wood and stone, wall and ground, and Elmáriyë stifles a gasp.

"Many men stood in this place, as likewise at the western gate, and tried to hold back the Imperial soldiers who sought to enter the ghetto," Cirien says.

"What exactly were these men attempting?" asks Elmáriyë. "And why did they begin in the slums?"

"As I said, their plans in full are more than I can know. But what they have achieved of their plan is clear: they have slain the local Imperial commander in cold blood and fought back the forces that were sent to punish them for their crime, though I expect that such was precisely their original intention."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the manner of their attack on the commander was intended," explains Cirien, "precisely to provoke battle with the forces of the Empire who occupy Ristfánd. It was meant as an explicit declaration of war, a challenge to the Empire to bring warfare to the east. It seems that the rebel forces have grown tired of this stalemate and wish to exert more influence—with bloodshed—in order to bring the conflict to a conclusion."

"How did they slay the commander?" asks Elmáriyë.

"They attacked him publicly as he walked the streets."

"And they hope to repel the Imperial wrath with the small amount of forces at their disposal?"

"It is true that I said that the Imperial response put an end to their rebellious activity, but that is only the reality on the surface. For I think there is more to it than that," Cirien says. "It may appear that the rebellion in the city was crushed, but it only retreated, like a snake with many heads that, losing one, shall simply emerge at an opportune time to strike again. But let us forget about these matters now. The course of the world is not ultimately determined by politics nor by war but by the humble and hidden fidelity of ordinary hearts. So let us go to the people suffering under the former and encourage them in the latter."

The ghetto has long felt almost like a different city than the rest of Ristfánd, with houses made of wood and scrap cramped together in muddy streets smelling of sewage with little grass, trees, or vegetation of any kind. Home to many who have fallen through the cracks of the commerce of Ristfánd or who, for one reason or another, have lost the means to support themselves and have no one else to care for them, the population in the ghetto is more dense than anywhere else in the city. There are also many persons whose livelihood has been lost or who have found themselves in the ghetto simply because of prolonged illness, whether physical or mental in nature. A large hospital stands almost precisely in the center of the area, a long building with a low roof, the sole structure with stone walls in the entire sector. It was built almost a hundred years ago by members of the temple of Nirániel with the permission of the government of Ristfánd and has been tended by them —among other volunteers—ever since. Cirien leads Elmáriyë there now, and as they step in through the threshold, she immediately hears the cries of those with grave physical wounds and sees pallets lined close together against the walls on either side, with mostly men and a few women resting upon them.

"We shall do for these people what little we can," Cirien says. "The city itself refuses medical aid to those who participated in the rebellion, but the temple has secretly requested aid and supplies from the people, and we have received a vigorous response in medicine, bandages, and tools. Our presence and work here can make a great difference in these people's lives and can relieve much of their suffering. But be aware that there are some for whom this hospital is now not a place of recuperation but a hospice in which they prepare for their final departure in death."

They then go among the citizens, tending to their wounds, bringing them water and nourishment, or simply sitting with them for a while, speaking or listening or holding their hands in silence. Elmáriyë feels the heavy air that permeates the hospital, and at first she struggles to breathe, feeling oppressed by the weight of human suffering, by the fear of death, by the anger and resentment and a host of other emotions that surge like currents of water, ripples cast from the many hearts in the building, like a lake dammed up within four walls and churning tumultuously. But as she goes among them, engaged in what simple activities that she can perform or listening and speaking in the little ways she that can, Elmáriyë begins to feel another reality underneath the oppressive suffocation. She feels a sense of hope, of courage, and of longing. It is not her own sense however; no, it belongs to the people, whose aspiration for freedom, so apparently crushed, nonetheless blossoms anew like a rose after winter and reaches out toward the sun of new life, whether it shall come in this life or only in the place that lies beyond death. These two realities—fear and longing—mingle together within the hospital and within Elmáriyë's own heart, and she feels the conflict, the tension, between them.

What can overcome this duality, this conflict between fear and desire, between the reaching out for definitive life and the ultimate futility of such an aspiration within the confines of this world? And the desire for life is thwarted by death. And what lies beyond death? More death? A shadow of one's previous life? Or something more? But how—how can a dying heart take solace in what awaits when it remains unknown, undisclosed, and could be even worse than the sufferings preceding it? No...Elmáriyë feels her heart protest. She knows in her heart of hearts that there is a hope deeper than the fear and a knowledge deeper than the uncertainty, a light deeper than the deepest darkness. And in this, this alone, she takes comfort and solace and finds strength to hope for these suffering hearts just as she does for her own. For there is, as she has been taught and as she believes, a dawn that will come to end every night.

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A month and a half passes and Elmáriyë finds herself settling into a routine. In the early morning she spends a few hours in the temple, drinking in

the silence of ancient stone as the day turns from darkness to light and the rising sun begins to shine in through the stained glass window, bringing color to the colorless shadows. She joins in the temple services, of course, and they are precious to her—morning, midday, evening, and night—but the times that are nearest to her heart are the times in silence, in solitude, when no one else is in the temple but her. During these times, the air itself vibrates with the sound of silence, the light itself shines with rays invisible, and the solidity of earth, stone, and wood feels as if unmovable even by a thousand ages of the world and yet as if passing in a single instant, only to give way to that life which is enduring.

During the daytime hours Elmáriyë is in the ghetto, usually in the hospital tending to the ill and wounded, though during her time here she witnesses many persons die and many recover. Because of this, the densely crowded room eventually empties again except for about a dozen persons. Toward one woman in particular, Elmáriyë feels a special bond, a particular affection, and also a deeper pain. Tilliána is only a few years older than Elmáriyë herself, a wife and mother of two children, though both her husband and her children have died as a result of the conflict. Her husband, Alsenór, was felled at the western gate and died almost instantly, with a lance through his heart. But he was known to the captain of the Imperial guard, and by the same deeply disliked, having had dealings with him in the past; thus as the conflict began to settle and the fires of battle died down, he sent two men to the house of Tilliána's husband and arrested both her and her two children. What they feared of a widow and her two small children, Elmáriyë does not know; but perhaps it was not fear that drove her captors, but desire, the desire for vengeance against one who was already dead and yet whose crime they wished to see punished to the fullest extent of their power.

And this happened even beyond their own choice or control, as both of Tilliána's children, a boy of six and a girl of three, fell gravely ill during the time of their imprisonment. This was due to the conditions in the overcrowded prison, filled with the stench and infection of numerous wounded persons left untreated. And despite the care that Tilliána gave them, they died in the prison cell, in the arms of their mother. She herself became sick shortly afterwards, and one of the guards who had previously arrested her—witnessing the depth of her suffering and loss—was moved with pity and petitioned for her to be released. And so she was, but the illness had already taken a firm hold upon her. She thus moved from incarceration in a prison that felt like a hospital for the dying to a hospital for the dying that felt like a prison. Perhaps she was already beyond treatment, and regardless of whether there were chains and locks, she could not leave. But there was a difference. In the prison there were bars and harshness and apathy, while in the hospital there

was love and care and compassion.

This is where Elmáriyë found her, with a broken spirit and a grieving heart, dying of an illness that was more of the spirit than it was of the flesh. She gave Tilliána what treatment she could, draughts of herbs to reduce her fever and to quell any infection she may have, whatever food and water that she could digest, and a friend at her side as often as she could spare. She bathed her too and cleaned her when she soiled herself, since she could not even rise from her pallet on her own, so weak was she. At first, Tilliána was embarrassed by all of this—by her bodily vulnerability but also simply by her complete incapacity—and apologized frequently in her frail voice. But Elmáriyë would simply run her hands through Tilliána's long blonde hair, now matted with sweat and tears, and assure her again and again that she was glad to offer this service and any other that she could provide.

"My husband was so concerned for us," she says one day as Elmáriyë feeds her small spoonfuls of broth. "He knew that standing against the Empire would endanger us, and he said that he had compromised with them for so long precisely because he wanted to protect us. You see...he was a government officer in the past. We were of a noble family, as noble as one can be in Telmérion where we have no formal class distinctions between noble and commoner. For generations, the men in my father's line were counselors to the hærási, and their guards as well." She pauses and coughs violently, and it takes a few moments before she can gather enough energy to speak again. "This position brought many favors and protections, but it also involved them deeply with the Imperial counselor whose role mirrored their own. But the Imperial counselor was, sadly, given priority over my husband and his ancestors simply by the treaty that granted the hærási to remain in power only as long as they acted always in cooperation with the counselor appointed to them by the Empire."

"So he was, in a sense, supplanted from his role?" Elmáriyë asks.

"You could say that, I suppose, though it was more his ancestors who experiences this supplanting. The role he inherited was already diminished, even though the hærási continued to value it and keep it in existence. And it is not as if he had *no* influence," says Tilliána. "But he was forced to continually butt heads with the counselor who was his rival. And eventually Alsenór decided that he had done all the good that he could in such a situation and chose to retire from his position." She falls silent, exhausted from the effort of speech, and all is quiet for a long while as she slowly eats what Elmáriyë gives to her. Eventually she speaks again, and there is earnestness in her voice, "But he had no choice but to take a stand, you see? He could not just wait idly by when he saw the blatant betrayal of truth and goodness unfolding before his eyes. He tried to work against this betrayal from within, but at

last…" And with this, she falls again into silence, struggling for breath.

Sensing that she is not going to say more at the moment, Elmáriyë assures her, "I understand, as much as I can, why he did what he did."

"I do not regret it," Tilliána sighs, "his resolve and his actions. And I accept his death as well, though it causes me great pain. I just wish that…" her voice fades, and tears form in her eyes and escape to roll silently down her feverish cheeks.

"You wish that your children had been spared," Elmáriyë concludes for her.

"Yes…"

"Beïta and Annár…" Tilliána breathes, invoking her children's names with a grief, love, and reverence that breaks Elmáriyë's heart. Then she looks up into Elmáriyë's eyes and says, "I only wish to join now those whom I have lost."

"I…" Elmáriyë begins, but her voice catches in her throat.

"You are going to say that you want me to live, are you not?" Tilliána asks. "But why? For myself? To fight the injustice that robbed me of my family? No…I am not interested in that."

"You are my friend, Tilliána," Elmáriyë says, finding her voice again. "Even so, whether you live or die is not for me to decide, though of course my heart will grieve at your loss. What I care about is that you walk the path intended for you, whatever that may be."

Tilliána stares at Elmáriyë, surprised by her words, and their eyes interlock for a long moment. At last, she says, "Your words are not what I expected."

"What else ought I to say?" asks Elmáriyë. "That I wish you to live for my sake?"

"To be honest…" Tilliána begins, "I think that, if you asked, I would be able to do that."

"I cannot ask that of you," says Elmáriyë. "You must look deep within yourself to discover if you still carry the spark of life. For if you do, this spark can again become a flame. If not, were you to choose to live simply because I have asked it of you, there would be no spark to sustain you, and such life would not last."

"What do you mean?"

Elmáriyë thinks for a long moment, grappling with how to express in words her intent, and then when she speaks, the words come tumbling out of her like a flood of feeling, "Your grief is making you sick even unto death, and a person must not seek death as if he has control over it and can choose by preference the time and manner of his passing. It is a gift and a burden, a mystery beyond our control and comprehension, and while we cannot seek it, we also should not flee from it. We must approach it as the mystery that it

is, in surrender and acceptance. And yet life, too, is a mystery, a mystery that is given from outside of ourselves, and is to be in such a manner received, so that it may truly become our own. Therefore, you must find deep within yourself the desire to live, or rather the openness to receive that desire anew where it has been lost. And perhaps this desire is beyond you, or rather perhaps this illness is in fact the true journey of your heart, and death to pass beyond to where your family awaits. I do not know. But you may still find a calling—a voice echoing within you inviting you to rediscover the courage to live even in and beyond grief in this life. Without this desire and this voice, what good would my voice do for you?"

"Perhaps your voice, Elmáriyë...precisely your voice, is what I needed," Tilliána says. "You have given me permission, both to grieve even unto death and to pass on, as well as to heal, to accept the pain, and to walk back unto life in this world."

"I wish only that you may find the freedom to walk unto life, my friend, true life," says Elmáriyë, taking Tilliána's hands within her own, "wherever that may lead. Let hope alone be your guide and not despair. For hope is the only road along which a person may walk and not come to grief, even if grief marks the journey."

Chapter Eighteen
Mysterious Meetings

Eldárien and Rórlain navigate through the streets of Ristfánd, leading their horses by the bridle, until they come to the courtyard in which the temple of Nirániel rises before them. They tie the horses to a post and ascend the steps to the large wooden doors, in which are carved ornate designs and runes—the temple being one of the last remaining places in which the old runes and the ancient language are still recalled. Eldárien runs his fingers along the runes and reads them aloud:

Oë Niranyë, ainá nu illó en elás,
inclés a seleánin tua eínnen ena voás.

"It translates as: 'Nirániel, goddess of light and love, incline to your children when they cry'," he says and then sees a small hand bell suspended to the right of the doorway. He pulls it, and the sound rings out clearly in the air.

The two men wait a minute or two and then the door swings open, revealing the clean-shaven face of a young cleric. He wears the flowing blue robe of a sage and scholar and bows to them when he sees them. "Welcome to the temple of Nirániel, travelers. Or at least I assume that you are travelers, by the

look of you."

"We are," replies Eldárien. "We come from the north with important news."

"How then may I be of assistance?" the cleric asks.

"Could we perhaps speak with a master of your order?"

"The grandmaster lives here, though he is very busy. Perhaps a word about what this news might be is in order. Then I shall know whether it is worthy of his time."

"I assure you it is," says Eldárien. "It concerns the safety of the inhabitants of Ristfánd and the Imperial plans concerning the progress of the war."

The expression on the man's face betrays concern and confusion, as if he does not know what to make of these words and is startled by their gravity. At last he says, "This way, then. I shall show you to his rœdra."

The grandmaster, much older than the man who answered the door, also wearing a robe of blue but with white hair and a beard that truly look to be, in his case, the adornment of the wise, rises to greet them as they enter his chamber. The man who had first answered the door silently departs with a bow.

"My name is Cirien Lorjiës," the grandmaster says kindly, clasping the hand first of Eldárien and then of Rórlain, who introduce themselves in turn. Then he gestures to chairs in front of his desk. "Please, have a seat." After he has returned to his chair opposite them, he continues, "You are very welcome here. How may I be at your service?"

"We come bearing a message of great importance for the people of this city," Eldárien begins. "We bring news concerning what we have unintentionally witnessed—you could say intercepted—concerning the Empire's plans to attack the city."

Cirien's face becomes serious, and his gray-blue eyes reveal an ocean of understanding, compassion, and concern, quite unlike the startled expression of the young cleric a moment before. In his eyes is neither surprise nor panic, but a deep and calm current of patient listening and long-suffering fidelity, in which even dire news such as this can be received as into a reservoir of peace. He leans forward in his chair and says, "Please, tell me all that you can."

And so Eldárien does. He recounts the events that unfolded in the barrow of Séra Galáptes and then continues with their journey south and the warnings they issued on their way to Ristfánd. Cirien remains silent throughout and does not even voice a single question until Eldárien has said all that he finds important to say. Cirien then opens his mouth to reply, but at that moment there is a knock at the door. "Ah, I think I know who that might be," he says softly and then, in a loud voice, "Please, come in."

The door creaks open, and they all turn as a young woman with long

auburn brown hair, clothed in poor tan cloth with a cloak of dark leather, steps into the room. She sees the guests and bows her head, saying softly, "Forgive me, I did not know that you were speaking with someone."

"No, come in, Elmáriyë," Cirien says. "I wish for you to be present for this conversation, if that is acceptable to my guests."

"Why would it not be?" says Eldárien kindly. "If you trust her to be admitted to our counsels, then so do we."

"I most certainly do."

Seeing that there are only three chairs in the room, Eldárien rises to his feet and gestures for Elmáriyë to be seated.

"Oh no, I couldn't," she says, raising her hands in protest. "It is you who should receive our hospitality now, and not we yours."

"Please," says Eldárien. "I insist."

"Very well." Elmáriyë sits in the chair, and Eldárien stands beside her, with one hand on the back of Rórlain's chair and another on hers. But to her surprise, rather than feeling threatened to have this man standing over her, she feels comforted. In fact, his presence is so strong that she finds it almost distracting, as if his hand were not upon the chair but upon her shoulder, and communicating something to her beyond speech.

"These men bring us news of the Empire's plan to retaliate," Cirien says, looking at Elmáriyë. "They speak of a military force that is being gathered and shall march upon the city. We know not the time of their arrival, but they heard the agreement itself being made, and I have no reason to doubt these men and the word they bring."

"But you also have very little reason to trust us," Rórlain says, "and so for that trust we must thank you."

"I have seen many things in my lifetime," Cirien replies, "and it is obvious that you speak only the truth." He sighs deeply and adds, "And this truth concerns me. For you speak not only of an army of men but of fell creatures of the earth, or rather of the abyss, who intend to join with the forces of men to bring destruction upon their enemy—upon ourselves."

"It is difficult to believe, ourselves," says Rórlain. "But we witnessed such creatures with our own eyes and saw the pact being made between a leader of men and a leader of beasts."

"Then we must act according to this knowledge and prepare as best we can for such a terror," Cirien concludes.

"We came to speak to you, rather than to any other," says Eldárien, "because I thought members of the temple more sure of trust than leaders of the government. I hoped that you would be able to tell us whom of the latter we may trust with this message and whom we may not."

"It was a wise decision on your part," Cirien answers, "for trust is hard

given to the leaders of Ristfánd in these days. I myself do not know whether the hæras is trustworthy or not. However, he ordered the quelling of the rebellion in the ghetto, and this seems to indicate that he is willing to harm his own people in defense of the ideals and supremacy of the Empire."

"To whom then should we address ourselves?" asks Eldárien. "We need force of arms to fight, but we cannot simply speak to the officers of the Empire and ask them to aid us in a fight against their own men. Perhaps there is no choice but to speak to whatever leaders of the rebellion still remain."

"You sound hesitant to do such a thing," Elmáriyë observes, and then she quickly adds, "Forgive me for speaking out of turn."

"No, no, Elmáriyë," Cirien responds before the others can answer. "You are admitted into our counsel, so please speak freely." And then, to the two men, he adds, "Though she is young, she is more deserving of my trust than all others."

So Eldárien addresses Elmáriyë directly and answers her question. As he does so, he sees a glimmer deep in her eyes which kindles something in his own. "I am loath to join with the rebels simply because I fear their cause is not entirely just. I wish to defend the people of Telmérion, and at whatever cost, but I do not intend to stand for a particular political goal or a concept of Telmérion either of my own making or of another's."

Elmáriyë nods silently, as if this answer more than satisfies her.

"You speak with wisdom," Cirien says. "Those who fight for the rebellion are brave and strong, but they are also rash and, at times, short-sighted. However, I know not what other avenues we have available to us. Either the government of Ristfánd shall agree to stand with us against the Imperial attack, or they shall stand against us. But the rebels, even in their diminished state after the battle, shall surely stand and fight, and we must be willing to stand at their side, even if only for a time."

"But is there any hope of success?" Rórlain asks. "If the rebellion has already been hindered by the Imperial forces within the city, what hope do we have to stand against an even larger force seeking to invade from without? Indeed, if both of these are true, we would be facing an enemy both within the city and outside of it, and simultaneously. It is not possible."

"No, it is not," Cirien agrees, "but sometimes impossible things, since they are the only course of action, are necessary. And then one realizes that they are, in fact, possible, far beyond one's own foresight or comprehension."

"I hope you are right," says Eldárien, "but what would you have us do?"

"You both speak already as if you are willing to take up arms to fight; is this correct?" Cirien asks.

"I do not know if there is another way," Eldárien says, "but I will fight only in defense of the people, no more."

"But you need a commander and also an army, or at least a fighting force —a militia—whom you may join. You cannot very well create one yourself nor lead it to victory," Cirien observes.

"Our part was simply to deliver the message," Rórlain says. "We can do no more than that, besides remaining here and lending our meager strength to whatever resistance the inhabitants of the city can mount."

"I am afraid that is very little," says Elmáriyë. "The city is suffering, and her people are weak. To all appearances, the rebellion has been crushed, and nothing remains but broken hearts and bodies trying to mend."

"As I said before, I believe there is more to this than meets the eye," says Cirien. "The rebel movement remained concealed for many years before bursting into the open in bloodshed. I believe that it still slumbers under the surface. We need only get in touch with it and find a way to relay your message."

"I may know of someone who can help," Elmáriyë offers. "She is the wife of a man who was once the counselor to the hæras but who left this position and fought in the uprising on the side of the rebellion."

"He would indeed be a good person to speak to," says Eldárien, "for knowledge of the mind both of the hæras and of the rebellion."

"Unfortunately, he was killed during the conflict," replies Elmáriyë softly, lowering her eyes. "And his two children died shortly thereafter during their imprisonment for the crimes of their father."

"I am sorry to hear that," Eldárien says with genuine empathy and compassion.

"Yes, it is a situation of deepest sadness," Elmáriyë whispers, and then, looking up again, "But she still lives and is recuperating in the hospital in the ghetto. Perhaps I could bring you to speak with her, and she could aid you in some way?"

"She may indeed," Rórlain answers, "but is she well enough for such a conversation?"

"I believe that she is."

"Then that settles matters concerning our next step," Cirien says. "Let us hope that it provides us more steps subsequently. But before anything, I suppose that both of you wish to know more about what has happened in the city?"

"Indeed, we do," says Eldárien.

"Then I shall tell you what I know." Cirien then relates to the two men what he has already explained to Elmáriyë concerning the intent and accomplishment of the rebel forces and the current state of the city, particularly those in the ghetto.

When he has concluded, Eldárien responds, "It indeed seems that visiting

the ghetto is the best and most prudent course of action. But my heart grieves that we find no trustworthy avenue by which to address our concerns to the leaders of the city, into whose hands the well-being of their subjects is entrusted."

"I agree," Cirien says, "but you may find precisely that, also, in the ghetto. I expect that many leaders of the city are favorable to the rebellion, even if secretly."

"In the meantime, the citizens should be warned and given opportunity to make provision for themselves, even to flee to the east if they desire," Rórlain adds.

"That is true," says Cirien, "but it also needs to be done without causing panic. I think that it would be good to give you both a couple days to make contact with a leader of the people before following this latter suggestion, for if possible the leadership should be told before the citizenry. I leave the former in your hands, but as for the latter, you can trust it to myself and the members of the temple. We shall warn our people at the appropriate time and also aid them as much as we are able."

"Thank you for your cooperation and your aid, Cirien," Eldárien says, "and for yours as well, Elmáriyë."

"We face a threat that far surpasses our native ability to counteract," Cirien observes. "We will do all that we can, but even then, we must turn to prayer before all else. For there lies hope beyond hope and strength beyond strength."

"Yes, in that you speak the truth," Eldárien says softly, running his hands through his hair thoughtfully. Elmáriyë looks up at him and sees that the expression on his face betrays great pain—a pain perhaps deeper than any she has witnessed. And in beholding his face and the depth glistening in his eyes, like a mystery hidden at the bottom of an immeasurable pool of water, she feels also his heart. Immediately she knows, in a deep certainty far beyond words, that Eldárien, too, is a pain-bearer, that he carries the hearts of others, the burdens of others, just as does she.

Overwhelmed as she is by this awareness, she is startled when the dialogue continues, and she has to force herself from her own thoughts back to the flow of the conversation.

"These creatures that we witnessed," Eldárien says to Cirien, "do you know what manner of beings they are?"

"I have studied much concerning such things since the rumors first reached Ristfánd," replies Cirien. "But I have been unable to confirm the truth of my studies until you came, bringing your account as first-hand witnesses. Now I know that what I had judged to be the case is indeed true—that is, to the limits of my current knowledge. I still do not know everything, and mysteries

remain which beg for answers."

"Whatever you can tell us may prove to be of great importance," says Eldárien. "To know the nature of the beasts that we must fight may help us to discover a way to defeat them."

"Are they not slain by ordinary means?" Cirien asks.

"No, they are, but..."

"I understand. You know not how many there are nor how they are brought into being. We could find ourselves fighting an immense and ever-replenishing force that would be the downfall of our people. I think this is what we all fear, but this is a fear to which we are afraid to give voice."

"Indeed," says Eldárien, "but if there is a way to prevent them, even to cut off their very origin, or their life, at the source..."

"They do not even have life," Cirien says, "not in the true sense of the word. It seems that my knowledge concerning these beasts will indeed help answer some questions within your hearts. You know what they are more than most, since you have seen them with your own eyes and witnessed their terror and their power. But the lore of the past can shed light that experience alone does not give."

"Please, we are listening," Eldárien says.

Elmáriyë, who has heard of these creatures, nonetheless feels far out of her depth and tries to cling to the thread of the conversation, having missed the earlier account that Eldárien gave of their path unto this place.

"The vrû'ádach, as we call them," Cirien begins, "are not men, nor have they ever been. Neither are they the dead who have been brought back to life. That much you both sensed. But what then are they? They take the form of men but are not men. They take the form of the living, but they do not live. How is this possible? It is because they are unearthly, wicked creatures born of a dark, forbidden art. They are but one species, for lack of a better word, of the abominations that are called the eötenga. Their making is of a power much greater than our own—an ancient evil that lurks in the shadows, ever trying to seduce human hearts, who were made of pure light and for pure light, with the allure of darkness."

"So these are creatures of darkness born of darkness?" asks Eldárien.

"Yes," answers Cirien, "though under all the darkness is to be found a 'forgery' of light. For light alone is life, and these things 'live' indeed, though in twisted manner, in mockery of the light. Dark itself cannot create, it can only destroy. But if there is any guise of creativity, of 'making' imputed to the forces of darkness, that is due not to their ability to create or give life but to their theft of goodness. Whatever made these creatures stole the concept of 'man'—what little, hollow part of it that it could possess—and fashioned it into what we now call vrû'ádach."

"But why would it do this?" Rórlain interjects.

"For the very hubris of creating, I suppose," Cirien says. "But also for war, for the destruction of the light and the reign of darkness."

"A terrifying thought," Rórlain sighs.

"Indeed. But there are more forces in this world than those of darkness alone. Many powers are invisible to our eyes, and in their hands, even more than in our own, is the destiny of the world. We speak of the 'gods,' and rightly so, but in the ancient days they were called 'Anaíon,' the Radiant Ones. A great deal has been forgotten over the ages, to the grief of many, but to learn again what has been forgotten may reveal to us a path that has until now been hidden from our eyes."

"How would we do that, if it has been forgotten?" Rórlain asks.

"That is a difficult question to answer," Cirien replies. "Or rather, it is simple to answer but difficult to accomplish: to find those who have not forgotten." He rises from his chair and turns to look out the window, crossing his hands behind his back. The others watch him silently for a long moment. "But there are enough things to occupy us at present," he continues at last. "I will reflect deeply on this and speak with you about anything that I learn or that is made known to my heart. For now, however, let us walk in the way that is clear to us and do all in our power to protect the people of Ristfánd."

With these words their counsels conclude, and Eldárien and Rórlain take their leave. But just as Eldárien is stepping through the threshold of the door —Rórlain having already gone ahead of him—Cirien calls to him. He turns back and sees the old man looking kindly at him. "Yes?" he asks.

"I have seen you before, Eldárien," Cirien says. "You came to the temple in the past, did you not?"

"Many years ago, I did," he answers. "Much has changed since then."

"Worry not," Cirien assures him. "I know what you were then, and I see clearly what you are now. Indeed, I see that the man who prayed in our temple then, the signs of Imperial office marking him out clearly, is the same man who stands before me now, bearing the signs of a man of honor and integrity that shine even more clearly than did the insignias of office that he once bore."

Eldárien nods silently to this and opens his mouth to speak, but he finds himself at a loss for words. Instead, he shares a final silent glance with Cirien and then with Elmáriyë who stands at his side. The eyes of both seem to pierce under the veil of his pain and to touch something deep within his heart. And by this gaze, a gaze of love and tenderness, his heart is eased, and the spark that he carries within him is kindled to burn still more strong and true.

† † †

The next day Elmáriyë leads Rórlain and Eldárien to the hospital in the

ghetto. Tilliána is seated with her back against the wall and an old blanket draped over her knees, and she looks up as they enter. "Good morning, Tilliána," Elmáriyë says, crouching next to her and wrapping her in her arms. Tilliána returns the embrace and then directs her gaze to the two strangers.

She asks, her voice betraying the weakness of her constitution and the sorrow of her heart, "Who are these men?"

"They are travelers from the north," Elmáriyë replies, "and they have come to help the people of Ristfánd."

"Good morning, my lady," Eldárien says, with a gentle bow, "my name is Eldárien Illómiel."

"And I am Rórlain Farâël, his friend and companion."

Tilliána smiles softly, embarrassed at the courtesy of the two men, a courtesy which she knows—without the need for speech—springs from their reverence for her in her suffering more than from any status to which she may have a claim. "It is good to meet both of you," she replies. "My name is Tilliána Valésa. I apologize that I cannot rise to greet you. I am still recovering from some weeks of illness."

"There is no need for apology," says Eldárien, and he and Rórlain sit on the floor facing her.

"How are you feeling today?" Elmáriyë then asks.

"Better still," Tilliána answers. "It seems that you will have me in this life longer yet. I looked in the face of death, and yet you pulled me through the darkness."

"That is good to hear," says Elmáriyë. "If you are open to it, Eldárien and Rórlain wish to speak with you in the hopes of preventing more suffering for our people."

"I would be happy to help in whatever way I may, though I am uncertain what that might be. I just wish you were able to speak to Alsenór, my husband, instead. He would know much more than I."

"We understand and have been told of the painful losses that you have suffered. You have our deepest sympathies," says Eldárien with compassion, and he allows these words to echo in silence for a moment before continuing. "Elmáriyë speaks the truth. We wish to help prevent more suffering from afflicting our people in the conflict that descends upon us in the days to come."

"In what way can I help you?" Tilliána asks.

"We were told that your husband was once the counselor to the hæras. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"How many years past did he depart from that position?"

"Five. It was shortly after our first child was born."

Seeing the pain in her eyes as she speaks, Eldárien reaches out and takes

Tilliána's hand in his own. "I am sorry that we must revisit these painful memories so soon."

"No, no..." she says, holding back tears. "There are good memories, too, and I want to cling to them, even if they are now touched with sorrow."

"Thank you for allowing us, then, to join you in these memories, both the joyful and the sorrowful," says Eldárien, giving her hand a final, tender squeeze and then laying it back upon the blanket. She nods silently to him, and then he continues, "Did your husband ever speak with you about what he experienced in the position of counselor and what led him to retire?"

"He did. He experienced hypocrisy and lies. He also knew injustice. That is why when he left, he did not just retire from his position, but sought a way to fight back, to resist, and joined with the rebel movements present in Ristfánd."

"We will speak of that soon," Eldárien says, "but first I want to ask about those things you mentioned: hypocrisy, lies, and injustice. Did he give you details about what he encountered?"

"The man himself," Tilliána replies. "I mean—the man himself was what he witnessed. Hæras Gléndas Medóra is a dishonorable person, though I suspect he is not unlike the other jarls in that respect, or at least some of them. However, what I am about to tell you will likely surprise you. I said that my husband left the counselorship and joined the rebellion. But, in fact, Gléndas has cooperated with the rebellion in secret for years."

"He has cooperated with the rebellion?" Rórlain asks in surprise. "But did he not command the quelling of the uprising here in Ristfánd?"

"He did," Tilliána answers. "And now you see an example of what I meant when I referred to hypocrisy and injustice. He has crushed the first stirrings of open rebellion in the city to give a clear message to all: 'I am sided with the Empire and will tolerate no resistance. My allegiance lies with the Imperial counselor, and, through him, with the legate in Brûg'hil and, in fact, with the Emperor himself.' That is what he intends to say and what he wishes people to believe. But he seeks instead only to put the Imperials off guard so that, when the second wave of rebellion comes, much stronger than the first, it will have a greater chance of success."

"Do you think that he will reveal himself openly at that time?" Rórlain asks.

"I do not know. He may aim to play 'behind the scenes' until the very end."

"He acts with great political tact," Eldárien says, "or that, I imagine, is how he justifies it to himself. But he has had his own civilians, indeed the members of his own rebellion, slaughtered in order to keep up a facade. I assume that this is not the first time something like this has happened."

"Not at all," Tilliána says. "My husband had witnessed enough to know

the hæras' intent and felt that his position as counselor was nothing but a facade as well. It gave the impression that Gléndas listened to the people—after all, Alsenór was meant to be their representative—but to all intents and purposes he listened only to himself. He played friend to the Imperial counselor and made whatever compromises seemed to fit in with his plans, and my husband was there only to keep up the perfect picture."

"What picture was that, exactly?" asks Rórlain.

"The picture of a hæras who is a consummate blend of the Empire and the people, of Vælíria and Telmérion, and who brings both to peaceful coexistence within his own rule."

"That is what the Empire has wished to accomplish, or rather what we have been led to believe," says Eldárien. "And to the surprise of many, it seems to have been more or less accomplished over the last two hundred years."

"Perhaps that is true to a degree, but it has occurred at the loss of many things that should never have been taken from us," Tilliána adds. "The Telmérion of the past is now lost to us, and if things continue, I fear that even the Telmérion of the present and the future will be lost as well."

"We shall do all in our power to prevent that," Rórlain assures her, "just as your husband did."

"I am grieved at the actions of the hæras," Eldárien says, "and at his duplicity. Nonetheless, it is hopeful news to us that he intends to support the rebellion against the Empire. How far he shall follow through with this, of course, we do not know. But now we know with whom to speak regarding the protection of the city from attack."

"From attack, you say?" Tilliána asks.

"Yes. Regretfully, we are here now to bring warning to the people that Imperial troops intend to march upon the city," Eldárien explains.

"And what then?"

"Then we all stand and fight," concludes Rórlain. "Though in your condition," he adds, delicately, "it might be wise to flee to the east. I wish for no further harm to come to you."

"Thank you for your concern, but I shall not flee. My health is returning rapidly, and even if I cannot fight with the sword, I will care for those who do so in whatever way I can and will tend to the wounded as I have been so lovingly attended."

"Thank you, Tilliána," Elmáriyë says, "for everything."

"I could not in good conscience do anything else," she replies. "But is there anything else that you need?"

Eldárien runs his hand over his beard as he thinks for a moment and then says, "We will need to speak with the hæras and warn him of the coming attack. But if he is living, as you say, a life of hypocrisy, doing so may bring

about bad fruits as well as good ones."

"What do you think could happen?" asks Elmáriyë.

"I am not sure... It is difficult to judge the mind of a man I have never met. I see not how he could deny such a threat to the very well-being and existence of his city. He may, rather, be forced to reveal his true intentions and to take up arms with the rebellion on behalf of the people of Ristfánd. But that would be the best scenario."

"He may also betray his people and side with the Empire, if he has something to gain," Rórlain adds.

"That is true," agrees Eldárien, "though I suspect he will seek to walk a line somewhere between the two extremes. If I understand anything about hypocrisy, that is its way: to give the appearance of unconditional goodness while underneath lies duplicity."

"May it be that he publicly supports the Empire while secretly relaying the word to the forces of the rebellion?" asks Elmáriyë. "Would such a course be feasible?"

"I suppose it is," Tilliána says, "though that would leave the ordinary citizen in the dark."

"It seems clear that either way, good or ill, he is going to bring word to the members of the rebellion," Eldárien says, "and that is why we must speak with him, whatever else may come of it. I also do not wish to judge the man's intentions without knowing him personally, for I recognize how easy it is to criticize and condemn from a distance, when only drawing near allows a true listening and understanding."

"In that you may be right, but we must judge nonetheless if we are to proceed at all," remarks Rórlain.

"You must speak with him," Elmáriyë concludes. "That much we know. But what about the rest of Ristfánd?"

"As Cirien said," Rórlain answers, "the members of the temple can help spread the word across the city."

"However, we also suspect that more people, armed for battle, will be coming to Ristfánd from the settlements to the north, hoping to aid in the defense of the city," says Eldárien. "We asked for aid as we passed through the settlements on our journey here." Then he sighs in evident fear and sorrow, and concludes, "But to come to the aid of a city on the brink of invasion that is not even aware of the threat of attack—that would be deeply disconcerting for those brave souls. Let us do all that we can to prevent that."

"Indeed. It seems that these questions and concerns will remain suspended in fear and uncertainty until we speak with the hæras," Rórlain says.

"Then let us go immediately to speak with him," Eldárien says, turning to Rórlain, who nods confidently in response. Then turning his gaze back to

Elmáriyë and Tilliána, Eldárien continues, "Once we have spoken with him, we will bring word to you swiftly, so that you may know his mind and may act accordingly."

"What a grievous ill it is," Tilliána says by way of conclusion, "when citizens have little hope of protection by their lawful leader but instead must fear him. It is my prayer that we may find in the person of the hæras not a confirmation of our fears but support and hope unexpected."

Chapter Nineteen
In the Crucible of Flame

Eldárien and Rórlain make their way through the streets of the city to the haeras' palace, an imposing structure of stone in the center of Ristfánd, surrounded by a grove of trees through which passes a narrow moat cut more for decoration than for defense. Its water glistens in the dappled light of the sun shining through the boughs of the trees.

"The hæras lives in a palace while many of his people live in squalor and poverty," Rórlain comments.

"Not a rare occurrence," Eldárien sighs, stopping to look at the building that stands before them. With high walls of massive stone tightly fitted and sealed with mortar, with vaulted archways, ornate arcades, and richly designed cornices and capitals, the structure is elegant and yet speaks singly of power and solidity, clearly hinting to the reign of the ruler of the clan itself. The building is large enough not only to serve as a place of meeting but also as a permanent dwelling for numerous persons—the hæras and his familiars and perhaps also other influential members of the government of the city. With this thought, a realization comes to Eldárien, and he turns to Rórlain. "Something just occurred to me that has until this moment has slipped my mind."

"What is it?"

"It is something so obvious that I did not stop to consider it before," he explains. "What if the hæras is with the Imperial counselor when we speak with him? We cannot very well warn him of the invasion when the counselor is present."

"That is true, but..." Rórlain says softly, though he does not finish giving voice to his thought, instead looking at his friend with concern in his eyes. "In truth, your words have just made me think of another possibility."

"Worse than what I have just named?" asks Eldárien. "What is it?"

"What if the hæras already knows of the invasion and has done nothing?

If he truly gives the impression of working with the Empire, then it is possible that the counselor has already made him privy to their plans."

"You think that Irilóf was able to get a message here before us?"

"It may be that the plan was made even before Irilóf succeeded at his task, and that what we witnessed was but the final piece being set in place," Rórlain suggests.

"But if the hæras does know about the coming attack," says Eldárien, "then I suspect that he already has some plan worked out with the rebels, and our news shall not be needed to stir him to action. Tilliána said only that he was duplicitous, not that he favored the Empire over the rebellion."

"Something does not feel right... Are you certain that this is the best course of action?" Rórlain asks.

"No, I am not, but I do not know what else we could do."

"Then we go to speak to the hæras?"

"I am afraid so," says Eldárien. "All of these deliberations confirm for me anew the profound limits of human foresight. We could speak all day about the possibilities that lie before us and about the consequences that our actions may bring, but in the end, we do not, and cannot, know. We must simply do what is right and, for the rest, trust in powers greater than our own."

"Very well then," Rórlain sighs, shaking his head. He crosses the narrow stone bridge over the moat and walks to the main door of the palace, Eldárien following behind him. He reaches out for the handle but pauses.

"What is it?" Eldárien asks.

Rórlain looks back at Eldárien, and his face is serious and lined with concern. "A thought just came to me," he says, "and with it a feeling. And I am surprised by its vehemence. It seems almost like a warning, intended for your good."

"What do you mean?"

"A thought within me but not of me," Rórlain attempts to explain. "Do you remember what Irilóf said when he arrested us? He said that his orders were to take you to Ristfánd for trial and execution. If you show your face in the hæras' palace, it is likely that you will be arrested and never see your freedom again."

"It has been long since I was here, and I never spoke directly with the authorities," Eldárien retorts. "I doubt anyone would recognize me."

"Please, Eldárien," Rórlain pleads. "In this matter, will you trust me? I wish to go alone, and I will speak for the both of us. I have vowed to protect you and I feel in my heart of hearts that this is something I must do alone in order to accomplish precisely that."

"I...very well, Rórlain," Eldárien says quietly. "I do trust you, and even if I think your caution excessive, I accept the gesture of your care. Whatever this

sense may be, I shall trust it as well, though I hope that it does not prove true."

"You are a hunted man. I suspect more than you realize. If I can be a bastion of defense for you against the forces that will harm you, then this is what I will do."

"What has come over you?" asks Eldárien, though he places his hand on his friend's shoulder and looks deeply into his eyes, as a way of expressing both his gratitude and his trust.

"It is perhaps no more than an intuition, but one that I wish not to act against."

"And I will not ask you to." With this, Eldárien steps back and watches Rórlain enter the palace. Only after the door has shut firmly behind him does Eldárien turn away and walk out of the grove and back onto the streets of the city. And to his surprise, he finds himself face-to-face with Elmáriyë, who stops before him, breathing deeply as if she has been running.

"El-Eldárien, I found you," she says, looking at him with eyes glistening and with alarm in her voice.

"What is it?" he asks, holding her arm to steady her. "Why did you seek me?"

"The ghetto...it is burning," Elmáriyë says, finding her voice. "The buildings, they are on fire. The hospital too."

"What happened?"

"There is too much—too much fire to be an accident. Everything is burning. Please, come with me. We need to help the people evacuate!"

"Of course."

Eldárien and Elmáriyë hasten through the streets of the city, which seem eerily calm considering the blazing inferno that burns not far away, and which can only be guessed at through the slight scent of smoke on the wind and the dull hue of darkness, like a low-hanging storm cloud, in the distance. When they come to the southern boundary of the ghetto, however, smoke billows up before them like a mass of black cloud blotting out a large portion of the sky, and the flames have already risen so high that they are visible above the eight-foot fence, orange, yellow, and blue, licking at the air. Elmáriyë steps forward as if to enter through the gate, but Eldárien holds her back.

"Just a moment," he says. He tears part of the sleeve off of his shirt and ties it as a face mask around Elmáriyë's mouth and then does the same for himself. "Please be careful. We will do our best to save them, but you must not allow the smoke or the flames to harm you either. I wish to save and protect you just as I wish to save and protect them."

"T-thank you..." Elmáriyë stammers, and their eyes lock for a moment before she turns away and runs into the ghetto. Without hesitation, Eldárien

does the same.

Elmáriyë's words were no exaggeration. The ghetto burns as if someone had gone from house to house with a torch and deliberately set everything aflame. Smoke billows from doors and windows, escapes through thatched roofs dissolving in the fire, and hangs thick in the roads and alleys, making it almost impossible to see more than ten feet in any direction. *It shall be impossible to save them all,* Eldárien thinks to himself, *or even a fraction of them.* He rushes to the closest house and, drawing in what clear air he can, kicks the door open. *Please...* he pleads, reaching out with his heart to the gods in whom his heart puts its trust, *please save these people. There is so little that I can do for them, but I do not wish for them to die... There has far too much death already.*

He enters the house, searching in the dense smoke for signs of life and calling out repeatedly in the hopes that someone might answer. But there is no response, and he sees nothing but the insides of the house gradually being gutted and consumed by flame. Escaping from the building before it collapses, he sprints to the next house along the road and enters it in turn. *How...how am I to choose where to enter and where not? Lives depend upon my choice, and this choice depends upon chance... Guide me... Guide me...*

This house too is empty, and, beginning to cough because of the smoke and moving close to the ground to avoid its full force, Eldárien returns outside. He looks around, trying to quell a sense of panic and futility, feelings of powerlessness crashing upon him like waves of a tumultuous ocean in the greatest of storms. *Guide me...* Seemingly at random, he chooses a house from among those lining the road and enters it. "Is anyone in here? Hello! Hello!"

And then...a child's cry.

Eldárien approaches the sound, forced almost to a crawl in order to avoid the smoke and the heat billowing above him as they seek for release. He comes upon a figure in the dense blackness, a young girl in the corner of a room, the body of her mother sprawled on the floor beside her. Flames lick at the walls and spread across the floor, consuming wood and setting it ablaze, threatening in but a few moments to cut off the way outside.

"Here," Eldárien says, drawing the child to himself. "Get on my back. Hurry..." Then he lifts the unconscious woman into his arms, and, carrying both mother and child, all the while trying to remain low to the ground, he finds his way out of the building. It crumbles behind him only moments after he is back in the street, sending sparks flying in the air and a plume of smoke billowing forth in every direction.

Looking around for a safe place for those he carries, Eldárien sees other citizens rushing to and fro, throwing water upon the burning buildings, and some entering the buildings themselves as he has done. He sees two young

women carrying pails of water, frightened looks on their faces but intent to do what they can.

"Excuse me!" he cries to them, stepping in their path. "Could you please take this woman and child out of the ghetto? Get them treatment if you can. I know not whether the woman lives, but it may not yet be too late."

"Very well, sir," one of the women says, and she takes the girl, now sobbing uncontrollably, from Eldárien's back. He then places the unconscious mother in the other woman's arms—a heavy burden but not impossible to carry.

"Thank you. Thank you both," Eldárien inhales, and an uncontrollable cough grips him for a moment before he is able to catch his breath again.

Before they turn away, one of the women says to Eldárien, "Be careful yourself!"

"I have to...I have to save whomever I can."

He rushes away into the smoke as it continues to grow ever thicker and the air ever hotter. Soon the ghetto will indeed be a burning furnace, and it will matter little whether one is inside a building or outside of it. He comes shortly to the hospital and almost trips over a figure upon the entrance. Kneeling down under the cloud of smoke pouring forth from the open door, he sees Elmáriyë herself, clutching Tilliána in her arms. They both appear to be unconscious.

Looking around desperately for aid, he realizes that all of the people whom he had seen before are now fleeing from the ghetto. The air is no longer able to support life, and the relief efforts have been abandoned. None more can be saved than have been saved; rather, if further attempts were made, the rescuer himself would die with those whom he sought to rescue. Eldárien cries out in anger and frustration and slams the earth with his fist in protest against his powerlessness. Then he sees Elmáriyë's eyes open ever so slightly, and she looks at him.

"I will..." he begins, but his voice falters, and then he is overcome again by coughing. When he has found it again, he says, "I will get you both out of here."

Her response, in a hoarse whisper, is, "I know you will," and then her eyes close again.

Without another moment's hesitation, Eldárien lifts Elmáriyë onto his back, her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck. She clings to him weakly. Then he draws Tilliána into his arms and holds her as one would hold a child, her head against his chest, one of his arms behind her back and the other in the crook of her legs, supporting her. She is entirely unconscious.

He sprints now, as fast as he can in his failing strength, through the streets, which have become a crucible of flame and a furnace of death. The fire burns loudly around him, as if roaring at him in menacing hatred, and the smoke

clouds his vision, burns his eyes, and sears his throat, making it almost impossible to breathe. Even though he feels as though he is already beyond the point of collapse, he forces his legs to carry him forward. Elmáriyë's slim body bouncing roughly against his back and Tilliána's figure cradled in his arms both give him strength and purpose, and energy flows into him from a source beyond his reach and yet also deep within him.

He bursts from the gateway of the ghetto and into the streets, free of flame and smoke, and sinks to his knees, tears of pain and sorrow escaping from his eyes. His head slumps against his chest and blackness veils his vision. As he begins to lose consciousness, he feels hands upon his shoulders. He feels the women being taken from him. He tries to look up, but he sees nothing but darkness.

"Sir, are you alright...?" says a woman's voice.

And then a man's voice, "You saved them. You saved them!"

"Please..." Eldárien manages to say. "Take us to the temple of Nirániel."

And then he loses consciousness entirely.

† † †

He awakes to the light of the sun shining upon his face and opens his eyes. He lies on his back on his bed, and Elmáriyë's kind face looks down upon him, creased in concern but gentle and radiant nonetheless. She smiles weakly when she sees him open his eyes.

"I..." he begins, but his voice catches in his throat.

"You survived," Elmáriyë says, "and I owe you my life." Her voice too is hoarse, but in his gladness that she is safe, Eldárien hears nothing but life—a life bruised but enduring.

"I am...glad..." he breathes. "But what about Tilliána? She was unconscious. Did she make it?" As he says these words, he sits up in bed, gripped by concern.

"She has not awakened, I am afraid," whispers Elmáriyë. "She was in the smoke for a long time. Cirien says that there is little hope for her recovery. It is only a matter of time until she slips entirely from this life."

"No..." Eldárien sighs. "She has already lost everything."

"But maybe it is for the best, you know...for her to join those whom she has lost," offers Elmáriyë, but he hears the doubt in her voice.

"She said that you gave her a reason to live again, did she not?" he asks.

"Yes. But I think it is too late for that now."

"I wish there was something more I could do," Eldárien says, swinging his legs off the bed and placing his feet against the floor. Elmáriyë looks at him thoughtfully for a moment, as if deliberating. But then she shakes her head.

"You are too weak already," she says. "I am afraid that you cannot help her."

"At least allow me to go to her bedside," insists Eldárien. "Will you join me there?"

"You really ought to rest."

"No. Please, accompany me."

She opens her mouth to respond but immediately closes it again. Instead, a single tear escapes from her eye and rolls silently down her cheek. She nods to him.

Tilliána is in the adjacent room, lying back on a bed with a pillow behind her head and a blanket pulled up to her waist. The window above her is open, its white curtain billowing and dancing in the gentle breeze that blows in from the courtyard. Eldárien kneels by the bedside while Elmáriyë sits at the edge of the bed. Together they look upon her. She is breathing, though with difficulty.

"There is no natural medicine that can cure her now," says Elmáriyë. "I have done what I can, but I am too weak, too unacquainted with suffering, with the kind of compassion that could save her."

Eldárien looks at her and asks, "What do you mean? What do you mean there is a kind of compassion that could save her?"

Elmáriyë lowers her eyes. "It is nothing."

"It does not seem to be nothing," he insists.

"Well, it is just that...you do not have the strength for it. Such a gift always comes at a great cost to the giver, and you are already at the limit of your strength."

"Of what do you speak?" Eldárien asks. "I do not understand."

"I am not going to force you to choose between your well-being and hers," says Elmáriyë, raising her eyes again and looking at Eldárien. She is weeping now, and tears stream freely down her face.

"Please," Eldárien pleads.

"It is just..." she hesitates, as if trying to resolve a conflict within herself, and then she continues, "I knew from the first moment I met you, from the first moment I looked deeply into your eyes. You are the only person I have ever met who has in himself the same gift that I too carry."

"What gift do you mean?"

"It is the gift of 'bearing.' That, at least, is what I call it. Have you not experienced in the past that you carry the pains and burdens of others as if they are your own?"

"But do not all men do this?" Eldárien asks.

"Few are compassionate enough to accept love with such a cost," replies Elmáriyë.

"But surely all are invited to it?"

"You are right, Eldárien," she says. "Of course you are right. Such com-

passion is the lifeblood of man, the measure of his love in a world marked by suffering and pain. But for you and I, there is something else at work. I myself have tried...I have tried to save Tilliána. But I cannot. I am too weak, too inexperienced. Her pain is too great for me, too far beyond me. I do not have the capacity to hold it, to hold it without losing myself. But the bearing heart can only mediate healing to another if they can hold the other's suffering, can encompass the other's pain within their own compassion, and give it a home. In this way, what is theirs becomes ours, and they are made free."

After Elmáriyë has fallen silent, she and Eldárien both sit looking at one another without speaking, the breeze whistling in through the window and Tilliána's labored breathing punctuating the stillness.

"What is theirs becomes ours..." Eldárien repeats, after a while. "I know that what you say is true. I have always felt it, but only your words, now, reveal it to me."

"Then you must know why I cannot ask this of you!" Elmáriyë cries. "For Tilliána suffers not only in body. She also suffers from a heart ravaged by loss and grief. Together they afflict her and lead her to the point of death." She pauses and shakes her head, as if trying to dismiss a surge of strong emotion. "I tried. I tried to give her a reason to live, and she was so close. But with the fire, everything was lost."

"Elmáriyë, I know that you are not asking this of me," says Eldárien, laying a hand upon her knee and reaching out with his other hand to grasp one of Tilliána's hands as it lays upon her breast. "But this is something that I must do. As you said, I am the only person who can do it."

"But at what cost to yourself?" asks Elmáriyë.

"I care not about the cost," Eldárien replies. "If I am to die that another may live, then I cannot think of a better way to depart from this life. And," he smiles softly, "I may yet live. We know not what strength lies in me yet, in my weakness and beyond it."

The look in Elmáriyë's eyes as she receives these words is inexpressible. "I knew..." she says in a whisper. "Eldárien, at first sight I knew you. Seeing you now is like meeting a long-lost friend or finding a part of my heart that has always been missing. And I do not want to lose that so soon."

"Then pray that I live, as well as Tilliána. If I am truly what you feel me to be, then you know as well as I that I must do this."

"I do."

Without being told what to do, Eldárien simply knows. He rises from his knees and sits on the bed, drawing Tilliána into his arms and holding her heart against his own. Closing his eyes, he allows himself to feel, to feel her heart beating weakly against his, to feel her labored breathing—and through this, beyond this, he opens himself to her pain, her illness, her agony. To her

very heart and existence.

There is a moment in which time seems to stop, and the universe itself holds its breath. Only the three of them remain in motion, in a room vibrating with life, with grief and longing, with suffering and loss, with despair and hope.

And then the moment passes, and Tilliána gasps and draws in a deep breath. She opens her eyes just in time to see Eldárien collapse before her, falling back, unconscious, into the arms of Elmáriyë.

Book 11

A Song for Ristfánd

Chapter One
Awakening

Fire surrounds him, licking at the hem of his garments like poisonous tongues and billowing forth smoke of blackest night, filling his lungs and blinding his eyes. It sweeps across the land, scorching earth and sky, turning the air itself into living flame. He opens his mouth to cry out, but no sound emerges. Instead, he is overwhelmed as the fire engulfs him, and he sinks to the ground and yields himself up to the flames, to pain, to death.

But no...the flames bite and death clamors to consume, but within him lives something else, something deeper, urging him not to yield to despair. Instead, he reaches out beyond the darkness, the utter darkness; or rather, something reaches out within him, and he needs only yield to its movement and its impulse.

A light pierces through the fire that burns and the smoke that suffocates, and before these rays—pure luminescence without diminution, pure radiance without violence, pure beauty without force—the flames themselves recede. And he finds himself kneeling against the barren earth in a desolate plain stretching out in all directions. But the light enraptures him and draws his gaze, and he looks—looks up beyond the desolation, beyond the night of loss, and sees the stars twinkling undisturbed above him. And not only this, but they pour forth their gentle light upon the earth, upon the dead carcass of the land, and from its parched soil, seedlings sprout, little green shoots from the blackened soil as if from fertile earth.

† † †

He awakes to the sound of voices.

Half in consciousness and half out of it, he tries listening to the persons converse, even though he cannot make out the distinct words which pass between them nor identify who is speaking. But he grows weary with the effort. And gradually the voices fade, and he hears only silence, punctuated by nothing but his own breathing.

Exhausted from this effort, he fades out of consciousness for an indeterminate amount of time and then wakes again. This time he feels a different awareness stir within him. Even without opening his eyes, he knows that the sun shines full upon his face, warm and bright. But when he tries to open his eyes, he finds himself too weak, and his body does not obey his command, even for so small a thing.

Blackness takes him, and he passes again out of thought and awareness.

"Brother..." he hears, and he moves to answer the voice, but realizes that he cannot.

"Brother!" the voice says more loudly, more insistently.

I am here! he wants to cry.

But nothing.

"Brother..."

S...

"Brother?"

Se...Se...

"Eldárien?"

Selía.

"Can you hear me?"

She is standing in the grass, her long hair dancing in the wind. No, everything dances. Her hair dances; her clothing dances; the grass and flowers all around her dance; and she herself dances. But no...she stands still, the breeze blowing against her thin little body, blowing through it as if it were a sheet hung in the wind. She is reaching out to him with her palm upraised, stretching, as if trying to cross a great distance to touch him, to make contact with him.

"Can you say anything? Can you respond?"

My sister... My Selía... I did not know that you were alive. What happened to you? How did you escape? I was so afraid and so sorry...so sorry that I could not protect you.

"Eldárien..." The voice is soft, gentle...hardly more than a whisper. Yet it pierces through the vision, and Selía vanishes. Now he sees only blackness, though his mind begins to emerge from the abyss, from dream and imagination and grief, and he hears her voice, clear and vivid and true. "Eldárien, hold fast." He feels her hands take his own and hold them, cold hands, and yet they feel so warm.

"I..." he speaks, and the words come from his mouth. They are less than a whisper, but they are words, not imagination. Flesh, not only thought. More than a dream or a memory. Reality and truth.

This...this is communication. Voice echoing voice in the vibration of sound, by which hearts themselves are shared.

He hears her voice sigh in relief, and her hands squeeze his own tightly.

"It has been a long time," she says.

"Selía?" he asks. His voice sounds strange, as if he has never spoken before. But no...it is his voice, his very own. "Selía?"

"I am sorry...I do not know who that is," her voice replies.

That is right...she is not Selía...she is...

"I am Elmáriyë," she says, and the lines connect in his mind, and his heart

confirms them.

I...I remember, he thinks.

And then he says it, "I remember."

She does not respond in words, but he hears a sound as of movement. Shuffling. And then something damp touches his forehead. A cloth.

"You are Elmáriyë..." he whispers, and his voice cracks from disuse.

"And you are Eldárien," she whispers in response.

And then he truly remembers, and his heart throbs with a thousand memories pouring in like a torrent.

"She...is she...?"

"Yes?" she asks.

"Is Tilliána...alright?"

She laughs softly.

"Thanks to you, she is well," Elmáriyë replies, "and she looks forward to thanking her savior in person."

He opens his eyes and sees her face bent over him, the golden sun glimmering in her hair. Her eyes shine with color and depth as they meet his own, and she smiles.

"Welcome back," she says.

"Can you help me sit up?" Eldárien asks. "I feel too weak still to do it on my own, but I do not want to slip from consciousness again."

She nods, and, putting her arms underneath him, helps to lift him into a sitting position and then places pillows behind him to hold him up. After she has done this, she pulls a wicker chair close to the bed and sits in it.

"The fire...was it extinguished? Has it harmed many people?" he asks.

"After you left, a concerted effort by the townsfolk was able to put out the flames," Elmáriyë answers. "And most of the people living in the ghetto escaped the fire, though their homes are ruined."

"How many died?"

"We are unsure, since some of the houses collapsed, but we have report of twenty-five persons missing—who likely did not survive the fire—while only sixteen bodies have been found and confirmed dead. What happened to the other nine, we cannot prove, though it is most likely that they are...buried under the rubble and yet to be discovered." Her voice is strained with pain and compassion, but hope burns gently in her eyes. "I have spoken much with those who have suffered because of this and those who have lost family and friends."

"You have...spoken much... How long was I out of consciousness?" he asks.

"A little more than a week," Elmáriyë replies, looking almost ashamed.

"I was lost. I was burning," Eldárien whispers. "But then the light came."

"I know."

He looks at her, and their eyes meet for a long moment, pouring out thought and speech beyond words.

"But it worked...whatever *it* was?" he asks after the silent speech has faded.

"Yes," she confirms. "You 'bore' her, Eldárien. You have probably done it many times in your life without being aware of it. But this was the first time you have done so deliberately and fully. And what you bore was great indeed —deep and wide and profound. We all feared that you would not be able to pull through."

"I would not say 'pull through,' however," he sighs. And he is surprised at himself, for even as he speaks a deeper awareness dawns upon his mind and his heart. "It is rather," he continues, discovering the truth even as he gives voice to it, "it is rather as if my being has expanded. It has dilated like an eye's pupil in the sun, like lungs drawing in more breath than they have ever drawn in before."

"That is precisely it," she responds. "But it is a dangerous affair. For before the dilation, there is a weight, almost like a crushing. We were afraid you would be narrowed, even lost. We were afraid that you would lose yourself." She pauses, and then she smiles again, and her smile is like silent laughter. "But you did not. No, rather, you found yourself again."

"And not only myself," Eldárien says. "I found her. It is like she is here inside of me...and...and..."

"And what?"

"And you, too."

"Me?" Elmáriyë asks.

"Yes. You were drawn from the flames, and you allowed me to see your need, your pain...and now you live in me."

Elmáriyë lowers her gaze, abashed, and now it is her turn to awaken to a deeper awareness. She has in fact felt *changed*—she knows no better word for it at the moment—since the events following the fire.

"I did not know until this moment," she says, "that you received not only Tilliána, but me as well."

"It was not my conscious intention," Eldárien says, "but I must have wished for it."

"You must have wished for it deeply," she says.

"You were scared and hurting...and she was at the point of being lost," Eldárien continues, the words forming simultaneously in his mind and on his lips. "When I opened myself to bear her, to carry her, I opened myself also to you."

"And you did, and we owe you more for it than we shall ever be able to repay," says Elmáriyë.

Eldárien chuckles softly at this and says to her, "You should speak to Rórlain. He knows that there are certain debts that are not debts, but gifts. Bonds of the heart, of the spirit, drawing together into one those who before were two. How could there even be a 'balance of accounts' for such a debt?"

Elmáriyë simply looks at Eldárien, at a loss for words with which to respond. In turn, he sees her face full of emotion so deep, so genuine, and so authentic, that he has no words to describe it.

And then his mind jumps back to the time immediately preceding the fire and sees again, in his mind's eye, Rórlain pushing open the door to the hæras' palace and shutting it again behind him. "Is Rórlain here? Is he alright? What happened at the palace?"

"Hush," Elmáriyë says. "He is safe. Regarding the rest, we will speak soon enough. But it is still too early. You need to recover."

He nods silently, and, almost as if her words have given him permission, he feels fatigue engulf him again.

"'Tilliána will come see you in the morning," Elmáriyë says. "And Rórlain is anxious to speak with you as well, though his business many people are currently attending to, and your presence is not needed. Mainly, I think, he wishes to see that his friend and companion is well."

"'Tell him that I am," Eldárien requests.

"I will," replies Elmáriyë, and she rises to her feet. "Now rest."

"'Thank you," he says to her. "Thank you...Elmáriyë." And then, closing his eyes, he whispers, "I just wish that I was able to save them all."

He feels her hand upon his head, as if an unspoken sign of understanding, of shared grief, but also a word of gratitude. Before turning away, she says to him, "I understand, and I wish it were so too. But you have done what you could. Try to rest in that knowledge, even as you mourn. Yes, mourn, but mourn in hope. Not all rests upon the shoulders of one man, and we know not the plans that lie hidden in the fabric of life and history for each person. All may yet be for good, beyond our knowledge or comprehension."

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As morning dawns on the following day, Eldárien rises with renewed vigor and sits up of his own accord. The first rays of the sun's light filter in through the slightly parted curtain of the window of his room and play on the opposite wall. He watches the dancing light for a while, simply present, simply abiding, with hardly a thought, and sees it pass from the reddish orange of early dawn to the golden-white of full day. And then he rises to his feet and tests his strength. He finds that he has no trouble standing or walking and so dresses himself in attire that has clearly been arranged for him, lying over the back of a chair beside the bed. These greatly resemble his previous clothing (now worn by much travel and pervaded by smoke and flame), but they are

new, as if recently made for precisely this purpose. He pulls on the trousers and boots and then a woolen undershirt and, over this, a linen gambeson. His mail hauberk hangs against the wall, but for now he omits it and instead pulls on his tunic and overshirt.

Just as he prepares to push open the door and step out into the corridor, he realizes for the first time the extent to which he is famished: with a stomach twisted by pangs, a mouth parched, and lips dry and cracked. More than a week indeed must have passed in which he consumed very little water and almost no food, perhaps none solid. This awareness only makes him more grateful for those who cared for him, thus preserving his very life, during this time. He intends to thank them and reaches for the door, when he hears footsteps approaching in the corridor outside. Then, a moment later, the door opens, and a face appears in the doorway.

"Good morning, sir," the young cleric says with a bow. "Cirien told me to come wake you. But, as I see, you are already awake. No matter. He himself shall be by shortly with breakfast, and he wishes to sit with you for a while, if you are well enough."

"I would be glad to see him," Eldárien says. "Thank you for coming and for your message."

"I am at your service." And with this, he departs.

Eldárien then eases himself into one of the chairs in the room—the narrow wicker one in which Elmáriyë sat the day before—and waits for Cirien's arrival. In about a quarter of an hour, there is a gentle knock at the door, and, after Eldárien's invitation, it swings open and reveals the kind face of the grandmaster. He enters with a tray of food and drink balanced on his hand and says, "Our dear friend awakes at last. Your recovery brings a joy both deep and pure to many, Eldárien."

"I want to thank all those who cared for me in my need," Eldárien says. "And I would like to do so in person."

"That can certainly be arranged," Cirien replies, and then, with a glimmer in his eyes, he adds, "though you know already the three who remained with you the most. You were graced by one or another of them by your bedside almost without ceasing. Tilliána most of all. She has lost those dearest to her, but you gave her another chance at life. And, as if to give back the time that you gave to her, the life you returned to her, she has remained by you with ardent devotion and tender care."

"Then I will express my gratitude according to the measure of her devotion," Eldárien says. "And that shall not be difficult, as I feel it keenly."

"Well, you shall be able to do that soon enough," Cirien says. "She will come about midmorning to see you."

"Elmáriyë told me as much yesterday."

"Ah, Elmáriyë..." Cirien says with a loving smile. "But here, you need to eat. I am sure that you are hungrier than perhaps you have ever been."

At these words, memories of his past return to Eldárien now, moments of near starvation in the wilderness of Tel-Velfána, in which he and his men hid from enemy troops, all the while trying to hunt or trap animals or gather vegetation to sustain their life long after their provisions had dwindled to nothing. But "I am hungry indeed" is all that he says in response. He receives the tray and takes a drink of water and then begins to eat—slowly at first, for he knows the state of the stomach after many days without solid food.

"She is dear to you, is she not?" Eldárien asks. "Elmáriyë, I mean."

"She is," Cirien replies, "though she has only been with us for two years."

"There is something special about her," Eldárien remarks, "though that is a word I am hesitant to use about anyone, since each person is special in their own way."

"I understand what, nonetheless, you are trying to say," Cirien responds. "Perhaps the word you are looking for is sacred...or mysterious. There is something mysterious about her."

"Something mysterious that lives within her," Eldárien proffers.

"Precisely." And Cirien looks at Eldárien deeply, his eyes speaking more deeply than his words. "But," he begins, trying to give voice to what his eyes have attempted to say, "she recognizes in you what she has long known and experienced within herself, even if she does not fully know what it is."

"And I see it in her, even if I am also, in a way, recognizing it for the very first time in myself."

After these words there is a lull in the conversation, during which Eldárien continues to eat and drink in silence. The food is plain but nourishing: rye bread, cheese, and a bit of fruit, and a cup of water and milk each.

"I wanted to ask about what happened concerning the fire," Eldárien says, at last. "I expect that I will speak of it with Tilliána and also with the others. But perhaps you can enlighten me on some matters beforehand. It feels...unusual...to have been away from the world, as it were, for over a week right after so many pressing occurrences."

"Unusual indeed," Cirien agrees. "So many events were set in motion, and yet you were not able to witness their unfolding. But worry not, they continue to do so, and there is much yet for you to witness, and much that calls for action and discernment. But let me say immediately: not all is for ill, and certain things are even hopeful."

"What do you mean?" Eldárien asks.

"Suffice it to say that, as we speak, hæras Gléndas harnesses all his authority in preparing the people of Ristfánd to defend themselves against the coming attack. And the Imperial counselor himself can no longer stand in the

way of such actions. But I wish to leave the telling of such things to Rórlain, in particular, as he will do it far more justice than I. You were right to trust him in speaking with Gléndas. It seems that he acted with great prudence and tact." Cirien then rises to his feet and takes the now empty tray from Eldárien. He says by way of conclusion, "But I must take my leave now. I wish not to drown you in conversation on your first day awake, and I also have many matters awaiting my attention. Please, I encourage you to speak simply with Tilliána in the joy of new life. The other matters about which you have questions can wait until other days, and they are conversations more appropriate to be had with other persons."

"I understand," replies Eldárien, "and that I shall do."

After Cirien has gone, Eldárien pulls open the curtain and looks out the window. The day is bright, and the sun shines full in a clear sky. He guesses it to be about eight in the morning, maybe a little later—enough time for a short walk in the courtyard before Tilliána arrives. The corridors are quiet as he walks through them, and the courtyard too is silent; the temple is always quiet, it seems, a haven of peace and serenity and stillness even in a city wrought by conflict and fear. As he steps onto the stone pathway that circles the courtyard, a breeze breathes through it, whistling gently against the walls and rustling in the boughs of the trees whose leaves glisten in the light. Shadows play against the stone and the earth, against the thick and yet well-tended grasses and flowers, and Eldárien contemplates the interplay of light and shadow as he walks slowly through the courtyard, head slightly bowed.

As the path curves with the shape of the courtyard and Eldárien follows it, he is surprised to hear a voice gently singing—so softly that until now, blocked by the trees, he was unable to hear it. It is a woman's voice, hardly more than a whisper, and yet full and rich, if not of sound, at least of emotion and meaning and purpose:

The child sang a song of lightness,
taking leave of sadness' suffocation,
bidding farewell to fears and frustration
and resting secure in love's consolation.

"I sing of you, my friend, my caregiver,
for you have given me more than I ever knew
in giving me the one thing necessary: in giving you.
How then can I respond but with me, full and true?"

And she danced upon the blades of grass, unbending,
and she alighted upon each flower, each petal,
like the dew of morning soft and, in sun's light, glistening,
and all the while, with joy in her heart, singing.

The day was hers to love and cherish, her heart's home,
but the night was hers as well, soft and still,
as every morning she would dance and roam
through every field and valley, mountain and hill,
and every night she would come back anew
to the place which she had never left,
for her home was in her heart, where love she knew,
and where she remained always with the one who knew her
and gave her life.

He approaches her. She sits on a bench with her back to him, the shadows of the trees playing upon her as if tenderly caressing her, and the light painting her golden hues of radiance and warmth.

"Tilliána?" he says softly so as not to startle her.

She turns and looks at him.

"Eldárien."

"I did not expect to find you here."

She smiles.

"Are you staying in the temple as well?" he asks.

"I am."

"What about your home?"

"We lost it when my husband left the service of the hæras," she replies. "Since then, these previous years, we made our home in the ghetto."

"From service to the hæras to life in poverty," Eldárien says, "it must have been a great change."

"Yes, but it is one that I never regretted, nor regret even today. The hardships of these last five or six years have taught me more than I learned in the rest of my life."

Eldárien takes a step toward her and opens his mouth to speak, but she interrupts him, "And yes, I mean the losses of the recent weeks as well. They still burn my heart more than fire and at times drown me more than an ocean of tumultuous waters, but..."

"I am so sorry," he says. "You have lost almost everything it is possible for a person to lose."

"But not everything," she whispers, and then she asks, patting the bench at her side, "Will you sit with me?"

He nods and sits and then responds, "I reverence the pain of loss in you, as well as the hope for life."

"The loss you have felt and known," she says quietly, looking at him, and for the first time he senses something in her voice and her demeanor, something that he can only recognize as vulnerability, like the vulnerability of a

person whose deepest secret has just been revealed, and they stand exposed before another awaiting their judgment, their response. "But the life you have also given," she concludes, and she looks away from him.

"I do not know if I would put it that way," Eldárien says. "I cannot give life. It is not within my power to do so."

"But with your compassion, your suffering, you opened the way for it," Tilliána says, "and for that I must thank you."

"If I did not have this 'gift,' this capacity, there is nothing I could have done for you," he says. "I am grateful for it, therefore, with you. And I do not even know what it means yet to have it...not in full. How can I do such a thing? And why me, of all people?"

"I know not the answer to such questions, but at least for me, they do not matter. All that matters is that you are you. All that matters is that you *do* have this gift. It is a part of you; it is yours. And it was given to you for a reason. For such a gift of love can be manifested only in a person with the love to embrace it and to give it—to bear it—as a gift for others." She turns and looks at him again, as if exerting an effort to overcome her vulnerability and to meet his gaze. "Perhaps you do not know it, but when you received all that was mine, when you felt it within you, I too felt all that was yours, your very heart. And never before in my life have I encountered something so beautiful."

"Tilliána..." Eldárien says, at a loss for words. "I... This is all so new for me. For so long I sought to help others with the strength of my arm and my skill with the blade. I had no understanding that I could offer them protection, help, and healing from a place so much deeper, a place where the law of being is not power or strength but the weakness and exposure of the heart to embrace, to hurt, and to love."

"And you stepped into that place without hesitation," Tilliána says. "Doing thus, you have been for me the kindest and best of friends. I can only hope to give some return for what you have given to me. Yet there is little that I can offer. I am not like Rórlain, who can be your protector and your companion in journeys and in battle. Nor am I wise and learned, a guide and giver of counsel like Cirien. I am not even like Elmáriyë, whose heart so obviously and so deeply understands your own and supports you with this understanding. No, I am weak and poor. But what I am and what I have is yours, and I shall stay by your side to the end."

"I fear that we walk into danger and even unto death," Eldárien replies. "If this is what it means, how can I allow you to join your destiny with mine?"

"Whether you wish it or not," answers Tilliána, "you have already done so. Forevermore, my life is bound up with yours, and as you fare, so must I."

"That is not true. The life that was given to you is yours. It is yours to live

as you wish. There are no conditions placed upon it."

"I speak not of conditions," says Tilliána. "I speak of something else. Of something as freely given as you first gave the very substance of your life to rehabilitate my own."

Eldárien is silenced as much by her words as by the intensity within her voice, an intensity of tenderness, of gratitude, and—the tenor is unmistakable—of love. He knows not how to respond, for though he wishes to protect her, to spare her from harm, he cannot deny that her response to him now in this moment and the intentions of her heart move him deeply and align with unspoken wishes within his own.

At last he finds his voice and says to her, "If that is the decision of your heart, then I receive you with gratitude, humbled before the gift. And I promise you today that I shall protect and care for you to the utmost of my power and even of my weakness, henceforth until the end."

Chapter Two
Doubts and Suspicions

Rórlain walks alone through the streets of Ristfánd and passes through a high archway of stone into the southwestern section of the city, where the barracks and training grounds of the militia are located. So much has happened already in the short time since he and Eldárien arrived in the city, and he finds the turn of events almost difficult to believe. How could he have known that his plan to speak with the hæras, the jarl of the clan of Rhóvas, would lead instead to him being an eyewitness to the murder of the Imperial counselor and the skirmish that led to the supplanting of the Empire's troops within the city? He thinks back on these events now, while he simultaneously looks forward to speaking with Eldárien about them.

But at present he has no time to reflect upon these things and instead is forced to draw himself back to the pressing matters at hand. A city needs to be fortified, ordinary citizens need to be trained as soldiers, and soldiers need to be equipped with arms and armor. Rórlain, of course, is little qualified either to train men or to equip them, but he finds people turning to him for his aid and guidance nonetheless. He is unsettled by this, by the fact that he has come to be seen as possessing a kind of authority simply because of his role as the "news-bringer." If anyone is fit to aid the people of Ristfánd against the coming assault by the combined forces of the Empire and the vrû'ádach, that man is Eldárien. But it appears that the gods are marking out a different path, one unexpected by both of them, and Rórlain struggles to

understand and accept this. He has seen a fitting leader in Eldárien almost from the beginning, and he has wished to follow him, to aid him in guiding the people of Telmérion—in whatever role may be marked out for him—toward freedom and peace. But now Eldárien goes where he cannot follow. He walks a path into darkness and suffering—invisible and yet real—which Rórlain simply does not grasp and from which he feels excluded. And Eldárien rests in pain, he slumbers in incapacity, while the city continues to live, while the men prepare for battle, and while the forces of darkness prepare to march upon them.

Rórlain has spoken often with Cirien—a true leader, though of a different sort—but there are certain questions troubling him about which he wishes Eldárien's perspective. And he finds himself also simply desiring the solidity of his presence. Has he truly come to depend so deeply upon this man in the short time that they have been together? It has been less than three months since they met, a small period by all accounts, even if most of that time was spent continually in one another's company and walking together through fears, trials, and hopes. But shall Eldárien ever again be who he once was? Or has his life forever been changed by those mysterious events that occurred during the few hours they were apart—hours in which Eldárien saved life at the cost of his own, and in which Rórlain witnessed the unveiling of the true nature of the hæras and the unfolding of events which would forever change the future of Ristfánd?

"Sir Farâël?" says a voice, interrupting Rórlain from his thoughts. He realizes then that, despite his efforts, he has still been thinking about the past and worrying about the future rather than attending to the present.

"It is not fitting to address me as sir," he replies, turning his attention to the man who approaches him along the road, "but what is it that you wish?"

"Captain Sædán wanted me to ask you whether you wished to be fitted for some armor," the man says. "He said the choice of kind is yours to make. You may have whatever you request, within reason, of course."

"That is a generous offer," Rórlain says. "But are there not many men in need of armor and many who are forced to wear ill-fitting protection made for another man or no protection at all?"

"The smiths try to remedy that as we speak," the man rejoins. "But the captain told me that he rather insists that you accept this offer."

"Then if I have no choice, I will go. Tell him that I accept. Where shall I be fitted?"

"I shall lead you there now, if you please."

"There is one thing I wish to attend to first," Rórlain says. "Could you tell me, instead, where to go? I shall find my way there myself."

"Very well."

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"Do you think that this will be enough for your family today?" Rórlain asks as Áldin—an ordinary laborer from the ghetto now, by necessity, become a soldier—receives the covered basket from his hands and lifts the cloth to inspect its contents: a loaf of bread, some handfuls of nuts, a few thick slices of salted pork, and some apples.

"Yes, yes," Áldin says, with enthusiasm in his voice. "It is more than we are used to. I cannot thank you enough for doing this for us."

"It is really thanks to Elmáriyë and Cirien," Rórlain replies. "The food is from the temple, and it is only due to their permission and efforts that I am able to bring it to you."

"But you are the one who approached them about our need."

"Aye, that is true," Rórlain acquiesces, "but you chose not to hide it from me."

"I am glad that I did not."

"Tomorrow I will bring you some more."

"Are you certain?" Áldin asks. "I can come to the temple myself and retrieve it."

"I insist, at least for the present," says Rórlain. "You are in training exercises almost all day, and I want you to retain what little time you can spare to be with those whom you love. Great danger approaches, and we do not know what fate awaits us. I wish not to take you from your family any more than you already have been."

"You have my thanks," says Áldin, and, placing the basket under his arm, he turns away.

After this, Rórlain makes his way to the forge to which the captain's messenger had directed him. A burly blacksmith, face dripping with sweat, is hammering a sheet of metal into a sword and looks up as Rórlain enters. The smithy is little more than a covered platform of stone without walls—the roof held by pillars—with a furnace, anvil, and grindstone. The heat of the forge is intense, and the air is thick.

"I was told to come to you for a fitting," Rórlain says.

"Aye," replies the smith. "My name's Fýrir. It's nice to meet you. I'll be supposing that you are Rórlain Farâël?"

"I am."

"Very good. Give me one minute and I'll be with you."

Rórlain steps back away from the heat to wait, watching the smith work in silence, and Fýrir chuckles softly at this. When he has finished whatever particular task he thought necessary to accomplish before letting the metal cool, Fýrir calls to Rórlain, "You won't learn much watching from a distance."

"I do not know if I would be able to learn much just from watching, regardless," he replies.

"You would be surprised."

"In truth?"

"Yes, and no," Fýrir says. "You could learn to beat and grind a metal pole into a point sharp enough to pierce a shirt of mail, or to take it and make it look more or less like a sword. But for any work of true skill, you'd need to be taught or experiment till your arms fall off. Though if you did that, I suppose you wouldn't be making no weapons at all, nor wielding them."

"Then I shall leave the smithing to those who possess the skill," Rórlain says. "For my arms shall be needed yet, like the arms of all the men of Ristfánd."

"And I shall provide you all with what weapons and armor I can, and, when the dread day comes, I shall also fight by your side."

"We need valiant and strong men like you, Fýrir," Rórlain says, placing a hand upon his shoulder.

"We have yet to see how valiant I am," he retorts, "though I do have the strength of two men. That must count for something."

"Let us hope that it does," says Rórlain. "Now, how about the fitting?"

"Come inside with me, and we'll get your size," Fýrir says, gesturing to a door at the back of the smithy that leads into a building. "What kind of armor will you be wanting?"

"I have worn little armor in the past, so I desire nothing that shall be too much of an adjustment. I want to be able to move freely."

"Armor won't stop you from moving freely. I can design it so that it can move more or less as your body can move. However, it is the weight that might be a bit of an adjustment. It takes a while for a man to become accustomed to walking around in twenty to thirty pounds of metal. Of course some armor weighs even more, but we have neither the material nor the custom among our people to fashion such armor except in the rarest cases. That, sadly, is more the custom for the knights of the Empire."

"I will gladly take whatever is in your power to give."

"Aye, and that be what I hope to give." Fýrir leads Rórlain inside what he sees to be the entryway of his house, though they step only into a kind of antechamber, then he pulls a knotted cord from a table and begins to take Rórlain's measurements. "What weapons do you favor?" he asks as he wraps the cord around his chest.

"Until now, I have used the bow and the axe."

"A two-handed war axe for cleaving?"

"No, an axe small enough to fit into my belt comfortably and to be wielded with a single hand."

"Then you might want a shield to go with it, or at least a buckler," Fýrir says. "Axes aren't the best weapons for blocking and parrying. And if you have an army charging toward you, I can almost assure you that you'll want something more solid between yourself and them than an axe."

"Have you fought before?" asks Rórlain. "You speak as if you know."

"It seems common sense to me, when I think of it. Yet to answer your question: I have studied the art of combat but have not been engaged in it myself. One way or another, I think I've got just the thing for you." Fýrir finishes the measuring and then disappears for a moment into an adjacent room. When he emerges, he holds in his hand a small circular convex shield, made of treated wood plated with iron. Rather than a handle, it has two adjustable leather straps—enarmes—one for the forearm and one for the hand. It is two feet in diameter. "This is the biggest targe you're going to get before it becomes a shield. Here, strap it to your left arm and see how it fits."

As Rórlain does so, Fýrir disappears again and then reappears with a long thrusting dagger in a sheath. This too he gives to Rórlain.

"The dirk can be held in your left hand as well as the targe, blade downward—or you can simply take it out when you need it. It will give you a great deal more options in combat than just fighting with an axe, or even with axe and shield."

"Are you certain these will not be better suited for another warrior?" Rórlain asks hesitantly.

"Oh no, I insist," Fýrir responds. "They are yours. But now let's talk about the armor itself."

After some conversation and a few experimental try-ons, they decide to outfit Rórlain with a brigandine—not as protective as metal plate, but lighter—for the torso, shoulders, and upper arms, with metal, gauntleted vambraces for the forearms and hands ("Because if you're fighting with an axe, you'll want your fingers protected"). Fýrir already has such armor in his possession and only needs to adjust it so that it conforms more precisely to Rórlain's proportions. This is something that Rórlain himself thinks important, since he does not wish to take any more time than necessary away from the making of arms and armor for the other men.

† † †

That evening Rórlain sees Eldárien in the dining hall as the former walks past. He is seated in a corner of the room alone, as the temple members take their evening meal alone in their rooms, as a rule, and during this time the dining hall is used only by guests. An empty plate sits before him, and he rests his head against his hands, his elbows against the table.

"Welcome back to the realm of the living, my friend," Rórlain says, crouching down beside him and placing a hand on his shoulder.

"It is good to be back," Eldárien replies, embracing him in response and then looking intently into Rórlain's eyes, as if to judge how he is faring.

"I suppose, however, that it is a fortunate thing that I asked to speak with the hæras alone and sent you on your way," Rórlain says. "Who would have foreseen that it would have led to what it did? The fire in the ghetto started at the very time we were on our way to the palace."

"I hoped to speak with you about those matters soon," says Eldárien.

"There is much that we need to discuss," agrees Rórlain. "When would you like to speak?"

"I am still feeling quite weak and I intend to return to my room to rest in but a moment. Perhaps we could speak the first thing in the morning tomorrow? Do you have the time?"

"Yes, I do," he replies. "There are a few things for which I am required later in the day, but most of the morning should be free."

"Thank you," says Eldárien, "I shall look forward to speaking to you then."

The next day, Rórlain rises early and, feeling restless, paces the corridors slowly and silently, not so much preoccupied in thought as preoccupied in emotion. He passes the door to the library, finds it open, and steps inside simply out of curiosity. The walls are lined with books and scrolls, and the many shelves create a maze-work of aisles in the small but overcrowded room. Rórlain has never been much given to reading, but he scans the titles of the books now and pauses to take a few from the shelf and flip through their pages. A certain book he recognizes from when he was younger, one of the few books that his family owned and which he read and re-read over the course of many years. Taking it in his hands again, he sees that the cover and the binding are different than his own copy, but the script and the format are almost identical to the one that he knew. He then sits in a padded chair by the wall, near a lamp that burns bright and strong, and begins to read.

> *The events of history surrounding the occupation of our country by the Vælirian Empire are now shrouded in mystery and forgetfulness. Much has been forgotten, as if effaced in the blowing snows of time, buried deep under rifts or eroded beyond the point of recognition. And yet certain things have been impressed so deeply upon the memory of our race that, even if their specifics are no longer known, their shape remains. We know of warfare and blood. We know that when the Empire came to our shores, they brought the sword, and a sword mightier than our own. But we also know that, for centuries before this, our land itself was marked by strife, by contention for supremacy, by the conflict of clan against clan and hæras against hæras. A question poses itself to us even at the distance of nearly two centuries: did the Empire bring war with them when they came, or did they intend to*

bring peace, and our own people insisted upon war? We may never know the answer to this question, for it is as if such matters were deliberately erased by those who participated in the great events of that time. All that we know is that, even if the Empire's coming was followed with combat and bloodshed, the ultimate fruit of its presence was peace. The occupation of the Empire brought about a peace between the clans which, until that moment, had eluded us in all but the rarest of circumstances.

This realization is made all more grievous by the recognition that once before in history has the land of Telmérion known universal peace, and that was short-lived. A paradoxical moment is that period of our history, the victorious ascension of Séra Galáptes and the reign of the Galapteäni kings, for it was a unification brought about not from without (as we know now under the rule of the Empire) but rather from the heart of our own land and people. But little do we recall now how such a peace was brought into existence and even less do we understand the fabric of that unity, which was able to restore to harmony the seven tribes even while preserving their diversity and the richness of their traditions. But we have cause to wonder now, in our own day and age, how long the peace that has been brought under the auspices of the Empire shall truly endure, and also whether such peace can even be rightly called by such a name.

Rórlain lowers the book and looks out the window, through which morning light shines yellow and bright. The song of birds filters in from outside, a song of peace and lightness and carefree wonder, and yet Rórlain struggles to hear and to rest in its deeper notes. The peace that the land of Telmérion has known in the past two hundred years is fast fading, and he feels a threat of violence drawing near from many sources, a threat that he is powerless to stop or even to delay. Shall their beloved home soon become a land drenched in blood, spreading from the point of utmost concentration —the rebellion around Minstead—to bathe the entire land in loss, pain, and grief?

† † †

"How are you feeling?" Rórlain asks as he sits opposite Eldárien in the latter's room, the morning light bathing all in its warm glow as it filters in through the window.

"I feel a great deal better now. Of course, I have only been awake a couple days, and before that I was not even conscious...at least, that is, in the ordinary sense of the word. It is hard to explain, and I cannot put it into words even to myself. And I am afraid that, were I to try, I would utterly fail to communicate it to you. I hope you understand."

"Is there anything that you think I should know about…all of this?" asks Rórlain.

"Someone explained to you what happened, correct?"

"Yes. Elmáriyë herself tried to explain to me this thing that she called 'bearing.' I did not truly grasp it in any meaningful way, so I asked Cirien about it. His words were a bit clearer—at least for me—but…"

"But it does not seem 'normal'?" offers Eldárien. "Rather, it seems almost frightening?"

"No, no…it is not frightening. After all, it is only you…and, I know not how to express it…simply healing someone. How could that be frightening?" says Rórlain, though not entirely honestly.

"I suppose not…" sighs Eldárien, lowering his eyes.

A dense moment of silence passes before Rórlain says, "But do not worry about me. It will just take some time, I think, to adjust."

"Yes. That is true for the both of us," says Eldárien, and then he looks back up with kindness in his eyes. "But tell me," he begins, changing the subject, "what happened in the hæras' palace."

"There is much to tell, in truth," Rórlain answers, glad to let the prior subject rest for the present, "and it concerns not only the hæras' palace. I assume that the others have not told you much?"

"They have refrained from telling me much of anything, in fact. They seem to wish that I hear it from you and from no one else."

"I wonder why," Rórlain murmurs.

"I think they are trying to protect me," Eldárien says.

"To protect you? From what?"

"I am uncertain, and I may be mistaken as to their reasons. I think, however, that they see me differently after what happened."

"That is understandable," Rórlain comments, hiding the fact that he, too, is struggling with seeing Eldárien in a different light than he did before. It is not that he is a different person than he had previously known, and certainly not that Rórlain looks up to him more now or feels more comfortable in his presence. For Rórlain, at least, it is quite the opposite: he feels put-off by what he sees as Eldárien's aloofness, an aloofness, granted, that is not due to his own choice but to the very nature and fact of his suffering. When he tries to explain it to himself, all that he is able to say is that he feels "distant" from Eldárien, or more precisely, he feels that Eldárien has moved away into a distance that Rórlain cannot reach, as if he took the only boat to a distant shore, and now all that Rórlain can do is look across the waters and see his figure silhouetted in the mist.

Because of this, Rórlain does not know how he ought to relate to Eldárien now, nor how to be close to him as they were before these events transpired.

In the midst of such thoughts, he realizes that he is sitting silently with his gaze on the floor, absentmindedly thinking, while Eldárien is looking at him with inviting eyes, waiting for him to continue. He realizes, too, that they have returned to the previous subject without intending it. Shall it always be like this now, from this time forward?

"I apologize. There is a great deal on my mind," Rórlain says. "The city is astir with preparations for the coming attack. But something preoccupies me in the midst of it all: I do not trust our leader. Granted, to all appearances he has now shown himself to be unconditionally on the side of the rebellion; but considering what we have learned of his character, I doubt the authenticity of his actions. Or rather, I doubt the integrity of his heart."

"Perhaps if you told me what you witnessed," says Eldárien, "that might help me to understand what you mean to say."

"Of course, of course." He pauses, trying to choose his words carefully and to speak clearly of what he saw. And then he speaks, "When I entered the *rædra cástria* I stepped into the midst of a heated argument between the hæras and the Imperial counselor. The hæras was accusing the counselor of setting fire to the ghetto in order to root out the last remnants of the rebellion. But the counselor protested that he would never act without the command or at least the approval of the legate in Brûg'hil, and that, regarding such an act, he had received neither. In response, the hæras claimed that he had long known that the counselor acted beyond and against the directives of the Empire and that no longer could such treachery be tolerated. He continued to press his point until the counselor became enraged. The latter drew his blade and threatened the hæras with severe punishment for these false accusations. In response, he too drew his blade, and did so just in time to deflect an attack from the counselor, who seemed to have lost his self-restraint. At this moment, a fight broke out in the chamber between the guards of Ristfánd and those of the Empire. In the midst of the fray, the counselor was slain, as were most of those men who with him served the Empire. A few were taken captive, for the purpose, I suspect, of bringing witness to bear on what they beheld that day.

"To all appearances, it seems that the hæras acted solely in self-defense, standing against an enraged counselor who acted far beyond the commands of his superiors and who proved this by attempting to slay the very man to whom he was meant to offer counsel in the name of the Empire. The actions of the hæras and his guards, thus, were nothing but an appropriate response to those who first drew the blade against them, thus breaking the bond of peace. It seems to me, though, that this whole affair was a tactic planned by hæras Gléndas. He has since taken undivided control of the city and claims sole leadership of the clan of Rhóvas in the absence of the counselor and of

any other Imperial representatives. We have yet to receive a response either from the capital or from any of the Imperial forces in nearby lands. I fear that their response shall be one with the coming attack, all the more vigorous for the bold moves the hæras has taken to exert his rule, whatever reasons he may claim to be on his side."

"But if he is sided with the rebellion and fights for the freedom of the people of Telmérion," Eldárien says, "then surely his actions are fitting to such a goal, and they are even militarily tactful. If he is indeed a leader of the rebellion, we could not well expect him to act differently than he has done. What then, precisely, causes you to distrust him?"

"It is because I judge his accusation toward the Imperial counselor to be false," Rórlain replies. "I do not believe that the counselor started the fire. In fact, I do not believe that the hæras believed it either."

"You believe that it was an accident that the hæras then utilized for his own purposes? Though not right or just, that would still be tactful. It would mean nothing regarding his fidelity toward the cause of the rebellion, but only cast a shadow on his character."

"No, I do not think that either."

"What then?"

"I spoke with many men who worked in close proximity to the Imperial counselor, and all unanimously told me of his honor and integrity. It is true that he stood entirely for the goals and ideals of the Empire, but he was not a duplicitous man. He would never act contrary to the directives of his superiors, nor, indeed, would he willingly cause the death of innocent persons."

"If that is the case, then he is fortunately unlike many of those who bear an office similar to his own within the Empire," remarks Eldárien. "Nonetheless, it does not surprise me, for not all those who align themselves with the Empire are unjust or malicious. Indeed many are noble. I can attest to that myself from my own experience. Yet perhaps, like myself, he did indeed receive such a command and simply did not communicate it to the hæras. For what reason would such a plan be shared with the very person who would have cause to prevent it? The counselor could very likely have received an order to set fire to the ghetto, and even if he was a man of integrity, resisting such an explicit order is a very difficult thing to do. Is that not more feasible than the fire being an accident? It seemed much too widespread to be an accident. That I witnessed first-hand."

"Regardless of what kind of man he was or what course of action he took, he lives no more," says Rórlain.

"Then why not let it rest?" Eldárien asks.

"Because I think it possible that the hæras himself commanded the fire."

"In truth? Why would he do such a thing?"

"I thought I already made that clear: now the hæras has a perfect pretext to justify the death of the counselor and his forces," Rórlain explains. "He can portray it as a matter of simple self-defense—defense of his safety and the safety of his people. The guilt can be laid entirely at the feet of the Empire, and he can rally the people behind him in that regard."

"But why would he need a pretext at all?" Eldárien asks. "I am not following your train of thought. Could you explain more thoroughly?"

"I think it due to the fact that he wishes to assert his claim before the judgment seat of the Empire, to assert himself as the sole ruler of the clan lands of Rhóvas. But he does not want to make that claim with the burden of having led a rebellion against the Empire on his shoulders—that is, at least for the Empire to see. He wishes, rather, to present himself as a peaceful and moderate ruler who did everything in his power to cooperate with the Empire and only acted in defense when the counselor went on a tirade of destruction. He desires to appear as though he *cooperated* with the Empire in quelling the rebellion...that is, until the counselor burned an entire sector of the city and then sought to slay the man who sought to hold him accountable for his wrong. What happened after this, he would say, was unavoidable."

"So you are claiming that the hæras himself started the fire in the ghetto as a way of framing the counselor?" asks Eldárien.

"I do not firmly believe either way," Rórlain replies, "though I fear it to be the case. Such an action seems entirely in accord with his character. And if the Empire *did not* command the fire, then the hæras does have just cause before the Empire, for then they can only assume that the counselor did indeed act independently and without the blessing of the legate."

"If even a part of what you say is true," says Eldárien, "then hæras Gléndas Medóra wages a war of his own or seeks to profit from the civil war in whatever way he can. And he little considers the cost that such actions bring to bear upon his citizens."

"Precisely."

"But false accusation is a grave matter," Eldárien warns, "as is the silent judgment of the heart, even if not voiced. The former can be severely punished, though the latter also bears its own poison."

"It is not that I intend to publicly accuse him," says Rórlain quietly, "though perhaps that is the appropriate course of action. Nonetheless, I have no proof of wrong doing, and I do not know where I would find any. I rather am simply concerned about what he may do, particularly if he is placed in a position in which it falls upon him to protect his people at the risk of his own well-being or rule."

"You fear that he will choose rather to sacrifice the people for his own power?"

"That is my fear."

"But does he have the authority to do such a thing?" Eldárien asks.

"If my suspicions are correct, then he had enough authority to command his subjects to burn a section of the city and all the people within it."

"But if your suspicions are not correct...?"

"I do not know," Rórlain sighs.

"It seems that all we can do is stand strong in defense of the people, whatever may come. I think what we ought to fear and what we must resist is the clear and pronounced enemy, and we should not allow ourselves to be preoccupied with fearing enemies in our midst."

"You tend to trust people too much and too easily, Eldárien," says Rórlain. "I hope, for your sake and for the sake of us all, that it does not redound unto harm."

"I am not counseling you on what you yourself are to do," replies Eldárien. "We know not how the hæras will act in open confrontation with the Empire until it comes to such a moment. Then, and only then, will he be judged—and not by speculations but by his own actions and their fruits."

Rórlain opens his mouth to reply but, after a moment's hesitation, he closes it again.

"What is it?" Eldárien asks him.

"Ah, it is nothing... I still need to tell you about what happened after the slaying of the counselor. As I told you, I happened to be present at the most opportune moment—whether fortunately or unfortunately, I do not know. After things settled and the 'dust cleared,' as it were—which took the greater part of the day—I approached Gléndas and spoke in this manner: 'I bring pressing news concerning the civil war. And, granted that you do not yet know of what I speak, my words may mark out a course that shall allow you to prevent great evil and suffering for your people and to retain the authority that is yours.'

"He replied to me as follows: 'How is it that you came at such a moment claiming to bring a message concerning the civil war? Can you not see that the civil war is on our own soil? This very day, my hand was forced in defense of our people, and in the process the man who represented the Empire but was no more than a tyrant has fallen.' It was then that I realized that he did not know of my presence earlier that day. My witness to the murder of the counselor had itself gone unnoticed. I did not think it fit or necessary to tell him otherwise. I simply replied, 'I see that you have stood against the Imperial power in defense of your own people, and you are very likely right to do so. I come to you because I have learned, through quite unusual circumstances that I shall soon elucidate, the plans of the Empire to lay siege to the city. And they plan to do so in collaboration with powers of unearthly

darkness, called by men the vrû'ádach.'

"His face betrayed doubt and confusion, and this turned quickly to anger. At first he did not believe me. It took a thorough recounting of what we beheld in the barrow of Séra Galáptes and my responses to a rather pressing interrogation for him to begin to accept my account. In this interrogation he demanded to know a great deal concerning my past, and I was barely able to conceal the fact of your identity. He did, however, learn of my previous alignment with the rebels, though he well hid his reaction to this. He truly does walk the line of a 'neutral observer' in the civil war. In this seems to lie his security and his strength. But I think he has other plans and finds himself in a rather unusual situation. Shall I tell you what I think?"

"Go ahead," Eldárien replies, with a nod.

"I believe," Rórlain continues, "that he does not know whom to trust. Though the reasons are opaque to me—I have my guesses—it seems that he finds himself quite alone in governing Ristfánd and the lands of Rhóvas."

"What do you mean in saying that he finds himself alone?" asks Eldárien. "Did he not recently succeed in defending against the Imperial attack against the rebels and now has put an end to the counselor himself?"

"I think the feat is smaller than in words it appears to be," replies Rórlain. "After biding his time and making preparations, it seems that Gléndas seized this opportunity to exert his authority at last and to claim all the lands of Rhóvas as his own. But that is not truly feasible in his current situation, even were he to slay every person favorable to the Empire within fifty leagues. For not only does the Empire have a presence in almost every settlement on the continent of Telmérion, however small, but surely the forces west of the mountains shall retaliate and seek to take back what he has claimed. That is one of the reasons I mentioned to you earlier that I think the fire was staged by the hæras. He needed to be able to stand before the Empire as a reasonable man, as someone with whom to dialogue and reach an agreement, and not as a mere rebel to be cut down."

"And your message destroyed that plan of his in a single blow," Eldárien concludes. "Is that what you are saying?"

"The Empire marches upon his domain whether he tries to avoid it or not. As much as he may aim to present himself as a partner in dialogue, the armies come to attack his city nonetheless."

"But if he is a leader of the rebellion, what else could he possibly expect? Or is he not a leader of the rebellion, but actually neutral as he claims to be?"

"A good question," replies Rórlain. "He clearly presents himself not as a rebel but as one who would force all the rebels to acquiesce and to return to peace. He counts on that as the currency with which to barter himself and his rule with the Empire. Only when he felt backed into a corner—either he must

risk the exposure of his true intentions or he must allow the rebellion to die in his lands—did he follow through with the plan that I have just recounted to you. And he did what he could to justify his own position, to make it appear as reasonable self-defense, as if somehow he could still fight for the rebellion in secret while standing before the Empire as an ally."

"I am struggling to follow you now, Rórlain," Eldárien says softly. "I am sorry, but my mind is just not capable of making sense of these things at the moment. Yet I do not think it much matters what methods the hæras uses to protect himself while still attempting to fight for the ideals that he wishes achieved for his clan. When the day of battle comes, he shall either stand with his people against the combined might of the Empire and the powers of darkness, or he shall betray them in manner small or great. I still think little is to be gained by these questions and suppositions, though you seem to be putting a great deal of effort and attention into trying to unravel them."

"Forgive me, Eldárien," says Rórlain. "But you did not witness what I witnessed. Something concerns me greatly, and I have tried to express that 'something' to you as best I can. Yet it seems that you do not share my concern. I shall therefore take it and bear it alone. If I am meant to act upon this in any way, all I can do is trust that a path shall be made clear before me."

"I wish that I could help you, Rórlain," Eldárien says quietly, with a mixture of compassion and strained tension in his voice. "I truly do. And I am trying to bear the pain of the realities of which you speak. But I simply do not follow you in your preoccupation with affairs beyond your understanding and your influence."

"You speak of 'bearing,' my friend," Rórlain says, frustration showing in his voice, which he immediately tries to conceal. But his final words come out with a strong tenor of accusation within them, "You speak of 'bearing,' and yet I feel as though you keep your distance from me when I try to invite you into this space. I wish for your advice, your counsel. And yet you simply dismiss my concerns as excessive, as 'beyond me.' Well, if I do not act on them, who shall?"

"Rórlain..." sighs Eldárien, reaching forward to place a hand on his friend's knee. But Rórlain rises quickly to his feet.

"I am sorry that I spoke with you," he says. "This is something that I must do on my own. I suppose it must be that way."

And with this he turns and leaves the room.

Chapter Three
Hearts United

A few days later, Eldárien walks through the fields surrounding the city of Ristfánd, immersed in thought. Scattered homesteads dot the landscape, simple houses of wood or stone with thatched roofs, and here or there a larger estate, smoke spiraling into the clear sky from many a hearth. There are numerous livestock fenced or stabled: horses, cows, sheep, pigs, and chickens. The crop-fields are fewer in number, and even these lie fallow, the spring harvest having already passed and the early fall planting yet to come. Eldárien is concerned for these people, these innocent people who, when the Empire draws near, will have no protection against blade and fire except the walls of their houses and the tools of their trade. He understands that they have been informed of the coming danger and know to take refuge within the walls of the city when the enemy approaches. He only hopes that they have adequate time to do this and that the enemy does not come in the dark of night while all but the city guards slumber. But there is yet hope that the people shall know long in advance of the Empire's approach, for scouts have been sent westward and northward in fair number, in the hopes of intercepting either the force marching toward Ristfánd or news of their coming.

As he reflects upon these things, Eldárien's mind is drawn inexorably toward the events that have followed upon his coming to Ristfánd: his encounter with Cirien, Elmáriyë, and Tilliána, the fire and subsequent "bearing," and Rórlain's concern and preoccupation with the affairs of the hæras and their estrangement due to this. He feels torn in many directions and by many different feelings. A tenderness he has rarely known stirs within his heart when he thinks of Elmáriyë and Tilliána, and he wishes to protect each of them always to the utmost of his ability, whatever may come. But regarding Rórlain he feels great grief and frustration of heart, not so much with Rórlain and what seems to be his unnecessary concerns and interest in the leadership of Ristfánd, but even more so with himself. His friend's words weigh heavy upon his heart, and they touch fears that he has carried within himself for a long time. It is true that in the moment he was faced with the choice to save Tilliána's life—as earlier in rescuing as many from the fire as he was able—he did not hesitate. When standing face to face with pain, suffering, and loss, he did not think, did not reflect, but followed the spontaneous and deep impulse of his heart: to give everything that he had within him, everything in his power, and even his very self, to save those who needed to be

saved.

But now he wonders at himself and begins to doubt. Is not Rórlain perhaps right in his feelings? Who is Eldárien, after all, to imagine that he can bear the pain of others and somehow mediate freedom to them? No. That is not the question. It is obvious that he has done so and that, if necessary, he could do so again, though in his weakened state it may cost him his life. He does not doubt the gift, so evident is it and so strongly impressed now upon his consciousness that he feels like a new man. Rather, he doubts himself and his fittingness to accept what has so evidently been entrusted to him. For to bear the suffering of others, to mediate life to those afflicted by pain and death, requires a heart that is pure and transparent, like a pane of glass clear of all filth and obstruction which allows the light to shine freely through. And this he cannot believe that he is. The blood has stained his hands so deeply that he fears it shall never be washed clean. And even now his heart is frail and blind, weak and wavering. The way that he failed to meet Rórlain in his time of need is proof of that. How can he claim to be worthy of this gift, to live its mystery truly, when he cannot even listen to a friend with true presence and offer him counsel that illumines the matters that so obviously concern him?

With these matters occupying his mind and heart, Eldárien makes his way back into the city and walks as far as the courtyard of the temple when he sees Cirien coming down the steps.

"Ah, Eldárien," the grandmaster says, "it is good to see you moving about. I assume you have returned to normal?"

"As normal as I can be, I think," he replies. "But I do not know if I will ever be the way that I was before. The weakness has all but passed, though somewhere deep in my heart and my flesh it lingers. Yet I feel much of my old strength returning, and, if the need arises, I feel capable of wielding the sword once again."

Their eyes lock for a moment, and Cirien nods knowingly.

"I pray only that I may wield it in the service of truth and good, no matter what pressure comes upon me to wield it otherwise," Eldárien adds softly.

"Do you fear that you shall go back on your resolve?" asks Cirien.

"I fear many things. I know my weakness and frailty—and I speak not of body but of spirit, of mind and will—and I cannot trust in myself. And now, I..." his voice falters as he tries to express something until now unspoken.

"Shall we find a place to sit down and speak, Eldárien?" Cirien asks.

"Oh, I have begun to share with you without asking whether you have the time," cries Eldárien. "Surely you are going somewhere, are you not? That is why you are walking?"

"Actually, no. I only stepped outside for some fresh air, and sometimes I

prefer the courtyard out here to the courtyard within the cloister. It allows me to see the townspeople as they pass."

"Then we could walk together, if you wish," says Eldárien. "I am happy to either sit or walk, as you please."

Cirien strokes his beard absentmindedly for a moment as he considers this and then replies, "No, let us sit. Often times conversation is better had sitting, facing one another, than walking side by side. There are less distractions that way, and it allows one to see the many ways that the other speaks without using words."

"Very well," Eldárien answers.

The two men find a bench nearby in the courtyard, under the shade of a large aspen tree, and sit upon it, turning to face one another. Then Cirien says, "Please continue in what you wish to tell me."

"I do not know if I have words for it yet," Eldárien begins. "But I shall try. I was saying that I cannot trust myself, that I doubt my capacity not only to walk in integrity the path marked out before me, but also to avoid the fear and compromise that before led me to hurt others. I also simply fear my limitations, my mistakes, for I have experienced firsthand how oversights on my part, how my blind spots, have caused others pain and even death. That is a burden that I wish not to carry. But it seems as if I am being drawn irresistibly back into a position similar to the one I left—a position in which human life is in my hands."

"It is indeed a great burden to carry the lives of others in one's hands, all the greater the more people there are and the more precious these persons are to you," Cirien responds in a quiet voice. "But in truth it is not you who hold power over life and death. It is not in your hands that lies the fate of each man, each woman. You are but a custodian, and even your custodianship only expresses itself according to certain limits. It is but a spark in the firmament of a million stars; it is but a line in the palm of the One who holds all life in his hands—theirs, mine, and your own."

"But what about my mistakes, my failures, that lead to harm for others?" Eldárien asks.

"Perhaps if the full picture were known, Eldárien, you would see that even these work for ultimate good for all persons. You are not the one writing the story, and it is not up to you alone to ensure its happy conclusion. Your very limitations—as you call them—are given to you by another; they are part of your nature, essential to who you are. To try to surpass these limitations, to be more than what you are, either through pride or through fearful control, will only cause you great pain and anguish of heart."

After he has finished speaking, Cirien looks deeply and tenderly at Eldárien, and the latter returns his gaze for a long moment of pregnant silence.

At last Eldárien says, "It is hard. It is very hard..."

"Indeed it is," Cirien replies, "for the world is not what it once was. It has been marred by a great evil and is now plagued by forces of darkness. You have a right to grieve, to lament, and even to question. This is not only acceptable. It is necessary. But I implore you not to lose faith."

"I do have faith," Eldárien whispers, "though it is even more difficult now, when I feel my frailty so deeply. Indeed, I feel so much smaller now than I once did, so much littler. It is hard to explain, but it is as if, when I bore the pain of Tilliána and Elmáriyë, I also found the very foundations of my heart dilated and expanded to the breadth and depth of human misery and pain. It is like standing before an abyss of evil that threatens to engulf me. Or indeed like standing in its very midst."

"And that is where you have been placed, my dear friend," Cirien says. "But this abyss of evil can only be overcome by an abyss of good. Solely by tapping into this latter and deeper abyss, by letting it live in you, can you hope to withstand the assault of darkness and even to stand victorious over it, for the good of all."

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A cold rain blows in that evening and, pouring from heavy gray clouds hanging low in the sky, drenches the city and causes the streets to run with water. Eldárien is sitting in the inner courtyard when the clouds loose the burden that they carry, and he runs inside to avoid getting soaked himself. As he enters the corridor, he runs into Elmáriyë—literally—and knocks her off her feet. Only just in time does he extend his hand and catch her, exclaiming, "I'm so sorry!"

"No, no, it is quite alright," she replies, laughter in her voice. "We were both running, I think. But I should know better."

"And I shouldn't?" asks Eldárien.

"That's not what I meant," Elmáriyë says, and, seeing the smile on his face, she adds, "Stop teasing me!"

"Teasing you? How could I? We have only just met."

"You know as well as I that we are far beyond that stage by now."

"It is...unusual...is it not?" Eldárien says, his tone now becoming serious, though no less playful for that reason.

"That is not the word I would have chosen, but yes," she agrees. "I think we should..." Her voice fades.

"What is it?"

"Well, I was wondering if we could speak again. I have some things that I would like to discuss with you...to 'catch up' in words where the heart has gone before, as it were. I hope you understand what I mean."

"Perfectly."

"Then?"

"Just say the word."

"Is this evening a good time for you?" Elmáriyë asks. "I will be out in the city most of the day tomorrow, so that won't be possible for me. Or we could speak another evening, perhaps."

"It seems that I am the only person who is not occupied during the days," Eldárien says quietly, "and that too feels unusual. Though I suppose that will change in a short amount of time, and then I shall miss this time of leisure and recuperation and feel that it departed too soon."

"Sometimes the hardest work is to do nothing at all," Elmáriyë comments. "That is what Cirien once told me. For nothing is never *just* nothing. Waiting, learning, listening, receiving, abiding...often I think that such things are really the deepest activities of the human person."

"That is true," Eldárien replies. "I came to discover that deeply, albeit with great pain, in the forests of Tel-Velfána."

"In Tel-Velfána?" Elmáriyë asks.

"Ah, yes..." Eldárien sighs, realizing now just how deeply the heart has gone ahead of words. "I suppose you should learn of those things as well."

"We do indeed have a great deal to speak about."

"Then let us begin tonight."

"Dinner begins shortly, but perhaps immediately afterwards?" Elmáriyë suggests.

After dinner has concluded, Eldárien and Elmáriyë return to the courtyard and sit in the sheltered corridor at its edge, a roof above them as they watch the rain pour from the sky, run off the eaves, and flow past them down the stone gutters built into the courtyard to prevent it from flooding. The rain has lessened somewhat and the noise now is but a calm rhythm of pitter-patters against wood and stone and the splashing of water as it trickles into the puddles that persist in the dips and crevices of the earth.

Elmáriyë draws in a deep breath, as if to gather up something deep within herself before trying to express it in speech, and Eldárien waits for her to begin. But she exhales without saying anything, and it is then that he senses—under the obvious comfort that she has come to feel in his presence—a certain anxiety or hesitation. He thinks that perhaps it is fear. But fear of what? Of speaking the word of the heart only to have it misunderstood or ignored? Or a fear of something else?

"Eldárien," she begins softly.

He remains silent, waiting.

"My entire life," she says, beginning at last, "I have been alone. I do not mean, however, a negative form of aloneness, such as that born of loneliness or loss. It is difficult to explain in words. I simply mean that I have lived in a

place of aloneness, of solitude. It is as though there is a secret chamber deep within the recesses of my own heart where none dwell nor are granted access but myself alone. But only upon coming here to Ristfánd and living at the temple have I discovered fully what lives within this inner chamber, even if before there were intuitions, and that 'knowledge beyond words' that lives in all of us from the beginning. It is here at the temple that I came to name what my heart has always known: that this chamber of the heart is not empty, but is occupied, and not by myself alone. It is a space of encounter both with the divine presence and with the hearts of my brothers and sisters, who are welcomed into my heart as into a home. Since then I have been offering to all a kind of invisible hospitality, taking them into the secret spaces of my heart and there holding all that is theirs in love, gratitude, and compassion."

She turns and looks at Eldárien for a moment before continuing, "Something new, however, happened when I met you. It was small at first, only a hint or a spark. Yet when you drew Tilliána and myself from the flames, and when you stepped into her pain and took mine to yourself in the same moment...then I knew. I knew that you occupy this same space. I did not even need to welcome you in: you were already there, living and welcoming. For you live also in this chamber of solitude, and you are the first and only person I have ever met who is—how can I express it?—wholly on the 'inside' and not on the 'outside.' And to be honest, that frightens me. For I hardly know you."

"It is something bigger than either of us, Elmáriyë," Eldárien replies after she has fallen back into silence. "For clearly I have had a similar experience, though I grant that I am less attuned to such things than you are. Rather, it is like in meeting you, and in your words to me the day of the fire, a whole new world was opened up to me. Yet I always knew it was there. Indeed, I had been in contact with it even without fully understanding. I had felt it, dwelt within it, and indeed often betrayed it. But it was always within me. And here you dwelt and beckoned me. Seeing you has shown me what is within, and has opened up pathways into the mystery of my own heart and the love to which it is invited."

"Are you not frightened?" she asks, clearly meaning a great deal by such a short question.

"I am," Eldárien says. "I cannot wear armor to protect against a person who lives in the inner chamber of my solitude, as you have named it. For good or ill, I can no longer take anything away from you to be hidden as merely my own. Nor can I go on my way and act as if I do not know you—know you in a knowledge deeper than all words or awareness—forgetting that I have met you and encountered you here."

"Certainly it is for good and not for ill," Elmáriyë says enthusiastically. "It

is frightening, yes, but not all the gifts of the gods are immediately comforting, even if they are wellsprings of deep peace and joy that nothing can tear asunder."

"But I fear nonetheless," whispers Eldárien.

"You fear the exposure, the closeness?"

"It is not that, so much as..." he begins, but then he allows his voice to fade.

"What do you fear, Eldárien?" Elmáriyë asks gently, placing a hand on his arm.

"I fear only hurting you," he says.

"I...I can bear being hurt," she says after a moment's reflection, though her voice is quiet. "Certainly you would not willingly harm me."

"You do not know who I am, Elmáriyë," he says, looking at her intently for a moment before lowering his eyes again.

"I have felt you."

"But that is just a beginning. Even with such an encounter, true knowing comes only with time, with fidelity, with the unfolding of life by a thousand experiences that make up a whole like threads of a single tapestry."

"You speak of fear," Elmáriyë replies, "and yet I find myself incapable of fearing you. Not after what I have seen and what I have felt."

"But if you knew where I came from and the kind of man I was—the kind of man that I still am—you would judge me very differently," he says.

"Then tell me, and I shall judge for myself."

He raises his eyes and watches the rain fall for a long time in silence, and Elmáriyë does not press him, does not repeat the request. She simply sits with him in the same silence and waits.

"You are right," Eldárien begins at last. "You are right in speaking to me as you do. I am not the man that I used to be, though much that I was remains with me still. I am neither the same nor wholly different. For I was a man lost, driven by fear more than by any other motive. I became a knight of the Vælírian Empire not primarily through adherence to the Empire but through the fear of my own weakness. I became a knight so that I could prevent any harm befalling those whom I loved, to prevent a recurrence of the tragedy that I suffered in my youth. My loss drove me forward; it fueled my actions and my desires, and not wholly for good." He then proceeds to recount for her, in detail, the destruction of Fálstead and the slaughter of his entire village, including his mother, father, and sister.

"The name of your sister...it was Selía?" Elmáriyë asks when his account has concluded.

"Yes."

"You spoke her name much when you were in the place of darkness."

"I remember speaking it to you when I awoke," Eldárien says.

"That is true, but you also murmured her name in your sleep...if sleep it may be called."

"What else did I say in this state?" he asks.

"Eldárien," she says delicately, "I learned a great deal about you. At times, it was almost like watching your life unfold before my eyes—not by witnessing the events that you witnessed nor going through what you went through, but by hearing your own reactions to these events while, in this state, you relived them. I witnessed your own pains, your own wounds and fears and desires, echo forth from these events. And I so wished that I could be there with you to feel with you what you felt, to be a companion with you in the path of pain that you have walked."

"I wish that you did not have to witness my pain," he answers, "nor do I desire you to participate in it."

"What would you tell me if I said those same words to you?" Elmáriyë asks. "If I told you that I wanted you to have no part in my pain, to leave me alone on my journey of life, what would you say?"

It does not take Eldárien long to give his answer. "I would tell you that I could wish for nothing else. My love seeks only to participate in everything that belongs to you. And it cannot do otherwise, for only in this way can such love be of service to you."

"You speak of love," she replies, "and I know exactly what you mean. So please allow me to love you. You know that I have been invited to, invited by something bigger than either you or I."

The only response he can offer to this is a gaze of kindness and gratitude and a gentle nod. After this they both fall into silence again and are enveloped in stillness and quietude. The sound of the rain serves only to deepen this silence, to create a sense of holding, as if the water that drips from the roof as a thin sheet is a veil encompassing and protecting something both hidden and sacred.

"I feel toward you something akin to what I would feel were I to see Selía again after all these years," Eldárien says when he finds words arising within him again. "You are a few years her junior, but in looking upon you I feel almost that she lives again. But no...that is not entirely accurate. For you are not her. You are...you are simply you. There is no other way to express it."

"Why would you need to express it any differently?" she asks.

"I suppose I would not..." he concludes, with a deep breath.

"Will you tell me," Elmáriyë then asks, "about what happened during your time in Tel-Velfána?"

"You have heard much of it already, have you not?" Eldárien asks.

"I heard your pain and fear and regret," she says, "but I know not the source of these feelings."

"Is it really necessary?"

"I think you know the answer."

"I do," he says. "I *want* you to know, and it would be wrong to hide from you the truth the pain of which you already feel."

"Speak as your heart dictates," says Elmáriyë. "Know that I wish to be nothing but safety for you in this place of your greatest sorrow."

"Greatest sorrow?" Eldárien asks, thinking immediately of the destruction of his village. But then he realizes that she is right. The loss of his family and his hometown is sorrow indeed. But the loss of his integrity has wounded him far more deeply. The first is the sorrow of grief and loss, a crucible of pain that is also a place of growth and an impetus for change. Yet the second is like a tear in the very fabric of his life, a wound that he himself inflicted on his own being, and through which darkness creeps in to accuse him in his weakness, to haunt him in his dreams, and to chain him in his aspiration to goodness.

"Eldárien," says Elmáriyë when he does not continue, "I know that you yearn for the light. A recognition of the darkness within you is not a betrayal of this light. It is only a part of standing with the light. Please allow me to be there with you, if for no other reason than that this wound needs to breathe in order to heal."

And so he begins. "Emperor Maríndas IV is a man of many paradoxes. I met him once, after I had already become a knight and yet before my departure to the lands in the east. I acted in my capacity as a knight within Telmérion itself for years, close to a decade, before being sent to Tel-Velfána. And the one who sent us on our way was none other than the emperor himself. He came to congratulate us on the great achievement that we were about to undertake: the conquering of the very lands that had once put a stop to the Empire's expansion two-hundred years earlier. But his speech and his manner were not of virtue and honor; they were of power and glory and the desire for domination. I should have known then that the path before me was not a good one. But I was vowed to fidelity to the Empire and to the commands of the emperor above all else. I told myself at the time that the situation was surely more complex, more nuanced, than I knew. I told myself that I should trust the judgment of my superiors and should not question the wisdom of the commands of the emperor. And while trust is indeed necessary in many things, in obedience included, this does not dispense with listening to the conviction of one's own heart and following the deeper voice that even the highest leader of men has no right to violate.

"Suffice it to say, however, that I departed as commanded. We sailed for many weeks until coming to the coast of Caróch, not far from the city of Elsedór. Tel-Velfána lay before us, a land that we thought was ripe for the

taking. We looked forward to a swift victory and a rich gain, receiving all the benefits of joining Tel-Velfána to ourselves in the unity of a single Empire—without realizing that many of us were nothing more than the conquered who had now become conquerors." Eldárien sighs deeply and falls silent for a long moment, lost in thought. When he speaks again, he says, "For if unity is indeed possible within this world, I am certain that it is not achieved by military force, nor even by political rule. It is achieved only by goodness and truth. For the truth is one and undivided. And only in this truth can human hearts, indeed nations themselves, be united in a way that is fitting to this world and to our place within it."

He looks deeply in Elmáriyë's eyes for a moment, as if searching within them for the courage to continue his account. "We took Elsedór without great effort, for we caught them entirely unawares. It was a slaughter and the first time that I took human life not in defense of the innocent but in service of a political goal. After occupying the city and securing it as our base of operations, many smaller companies were sent into the thick woodlands to the east with the command to take and occupy any and all settlements that we came upon. I went forth, the captain of a company of a hundred men, unsure of what I would do and what I would command my men to do when we happened upon such settlements. But in truth, for years this question remained unresolved because it remained untested. For numerous villages, hearing of our approach, sent messengers ahead of them to surrender and to plead for peace. Thus bloodshed was averted. For this my heart was relieved, though I grieved that these peaceful people—not unlike the people of my own hometown—had to face such fear and to yield to a foreign Empire simply because of our superior military might.

"And then everything changed. Word had reached the cities to the east, across the mountains, of our invasion. And they marched out in force to meet us. Thus began years of brutal warfare in the forests and hills of Tel-Velfána. The invasion for all intents and purposes was stopped, and we entered a state of survival, a game of cat-and-mouse, with one side being the cat one week and then being the mouse the next. It meant terror. It meant sleepless nights. It meant frequent deaths of soldiers on both sides and continual reinforcements supplied from the reserves to replenish fodder for this apparently never-ending absurdity of death.

"But these years began to change me. I was changed by what I witnessed, by what I was called upon to do to protect my men, to somehow safeguard their lives so that they could return home to the families whom they loved and who awaited them. I killed many men and ordered many more killed. And I watched as many soldiers for whom I cared were slain, or I found their bodies butchered upon the battlefield. I lost count of how many men I buried

in unmarked graves in the woods. Their number was great.

"Eventually, the forces of the Empire were able to gain an advantage, and we were commanded to push this advantage to the east, into the mountains, and further, to the great cities at the heart of Tel-Velfána. A part of this command was to show no mercy to any village, even if they asked for peace. Considering the combat in which we had long been engaged, no further risks were possible. That is what we were told, for the enemy forces could hide among the villagers and could thus catch us when we least expected it. We were to raze to the ground every village that we found and to either chase the citizens from their homes or to slaughter them where they stood.

"I do not know if I would have followed through with such a command in the months shortly after our arrival in Tel-Velfána. I truly hope not. But after everything that I had witnessed over the previous years, after the pain that I had borne and seen others bear, it was impossible for me to accept these orders. I thus sought to resign from my position as a captain and, with those of my men who were willing, sailed back to Telmérion."

After these words Eldárien falls silent, visibly exhausted from the effort of remembrance and of speech. His face betrays immense pain, a pain so deep and so wide that Elmáriyë has never seen its like before. But his expression is also marked by relief and by gratitude. He knows that he has given his greatest sorrow to her, and that, even in her silence—especially in her silence—she has received it. And the effect that her receiving has in the depths of his heart is far different, far deeper, than what he had experienced when he spoke of these matters with the Feskar family or even with Rórlain. It is true that he has spoken with her far more deeply, and from a deeper place of the heart, than he did then. But this alone does not explain what he feels in this moment. Only the very nature of her presence and the kind of union between them explains the meeting that now occurs within Eldárien's heart between the shame and anguish of his past and the love that marks out for him a future: a future of light and hope.

"Elmáriyë," he says, not expecting a response from her in words, for her eyes, her presence, and her heart have already said enough, said everything that it is possible to say.

"Eldárien," she says in turn, and this mutual pronunciation of names is for both a shared recognition, a sealing of their meeting, and an acknowledgment of the awareness that they both bear that each has been entrusted into the care of the other.

Eldárien then draws Elmáriyë into an embrace, and their hearts, apart for so long, are united. At this moment the rain breaks and the clouds in the west lessen, allowing the rays of the setting sun to bathe the city in light and to fill the inner courtyard with their vibrancy and color.

Chapter Four
Thoughts and Memories

The earth crunches softly under Tilliána's feet as she paces slowly between the ruined buildings of the ghetto. Long already have the burned bodies of her fellows been removed and buried, and the roads cleared of rubble and refuse. But even so, the ghetto remains, and may always remain, but a skeleton of what it once was, a hollowed out carcass of blackened wood and scorched stone, of lives lost, memories extinguished, and hopes forfeited.

She comes, after much deliberation and hesitation, to her home—her ghetto home after the home that she and her husband first shared, before he left the hæras' service, was lost. And this home too is now gone, hardly more than a blackened shape against the earth where the wooden structure has been reduced almost entirely to ash. Everything that had been inside—all that she and her family possessed—has been destroyed or ruined. Wood and cloth, paper and thread, have been turned to dust; metal and glass have blackened or shattered, but even now awaken remembrance in Tilliána of the time when these things had been a part of her daily life: an old chalice that Alsenór's parents had given to him on his wedding day; a window-hanging of stained-glass with a design of an elk standing atop a hill in the wilderness, the blazing sun shining red and yellow behind him; a matching set of tin plates and cups with which her family had daily eaten for years, scratched and scuffed by continual use, but now hardly distinguishable in the burnt remains of the house.

Tilliána walks to the center of what would have been the bedroom that she and Alsenór shared, and she crouches down close to the earth. She places her palms against the ground, as if reaching out to touch and to make contact with what is now forever lost, with the life that she had once known and cherished, before it was irreversibly changed by violence and death. And as she does this, she feels something underneath her fingers. Pulling it from the earth, she sees a brooch of silver, veined with gold, in the shape of a maple leaf. Without thinking she holds it to her breast, recalling the moment that he had given it to her.

It was shortly after his parents had learned of their love for one another and their intent to marry. Their response was one of strong disapproval, apparently on the grounds that Tilliána's birth and stature—being of the lowest and poorest in Ristfánd—was not fitting for one who would be a counselor to the hæras himself, in the long line of those who had gone before him.

Alsenór had argued with his parents and tried to convince them otherwise. After a period of time, seeing that their son had no intention of changing his mind, they gave begrudging approval, although they asked him to wait a further year before pursuing marriage. This he accepted. One day during this time of waiting, he led Tilliána to the coast south of the city, and, in the evening twilight when the water danced red and orange, he gave her the brooch with the following words.

"Your common birth means nothing to me since you are for me the greatest in nobility and the highest in stature. My family has long served the hæras and attended to his house, but neither does such position mean anything to me. Benefits it grants us, that is true, and such benefits I wish to share with you, but our country has never been one to be divided by wealth and power. It is a tradition among our people that the influential are no more important than the common, that the wealthy owe their wealth to the poor and the poor have a right to the share of the wealthy. It is long, however, since Ristfánd has lived truly according to this ideal, and the rift that my family imagines to exist between us is but a symptom of this. Yet I give you another sign, a pledge: the seal of my family, that it may be your own, a promise that you share in our inheritance, but even more, that I wish to share fully in yours."

As events played out, that is exactly what happened. Alsenór received his wish: he shared in Tilliána's lot in poverty and even, forsaking his family's long service to the hæras and marking out a path of his own in service of truth, paid the price of death. But only now, after the dust has begun to settle and the smoke to fade away, does Tilliána allow herself to doubt whether his decision to fight with the rebellion was the correct one. Certainly she does not wish that he had compromised on the truth by participating in—or even allowing—the injustices of the jarl's court. But the armed resistance offered by the rebels had brought nothing but suffering to the people of Ristfánd. It had not built up but only torn down; in addition, it had stirred those in authority to acts of violence in response.

These doubts concerning the person dearest to her, doubts about one now deceased, cause Tilliána to feel both insecure and ashamed. She fears that she is desecrating her husband's memory, casting a shadow over his integrity in hindsight simply because he is no longer present to defend and explain his own actions. But no, she thinks to herself, she is not doubting his integrity nor even the rightness of his goals. What she doubts, and cannot help doubting, is the wisdom of the path that he chose to pursue toward such goals. Recognizing this, she lets go of her resistance to these feelings and instead allows them to wash over her. As the insecurity envelops her and the shame touches her heart, she realizes that they are simply not true; they are

nothing but fears, fears unfounded in reality. Therefore, rather than feeling estranged from Alsenór, she feels drawn closer to him, as if being willing to look at his life and his actions without fear allows her to love him still, to feel both the beauty and the pain, the wisdom and the folly, that mark his life, and yet to embrace him in all and beyond all, in the ceaseless aspiration toward goodness that was always his and which so clearly marked the ending of his life. In the light of this goodness, she finds the courage and serenity to look honestly upon everything else, even those things which were imperfect, and to do so with peace.

Her mind and heart carry her back to the life that they shared together and to the family that was born of their mutual love. Many scenes pass before the eyes of her imagination, indelibly impressed through deep feeling and now also through the intensity of her grief. She remembers when they first met. After bumping into someone in the busyness of the outdoor market, she had dropped the basket of groceries she was carrying, and Alsenór, standing nearby, had rushed to help her pick them up again. This was not only an act of kindness but of chivalry, as the market was a place where pick-pocketing or other forms of petty theft were commonplace. A woman's goods, which were scattered across the ground, littered between people's legs and uncaringly trodden underfoot, were rife for the taking. Looking up at Alsenór as she hurriedly gathered her belongings, she said, "Thank you, kind...sir," adding this last part as she saw the hæras' crest upon his breast. He replied with gentle eyes, "It is my pleasure." Then, after returning to her what he had salvaged, he said, with a wave of his hand gesturing to spilled grain and crushed fruits and vegetables, "Perhaps I could help to replace those things that have sadly been trodden underfoot." "Oh, no," Tilliána said. "I could not ask such a thing of you." "I do it not because you asked," he replied, "but because I wish to do so. It is I who ask for your permission to aid you, and not you who beg for aid. Surely there is no shame in that?" "Aye, sir," she answered, lowering her gaze, "then I accept." And he, "Very well. But you may dispense with the 'sir.' Simply call me Alsenór."

The image within her shifts now, and she recalls the birth of her first child, Annár, and the exuberant joy that Alsenór had showed. "A precious gem in a crown of love or the first flower in the garland that we are weaving," he had remarked, looking on the fresh face of his newborn son. "Or in the garden that we are planting," Tilliána had replied. "And may our home always be that," Alsenór had said, taking the child in his arms and holding him close against his breast. "A garden where flowers freely bloom." As this memory and a thousand others confirm, Alsenór was a kindhearted man, and this was revealed most visibly in his attitude toward his family and in his relations with children, his own children most of all. Even when the Imperial counselor who

had first sparked his decision to retire from his post had died, and a new, more just and righteous counselor had arrived, Alsenór had decided to abide by his decision to leave the hæras' service. Thus he perpetuated his break with the role the first son of his family had filled for generations. Since the situation had so drastically changed only two years since his leaving the hæras' service, and for reasons that were obviously just, it is possible that Alsenór would have been received back had he asked. But he did not ask. And his reason was not now that the Imperial counselor usurped his role as advisor to the jarl, nor that wickedness was perpetrated against his intent and desire to aid—for the new counselor seemed much more liable to cooperation—but because Alsenór had come to cherish the time spent with his family and would lose a great deal of this time were he to return to his previous role. Realizing this, Tilliána allows herself to ask a question for the first time that she could have asked years ago: Was Alsenór's decision to leave the hæras' service and to persist in this departure the right decision? And this question leads to another. It comes to her in a memory of the conversation she had shared with Elmáriyë, Rórlain, and Eldárien not long ago. Why had Tilliána not shared the detail of the Imperial counselor's replacement with those who had been at her bedside during her illness? She had not lied to them and had told them truly that her husband left the service of Gléndas because he felt his aid unwanted, or at least ill-received, in contrast with the strong voice of the current Imperial counselor. But she had not told them that a couple years later the counselor was replaced and that Alsenór still insisted on the new path he had chosen rather than returning to the old. Did she avoid saying this simply because it was irrelevant to the conversation at hand, or because there was something inside her making her reticent to speak of it, even perhaps to think of it?

It is, she realizes now, because she feels guilty for Alsenór's decision, or at least because she does not feel comfortable with the fruit that it ultimately bore, whether it was her fault or not. For if Alsenór had remained in the service of the hæras, perhaps he could have been included in Gléndas' inner counsels, both in receiving and in giving, and thus could have prevented the uprising rather than participated in it. He could have pursued his goals of justice peacefully rather than through siding with the violence of the rebels. He was such a loving man, so tenderhearted, but in the last analysis he had not only failed to protect his family but had been the indirect cause of the deaths of both of his children and of the bereavement of his wife. With these thoughts, Tilliána's eyes burn with tears, and her throat catches with spittle. How can she think such a thing of her spouse, of the love of her heart? What ingratitude such thoughts express concerning everything that he had sought to give to them and did indeed give to them! How could he have known

where his path would ultimately lead and the fruits of the fateful decision that he had made? Is it not true, rather, that sometimes a person is asked to simply do their utmost, to walk in integrity as best they can, even if their path leads into a place that appears as utter failure? And if that is the case, is such failure perhaps—just perhaps—a stepping stone to something that lies beyond failure, born not of success but of fidelity and sacrifice?

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The city of Ristfánd lies bleached in the sun beneath Elmáriyë's gaze as she stands atop a watchtower to the southeast of the city: a structure of large stone slabs standing over a hundred yards tall and giving a splendid view of the surrounding landscape. Feeling a growing pain in the expectation of the coming attack—as if the fear of the citizens was encroaching upon her and making it difficult to breathe—she spoke with Cirien, and he suggested she spend a day walking in the countryside. The west and the north, however, do not promise safety and security, but to the east and the south little danger exists of encountering anyone who could be called an enemy. And so she has walked, through the trees and hills of the plains that swell down from the mountains until they meet the sea. To the sea she has not ventured, content to walk among the sights and sounds of the woods and of the quiet farms and homesteads that speckle the land.

And in the late afternoon her journey led her to the great eastern watchtower. It is a narrow building erected as a wall thirty feet thick and one-hundred long, with barracks on the bottom floor, a refectory, library, and crafting area in the middle, and, rising as a tower from the center of the building, a lookout and warning-fire at the top. The watchtower, for its size, nonetheless houses no more than ten soldiers. It is not designed nor purposed for defensive use; it seeks only to give a vantage point over the surrounding areas from which the guards may alert others of any impending dangers. But rarely do any dangers come into the plains of Mélroc, or indeed anywhere east of the great Teldren and Yjind mountain ranges. The Relihím focus their infrequent raids upon small settlements and isolated hamlets. These brigands avoid the larger towns and cities, as such locations have their own means of defense, their own watchmen or guards, while the smallest habitations often have nothing at all. The Empire, as is its duty for an occupied state made a member of its own cultural and political structure, helps to quell these raids, though the soldiers of the Empire have never been able to eliminate the Relihím entirely. For the life of vagabond banditry is both elusive enough and, apparently, desirable enough to endure even armed resistance by those whose role it is to keep the peace.

Yet the danger that the people in Ristfánd and its environs now await is not something that the Empire can help to quell or prevent; rather, the enemy

they await is the Empire itself or those who claim to fight in its name. Even so, as Elmáriyë looks out upon the city laid before her in its entirety and on the lands that surround it, she feels keenly the sense of both beauty and fragility that marks the life of man upon the earth. The beauty is all the more poignant because it stands on the brink of a great threat to its existence, and the fragility highlights the beauty in a special way since it stirs the heart to care for that which is threatened, thus awakening a deep and conscious love for things which before were loved unconsciously or even taken for granted. And Elmáriyë's sense of both of these aspects has only deepened—both in quality and in expansiveness—since her encounter with Eldárien and the bearing that she experienced from him. It was the first time that another bore her as she had so often done, mostly unconsciously, for others. In this experience, not only did she learn a great deal about the nature of bearing that she could only learn from receiving it rather than giving it, but she also felt her very capacity to "feel" grow within her. Now she is aware that she has become more sensitive, as if the sinews of her heart have been both stretched and softened, so that she can undergo experience both more keenly and more widely. She is still trying to come to terms with the influx of feeling that flows in upon her both from a greater distance as well as in a greater fullness than she had known until that moment.

Most of what she has felt has been anxiety—anxiety and fear. For these, since word came of the impending assault, have saturated the atmosphere in the city and in the settlements surrounding it. The anxiety that has grown in expectation of the coming of war is dense and tangible even for the inattentive; thus, it is even more so for Elmáriyë, who has always felt things many others do not feel and has hurt intensely for things that others seem easily to dismiss or ignore. But anxiety alone has not marked this deeper awakening catalyzed by Eldárien's presence and his bearing. No, Elmáriyë has also tasted a deeper and wider joy and a newfound wonder at the very beauty of reality, which permeates her heart and surges often to the surface with profound gladness—something like the wonder-filled awe of a child discovering reality for the first time. She looks out upon the city and the plains now with a mixture of both of these experiences: anxiety at the uncertainty of the future and pain at the coming suffering of thousands, and a wonder-filled awe at the very miracle of existence itself, fragile as it may be.

She leans absentmindedly against the stone wall to her right, at the top of which is a stack of thick logs ready to be set to the torch as a beacon of fire visible from the city, should the occasion arise. The warm stone against her shoulder, sharing in the same light and warmth that pours down upon the city in the distance, stirs in her unexpected thoughts. She thinks that during the daylight, as long as the sun shines bright in the sky, all things share in

equal measure in the radiance and consolation of the light; but at night, as shadows fall, the earth is shrouded in darkness, and smaller lights are necessary in order to counteract the dark, to give radiance and warmth in small pools of light where before everything was bathed in the universal shining of the sun. Like the watchtower itself, the light is there to ward off danger or to warn against it; it is there to stand tall and glorious as a beacon for all to see, as a beacon to guide their way. But the light is there also to guard the intimacy of life and love, to illumine home and hearth, and to dispel the nocturnal chill with the welcoming warmth of belonging. The light is home, and the darkness is alienation. The light is security, and the darkness is fear. The light is clarity, and the darkness is uncertainty. The light is closeness, and the darkness is distance. The light is expansive radiance and the darkness is shadows that close in tightly to suffocate the heart.

Light is thus the sole longing of the human heart, which has been born of light and made for light. And yet in this world marked by pain and loss, the path into the fullness of the light passes also through darkness and is as it were hemmed in by darkness. For just as the stars send forth their rays through darkness to strike the eyes of those who look upon them in the glistening firmament, and as a torch burns more brightly, more visibly, in the dark than it does in daylight, so the darkness itself is permeated by the light, gripped by the light, in the unfolding of all things toward the everlasting dawn and endless day. But the choice lies in every human heart: to seek the light undimmed, with all the aspiration of the soul, or to compromise with the darkness and to yield to its domain even within the depths of one's own self. Only in the former choice is darkness itself pervaded by light, and to light does it yield, whereas in the choice of darkness, when darkness is desired or accepted, one finds instead that balancing the darkness and the light (as if some agreement were to be struck between them) leads only to the loss of light and entrapment in darkness. For the beauty of darkness, if beauty there is, only comes from its standing over and against the light, as a space for the light's illumination, as the expectation, the longing, and the capacity for the fullness of dawn and of day. But the darkness of evil, of wickedness, of the powers of violence that seek to set themselves against the light of goodness, will only harm, cripple, and destroy. Thus the darkness of longing and expectation, like the darkness that allows the stars to be seen, is replaced by the darkness of loss and isolation, like the darkness of a dungeon buried under the earth, from which there is no escape.

As darkness descends upon the land of Telmérion, the need for beacons of light grows—beacons that not only give warning but guidance, consolation, and warmth. But to be a source of such light—or at least its vessel—the beacon must confront the darkness head-on, must pass into and through the

darkness, so as to illumine the way for others, or to find them where they are, lost in the night, and to lead them back into the light once again. This, she knows, is what Eldárien is destined to do, and he bears the marks of such light already. He is gripped by it, possessed by it, and, in this possession, is made absolutely poor, destitute, with nothing in his hands save openness and emptiness, receptivity and trust. Only in this way can the light shine in and through him, in the way that it must, for others. Reflecting on this, Elmáriyë knows that she is invited to the same poverty, the same openness, which she has not knowingly or willingly rejected but which nonetheless invites her now with a depth and expansiveness that she has not known until now.

And although such a path frightens her, she also spontaneously recognizes that it corresponds with the deep aspirations of her heart; it is an unsealing and maturation of desires that she has always held within her, and not an imposition from the outside. Nonetheless what frightens her even more, what causes her heart to ache immeasurably more profoundly, is simply the awareness of great evil and suffering that encroaches upon her consciousness, as if the coming pain of the war is already resounding within her being before it has even begun to play itself out upon the stage of history. Never before has she directly known war or bloodshed, except—as she now knows—in that earliest of memories forgotten but not without effect: the slaughter of the traveling company, her family included, of which she was the only survivor. But in waking consciousness, what she knows of war and violence is little, learned only from books and conversations and the heart's compassion. Only time will tell how much these, and in particular the compassion of the heart, have prepared her for what awaits.

With these thoughts filling her mind, Elmáriyë descends the stairway from the high point of the watchtower and follows the path in the direction of the city. The sun is beginning its descent in the lower portion of the sky in the west, and she finds herself looking into its brilliance as she makes her way back to Ristfánd. As she walks, sounds enveloping her—the song of birds and the chirping of crickets, the rustle of the breeze in the boughs of the trees, and the soft crunching of her own footsteps against earth—a thought comes to her, which in a way sums up all of the thoughts preceding it. *My life has been marked by solitude*, she thinks, *and yet I feel also more viscerally than I have before that this solitude has been a meeting-place of deep encounter with others. And I mean not so much that it has allowed me to meet others explicitly in person-to-person contact, though this is true as well. I mean that the solitude itself is a place of encounter. It is precisely in my aloneness, or rather in the sanctuary of my heart where I am most silent and poor, that I feel most deeply and expansively the reverberations cast from others' hearts, as if they were my own.*

There is a directness here which, in a wholly unexpected way, is even more direct than the contact possible through words, through glance, through touch. All of these are beautiful, of course, and are essential, the shared life intended for us in this world and the concrete service that responds to the desperate needs of our time. But in this place of solitude, in this hidden inner sanctuary, it is as though our hearts touch directly without anything between them. Or rather...it is as if the divine presence itself is our meeting-place and the living-space of our encounter. These thoughts subside for a moment as Elmáriyë continues to walk, and a wolf's howl sounds from somewhere far to the north. After a moment, it is echoed by the howls of others. *Even the animals communicate at a distance,* she thinks, stirred to further reflection by the sounds she hears, *and the air itself is their medium. But inside man and woman, inside each one of us, lives something so much deeper, richer, and fuller. Inside us lives a flame that surpasses the animals, surpasses indeed everything within this world. In this secret fire we communicate, and not only in the direct commerce of voice and sight, in the manifold interactions of daily life, but...in spirit flowing into spirit like ripples intermingling in a single ocean...in heart throbbing into heart in a single circulation, two hearts, a thousand hearts, as if in only one body.*

Thus to find Eldárien living somehow "within" me when I have felt all others to be "without," this has changed something profound in my mind and heart. Or rather, it has awakened me to something that was present all along, but of which I was unaware. For they are all *within me, each one of them, near and far, as I also am in them. To "bear" another, therefore, is the lot of every person in this life. It is the very nature of love. After all, a mother bears a child in her womb before bringing him to life in the world. And we are all borne, in numerous ways throughout our life, by those who uphold us, guide us, and care for us even far beyond our sight. To have the gift of "bearing," as Eldárien and I experience it, therefore, is not something entirely special or unique. It but summons into a fully grown tree what exists as a seed in all of us.*

And yet... her thoughts falter for a moment, and she looks around in the light that now turns to the oranges and reds of twilight, glistening in the leaves of the trees and pervading the clouds with the richness of its color. *But this gift we have received—from wherever it comes—is an entrustment and a task. For some reason, we feel what others do not feel, or we feel it much more intensely. And this means that we can aid others in a way that is uniquely our own. I have felt this for so long but was unable to name it. And Eldárien...he has searched for it without knowing it. This much I saw in his eyes when I explained to him the reality of bearing. Once he heard this, it was as if his heart cried out, "Finally, a way to help those whom until now I have felt*

powerless to aid!" I feel it too, Eldárien... I feel it too...

And yet...and yet this capacity is not a power in the normal sense of the word, not a mere human capacity to be and to do. No, it is more like powerlessness. And the more powerless we allow ourselves to be, the more this mystery is allowed to harness us and to communicate through us a power greater than our own. The more trusting and vulnerable and surrendered we become, the more we are allowed to feel and to carry others, that the pain may be eased from their shoulders and the yoke from their hearts, making space for the light to shine within their darkness and for all things to be made new.

Chapter Five
A Messenger Comes

The clatter of wood against wood echoes through the training ground as Rórlain parries the strike of the captain of the guard. He then lunges forward and seeks to land a blow on his trainer, but the latter deftly steps to the side and blocks the wooden training axe with his shield and then, in one swift flourish, counters with his sword against Rórlain's upper shoulder where his armor does not protect. The blow is relatively light though hard enough to sting, and Rórlain admits defeat. Were the battle in earnest, the strike would have been deadly or at least debilitating.

"You are improving," the captain says. "Lighter on your feet now, though your attacks are still too slow and predictable."

"Only so much improvement can be expected in so little a time. I am a huntsman, Hérsir, not a warrior," he replies.

"But you are one of the few men in Ristfánd who have had real combat experience," Hérsir says, "at least in warfare itself. My men have spent their lives as guards and custodians of justice, not on the field of battle where death is all around and the enemy seeks only to take your life."

"Often he seeks only to save his own," comments Rórlain. "I know that a part of me does, anyway."

"Aye, and that is a difficult thing to master," says the captain. "To flinch when a sharp blade of metal is flying toward you is only natural. But to stand strong, unmoved, and to keep your wits about you enough to block, parry, and counter the strike: that takes practice, experience, and discipline. You are doing quite well in all of them."

"But I still flinch a bit?"

"Only slightly. The greater point of growth for you is to outmaneuver your opponent. In order to do this, brute force is not enough, nor even speed

alone. You must learn how to get past your foe's defenses, be they weapon, shield, or armor, and thus become adept both at discerning their weaknesses and breaching them."

"How exactly do I accomplish such a thing?" asks Rórlain. "I am not like to dance around my opponent like a madman or a jester."

"It is not a matter, as I said, of speed, but of acumen, though a modicum both of speed and of strength are required," Hérsir replies. "And in combat stamina is of great importance. If you move too much, you shall tire and be overwhelmed. Stand like a rock unmoving and yet be prepared at a moment's notice to become as sinuous as water and as fast as a bolt of lightning."

"Like a hunting animal preparing to spring?" Rórlain offers.

"Precisely. This combination is the key to your success," the captain explains. "You see this even in the peskiest of insects, do you not? Whether a simple fly or a gnat, they land and remain unmoving, as if taunting us, and when we try to strike them, they are suddenly off, beyond our reach. And before we know it, they have stung us and disappeared again."

"An unpleasant experience," Rórlain grants.

"Indeed. But likewise you must be. You cannot fly, and you are of greater size, yet such an approach shall work well for you, and it fits with the build of your body and the manner of your combat. It only needs to be developed and become less a tendency and more a honed choice and capacity."

"As you say. I shall work to improve it."

With this they retire, Rórlain wiping sweat from his brow and returning his practice axe to the rack beside Hérsir's sword. The afternoon sun is warm, and the air is still and quiet, with hardly a whisper of breeze. The weeks pass in Ristfánd with no news of the incoming forces and with little to speak of within the city itself. The days, however, are occupied by many in combat training, since not only is the city guard preparing to fight, but a militia has been formed which is composed of almost all the men over the age of eighteen within Ristfánd and its surrounds. Rórlain himself trains much, but he has also taken to spending a great deal of his time assisting in the making of weapons and armor. He does not have the skills of a smith, but neither does the city have the resources for the mass production of metal armament. He helps rather in various other tasks of craftsmanship, shaping hewn wood into spears, often affixing a tip of sharpened iron or copper to the end, or boiling, drying, and sewing leather for armors—mainly jerkins or vests to protect the vital organs of the torso, from neck to hip—or sanding wooden shields and fastening to them both handle and hide.

He has also ridden out with hunting parties to the surrounding woods to catch what they can both for the production of leather and furs and for stocking provisions against the coming siege and the likely scarcity of supplies

born of this. But most of his time is spent in the city, working and training from early morning to late afternoon. Because of this, he has seen little of those at the temple. Eldárien remains on his mind and in his heart, but he does not know what more to say to him. He knows not how to share with him the growing sense of fear and suspicion he feels regarding the leadership of the city and the hæras in particular.

But what if Eldárien is right, at least in part? What if Rórlain's suspicions are unfounded or at least misguided? Even if the hæras is not to be trusted, this does not imply that any of Rórlain's thoughts or interpretations are correct. And thus to act upon them could bring great harm to many persons. Is not Eldárien correct, therefore, that the best thing to do, perhaps the only thing to do, is to devote themselves to preparing for the coming battle? The true nature of the hæras and his intentions shall be made known with the coming of full-fledged war to his own walls. Then the man shall be known for his deeds. Thinking of the approach of enemy troops to the walls of Ristfánd, Rórlain is reminded of a conversation he had with the captain of the guard a couple days earlier, a conversation concerning the battlements of the city and the guard to be stationed upon them. The latter had told Rórlain that he wished to show him the wall and to speak with him regarding its defense.

"Hérsir!" Rórlain cries, stopping the captain as he walks away.

"What is it, Rórlain?"

"You said that you wished to show me the battlements of the city and to discuss the plan of defense. Is now an appropriate time for such a thing?"

"Aye," Hérsir replies. "I was heading to the northern wall of the city soon regardless. I can show you the main gate and discuss with you its design, as well as the proper placement of men upon it."

"But why do you wish to speak of that with me, captain?" asks Rórlain.

"You will see soon enough."

On the north wall of the city, near the center-point where west and east meet, lies the great gate of Ristfánd. There are also three smaller gates, one each on the other sides of the city, west or east into the plains, and south to the slope descending to the sea. And in all directions too, settlements spread, homesteads and farms dotting the landscape, though to the south the heavy stone structures of the city spread even outside the walls nearly to the ocean. Here the trade of fishing flourishes, and the docks are full of fishing boats large and small. Being of such considerable size, a good two miles across in every direction, Ristfánd may well prove difficult to siege, as even a large army would be forced to attack only one or other part of the wall while leaving the rest unattended. And since in her rear Ristfánd looks out upon the sea, in the worst scenario, the many boats could be used to evacuate the majority of the

citizens from the city, to protect them upon the water, and to carry them to a safer location.

The north gate, being the largest of the four gates, is the most likely location of the main assault. It stands twenty feet across and twenty-five high, closed by a wooden drawbridge reinforced with metal, and an iron portcullis that can be lowered and raised from a chain pulley upon the battlements. These battlements, upon the thirty foot wall, provide a walkway wide enough for three men to walk abreast, all the while protected by a parapet chest high on the side facing away from the city, with merlons two head-heights taller. Sentries continually man all the gates and indeed are stationed at regular intervals along the wall for the entire perimeter of the city. But nowhere is a better location for an army to seek entry than the north, and here they plan to focus their defense, though being ready to move at the slightest notice, for they will know not, until the enemy comes, where precisely shall be the focus of their attack.

Rórlain and Hérsir arrive at the gate and stand just inside it, in a wide courtyard of stone, a kind of antechamber to the city itself designed to be a last bastion of defense to prevent, or at least to slow, the progress of an army in the event that they breach the outer gate. Stone steps lead up onto the battlements on either side of the gate, and Hérsir gestures for them to ascend. When they have come to the top of the wall, they look out over the wooded plains to the north, rich in the vibrant colors of spring. These woods are interspersed with the same farms and buildings that dot the landscape all around Ristfánd, with rough gravel or dirt paths connecting many of them both to each other and to the main Márdas road that runs more or less straight down from the north to the gate itself.

"I would like you to have command of a troop of archers stationed on this wall," Hérsir says.

"Why me?" Rórlain asks, turning to look at the captain. "Never before have I had the charge of men."

"That is true, but as I said before, you are one of the few who have tasted real battle, and against the forces of the Empire at that."

"I fear what I experienced shall be nothing like what awaits us when the army arrives at our gates," Rórlain retorts. "I do not trust myself to keep a level head when that happens."

"But I do," says Hérsir. "And the men shall need a level head and a firm hand, that their arrows may not be wasted, and, the gods forbid, that they may fight well with the blade in the event our wall is breached."

"If you insist, then I shall try."

"It is but fifty men. For that many, I believe, you are equipped."

Rórlain turns his gaze out over the lands to the north and exhales deeply

in both exhaustion and anxiety. A pang of fear spreads through his heart, and for a moment he glimpses more of Eldárien's pain than he has known until this moment: the pain of being responsible for the deaths of others. He hopes to be spared this himself, but in this moment he recognizes the real possibility, even the probability, of such a thing happening. "I will do what I can," he says to Hérsir, keeping his gaze to the north and watching the many trees sway gently in the wind.

As if sensing Rórlain's thoughts, the captain replies, "Only remember that you have no direct power over their lives. Whatever happens, it may be well beyond your control. Just give commands, and, insofar as within your power, instill courage. The rest lies within the heart of each man and in the hands of fate."

Suddenly a figure appears from the midst of the trees: a man on horseback riding hard, at full gallop, along the road. Rórlain and Hérsir descend the stairs and step out through the gate to greet the rider when he approaches.

"Hail, friend," Hérsir cries, raising his hand in the air as the rider draws near. He wears the garb of a soldier of Ristfánd, and his horse glistens with sweat in the light of the sun.

"Hail, captain," the man says, reining in his horse and coming to a halt before them. He dismounts and stands, visibly exhausted and yet eyes burning with an interior fire, as if collecting his wits before speaking. "I bring word of my scouting expedition."

"Your name is Aústryn Lárdæs, correct? What news do you bring?" Hérsir asks.

"I bring grave news indeed," says the rider. "Not five days past, I encountered a troop of soldiers marching southeast along the plains. I suspect they had come through Téldyn pass with their sights set upon Ristfánd."

"That is likely their exact intent," Rórlain says. "How many men did you estimate were among them?"

"It is a large host, though numbers I cannot accurately guess," replies Aústryn, and then hesitantly he proffers a guess, "I suppose five-thousand."

"That is more than twice the number of trained fighters that we possess, though we have gladly been able to prepare for battle many more," says Hérsir. "But an untrained man with a sword in his hand is not necessarily worth counting when set against an army of trained soldiers."

"There may yet be great worth and courage in the men of our city, captain, though untested," Aústryn says, with a bow of his head.

"You speak truly," replies the captain, "though we can only pray that the test does not break them."

"Was the company that you saw composed of men alone?" Rórlain asks.

"Men alone?" Aústryn asks in response. "I saw none but men. Men armed

for war. And if they march behind me, they could be only two or three days away now. I rode hard and fast, but there is only so much I could have gained on them in so short a space."

"Then we shall prepare with haste for their arrival," Hérsir says. "Thank you for bringing word with such care. Many lives may indeed be indebted to your speed."

"What more would you have me do?" asks Aústryn.

"Go directly to the hæras and bring him the same word that you shared with us. And then you may rest and recuperate from your travels."

With this Aústryn bids them farewell and leads his horse into the city. Rórlain and Hérsir remain standing for a moment, looking anxiously to the north as if an army would crest the horizon at any moment. At last, Hérsir breaks them out of their reverie, saying, "Let us bring word to the men before night falls. The coming days shall be full of expectation and preparation."

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If blood boils in the veins with intense anger, it freezes with fearful expectation. But it is not blood at all, at least not bodily blood, that causes the feeling that one is almost paralyzed with uncertainty. It is rather what blood represents: the feelings of the heart throbbing out to pervade one's whole being and to take in, too, what in the very extremities of experience seeks to reverberate also in the inner self. Rórlain feels the waves of fear viscerally as he walks back to the temple of Nirániel that evening after bringing word to the men. It was an exhausting work in itself, repeating the same message again and again and seeing the fear in the eyes of those receiving it. In the eyes of many, yes, there was resolve, even profound courage. But the fear was always there as well. After all, Ristfánd is not a city designed to withstand prolonged assault. It is protected by watchtowers that will warn of any incoming force, and walls surround the city itself, tall and sturdy walls of stone. All of this Rórlain has seen for himself. But Ristfánd has little more than these things, no heavy weaponry, no wide moat, no clear view of the surrounding area (which is heavily wooded and provides ample cover for any attacking force), and no strategic position, not even a crevice in the mountainside to limit the enemy's attack to only one section of the wall.

The coming battle is to be different than the assaults on Imperial caravans or patrols in which Rórlain had previously participated. Here it is not a matter of a surprise attack on an unsuspecting troop of a dozen or two dozen men, from which one can retreat again into the secrecy of the woods. No, now it is a matter of building up defenses and standing strong while a superior force seeks to conquer, to take or destroy what one seeks to protect, and even one's very life. Yet regardless of what stands before him and the fear that it incites, Rórlain has known fear, has tasted darkness and the proximity of

death—he thinks of his prior encounters with the creatures of darkness—and yet has come back into the fullness of life once again. Deep inside his heart he hopes that he shall see light again after the coming darkness, but there is no certainty of such a thing, and he must come to terms with the great unknown and with the real possibility of death for himself and for thousands more. As he comes to the courtyard and begins to ascend the steps of the temple, Rórlain resolves to fight not to safeguard his own life, but rather, when faced with the terror that awaits, to seek to assuage the fear of others and to save their lives in whatever way he may. And paradoxically it is this acceptance of death that allows in his heart a surge of courage.

As he comes to the main corridor, he sees Tilliána walking, with her back to him, toward the great doors leading into the sanctuary. He opens his mouth to call out to her, but she pulls one of the doors open and passes through it before he finds the appropriate words to say. After a moment's thought, he decides to enter behind her, and when he does so, he finds her sitting about halfway along the length of the nave of the sanctuary, her head bowed. He eases himself into a bench a few seats behind her, and he waits. A good half hour or so passes, and he is nodding off to sleep where he sits—through the intermingling of fear and exhaustion—before she stirs.

"Tilliána," he says softly as she rises to her feet and begins to leave the sanctuary.

"Rórlain?" she asks, looking at him in surprise. "What is it?"

"I just wanted to inform you that one of the scouts that was sent out has returned," he replies, "and they report a force marching toward the city naught but a few days out."

After an expression of pain washes across her face, she says, "Then it begins soon." She turns away as if needing space for thought or, unable to speak further, intending to leave the sanctuary; but then she turns back and adds, "I heard you come in just after me. Did you wait for all this time just to inform me?"

"Well," Rórlain says sheepishly, "I actually lost track of time. Exhaustion seems to have overtaken me."

"There is no better place to rest than where one's limitations and weaknesses are held by someone greater," Tilliána says simply. "Maybe it is fitting that you felt that here and not elsewhere."

Rórlain looks at her for a long moment, in wonder and amazement that her words cut so incisively into his heart. For he has indeed been restless and overworked now for weeks—filled with fear, expectation, and suspicion—and has been carrying the burdens of his thoughts and desires alone and feeling crushed by the weight.

"I wish that is indeed what I experienced," says Rórlain, "but I fear it was

just exhaustion and nothing more."

"Many things we feel without noticing it," Tilliána answers with a gentle smile, "and much happens within us without our being aware of it."

"Perhaps so." With this Rórlain rises to his feet and continues, "May I walk with you back to your room? Then I shall seek Cirien and bring him the news. All in the temple shall know soon enough what awaits us in the coming days."

Chapter Six
Light and Darkness

Eldárien wakes early, long before dawn, and his heart is restless. He rises from bed and dresses, then sits in a chair, his head resting against his hands. Only gradually does he remember what woke him: a dream, or rather a nightmare. Many of the specifics are now gone and may never return, having fled with the return of consciousness; but he remembers the feeling, the awareness that the nightmare stirred within him, and its import. And an image: the face of Rórlain twisted in pain. Rórlain dying. In the dream, try as he might, Eldárien was unable to do anything to help his friend; he was powerless to do anything but watch Rórlain be brutally slain before his very eyes. But by whom and for what reason? Such details have slipped away from him, and Eldárien is left with nothing but a sense of deep insecurity and fear. He tries to shake it away, for he recognizes that it is irrational: nothing in the dream was real, he tells himself. This is true enough; but dreams also speak of things hidden deep in the heart, often buried below consciousness and seeking to come into the open. What, then, does Eldárien fear for Rórlain's sake? The answer is not long in coming: he fears what Rórlain will do if he chooses to act upon his suspicion regarding hæras Gléndas Medóra.

As he sits with these thoughts and feelings, trying to make sense of them, to walk through them into clarity and peace, the words of Cirien come to mind, "Your very limitations are given to you by another. To try to surpass these limitations will only cause you great pain and anguish of heart." He feels the truth of these words now, but simply experiencing this is not enough to give him the capacity to let go of his worry, his fear, and to relax into his littleness. After all, does not Rórlain's well-being depend upon him?

Yet does it, truly?

"But a spark in the firmament of a million stars...but a line in the palm..."

The memory of the grandmaster's voice casts an echo in his heart, as if the words once spoke are spoken again. But now they are spoken not from without but from within, as if taking up their abode within him.

Eldárien rises to his feet and steps out into the corridor, walking the silent and still halls until he comes to the vestibule of the temple itself. He enters the wide chamber with raised roof arched overhead and is surprised to find himself stepping into a liturgical service partway through. But he should not be surprised, as the vowed members of the temple gather every morning before dawn to sing and pray until the coming of day's light, to fill the nocturnal hours of expectation with prayer until the daystar itself comes and illumines all that before slumbered in the night.

He takes a few more steps into the expansive nave of the temple and sits on a bench facing toward the altar from which incense rises, and which is surrounded by the echoing voices of men and women whose song now fills his ears and joins with the voice that has been speaking deep within him:

When the night descends and darkness falls
and sun's light is hidden, veiled from sight,
the stars glisten silently in the celestial halls,
and yet their silence is song, glorious in might.

Sixfold constellations, brightest among the heavens,
hearken unto us as you shine pure and undimmed,
while we in toil and strife and fear make amends
for the sickness that lives within us, for our sins.

Darkness falls around us, day gives way to night,
and twilight's splendor wanes into nocturnal rest,
but we are bereft of peace, for before our sight
the dark takes shape, gathers like a wave unto its crest.

We falter, for dark is not only without but within,
and the shadows of unspoken betrayal, of apathy,
arise before us in fleshly shape, strong beyond our ken,
and yet in our faltering we cry unto you: Look and see!

Neréthion, the mighty and the strong, hearken,
and Hiliána, the sweetest of mothers and source of life;
Télmoth, lover of the earth, patron of our land and kin;
Meléngthar, guardian of birth and passing, of death and life;

Mórnwyn, lover of the greatness hidden in the small;
and Toróäs, delighted by delight, and guardian of play;
we beseech you, six gods in heaven's light, hear us all,
and the seventh, Nirániel, oft unnamed, come this day.

For when day descends into night without a sunrise,
and the cycle of the sun and moon comes to a cease,
we learn that our refuge lies in you alone, in your eyes,

and we beseech your benevolence: restore to us your peace.

For against such darkness, strength of mind and arm
avail little, and we turn beyond the clouds, the dark,
to open the windows of the heart and soul
to the light that comes from the very origin of time.

Under the impress of the singing voices and their flowing current, the memory of Cirien's voice within Eldárien now changes to the voice of his mother. *Eldárien, remember to sing always to the tender mother in your heart, and, when you can, with your voice. And never betray her kindness*.

In all his years of blindness, a mother she has been, the goddess of light. But so too the other six, veiled from his eyes by his own ignorance or forgetfulness, have been present. He knows this now and cannot begin to doubt it, though before he hardly gave it a thought. For Hiliána has spoken to him, a voice from the deepest silence, and has entrusted to him a light deeper than that visible to the eyes. And now he feels a new world opening up before him —indeed opening up within him—that he had not known before; and he is convinced that it is more vivid, more immense, and, if it were possible, more real than the world that he has known until this moment. The words of the song, of prayer, are not empty and hollow consolations against the encroaching night, nor are they blind aspirations for a distant hope, like begging for stars a million leagues away, uncaring and unmoved; rather, the stars press tight against the earth like a blanket of glistening gems laid upon one in sleep, securing peace. Moved by this thought, Eldárien leans into the song and prayer of those around him and finds in them strength to yield to the movement that is both most difficult, because most vulnerable, and also most spontaneous and free. After countless years too lost and too ashamed to sing, he lets the child that he once was lift his voice again in song to the guardians of the world, stars of tenderness and mercy, harbingers of the light and consolers of those who wait in the night for the rising of the dawn.

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After the service has concluded, Eldárien sees Cirien in the hall as they together leave the sanctuary, and the latter approaches him.

"Is it right of me to say that you appear burdened?" Cirien asks.

"Indeed I do...though the song helped," Eldárien replies. "Is it really that easy to see?"

"I expect that it is not. I doubt any see it but myself and perhaps Elmáriyë."

"She probably has not had a chance to see anything yet, for what troubles me has come only this morning."

"To what do you refer?" asks Cirien.

"A dream. Or rather a nightmare."

"Shall we take breakfast together in my chamber? I have some time this morning, and you have been heavy on my heart."

"I would appreciate that, thank you," says Eldárien.

Together they walk to Cirien's chambers—settling in a sitting area which serves as an atrium to his bedchamber—and not to his rœdra, which he occupies only at certain times of the day and in which he receives more formal visits. There is already a tray of food on a low table in the center of the room, no more than bread and butter and a small pot of tea. Cirien gestures to a chair, "Please, take a seat. There is little to eat, though I hope that you will not mind. I usually eat a light breakfast, and we are also, as a community, cutting back on our consumption and trying to save what we can. For we expect that hunger may prove a great enemy within while the enemy from afar threatens us from without."

"I truly hope that it does not come to that," Eldárien comments, taking the seat. Cirien sits opposite him and pours tisane for each of them. "Do you not think," Eldárien continues, "that as many people as are willing should evacuate the city, moving further to the east? I am confident that the other villages will take them in, at least on a temporary basis."

"There is nothing new in that thought and that suggestion," Cirien says. "I made it myself shortly after learning of the coming attack. And as I understand it, a good eighty or ninety families have fled to the east already, and more shall do so in the coming days."

"But what about a mandate? I understand that we need men to stand and fight, but it is even more important that innocent persons do not die. And I fear, considering the nature of our enemy, that they shall slaughter without concern for armed or unarmed, capable or incapable. Has the hæras done nothing in this regard?"

"Nothing?" Cirien asks. "He has forbidden anyone to leave the city, saying that it is cowardly to flee while others are forced to stay and fight."

"There is truth in that," says Eldárien, "but what about women, children, and the elderly? Are they also to stay and await death, should the battle go ill?"

"That is exactly what many of them must do, it seems. But if the battle indeed goes ill, I fear that it is only a matter of time until those who flee must also face the same threat of death further east."

"I pray the threat is prevented before we come to such an outcome," Eldárien sighs.

"Is this what troubles you?" Cirien asks. "You have seen the forces of darkness and you are concerned that we have little to no chance against them?"

"That does concern me," says Eldárien, "but that is not what burdens me

especially at the moment, or at least not what I mentioned to you in the corridor. But in that respect, I know that there is hope, even if it is slim. I have fought in many battles, and I have come to learn that the outcome of military action is often different than we expect, and that worrying about it beforehand only clouds the mind's ability for judgment and the heart's capacity for courage."

"But you are concerned?"

"Of course I am. We do not even yet know if we can slay these creatures or if they, being already dead but animated by some mysterious power, are immortal. If that is the case, then we are certainly doomed."

"Unless there is a way to surpass such power," Cirien adds. "And you yourself witnessed that first-hand, did you not? You saw that they are capable of being slain. Rórlain told me himself that he slew them as one would slay any other living creature."

"That is true," Eldárien admits, "but what is to keep them from simply being remade or sent back?"

"Eldárien..." the grandmaster whispers softly, running his hand through his long white beard. "Eldárien," he repeats with emphasis, "you see far...farther than most. And this seeing causes you great pain, even as it may be instrumental in saving the lives of many."

"You mean to say that there may be some truth to my words?"

"Not only *may* be. But *is.*"

"What do you mean?"

"I have kept it to myself until this moment," Cirien explains, "but since you have already intuited it, there is no reason to hide it any longer. After all, it is imperative that you know soon so that we may discern a path forward."

"To what do you refer?" asks Eldárien.

"I mean that these vrû'ádach cannot be slain forever by ordinary means. You yourself saw them destroyed by blade and arrow, yes, and such is a true limit to their power...but it is only temporary. For the very substance of which they were made—something that I myself cannot speak to, as I know not what such a substance is—will only be reforged and sent out once again to slaughter and destroy. The manner of their making and their remaking, however, is beyond my own wisdom or understanding, and the ancient lore endures no longer in common civilization that would give me greater insight. I know not how they are made, and I therefore know not how they are to be unmade. All I know is that they cannot be slain by mortal might, but only, as it were, sent back to the place from whence they have come. And in short matter of time they can return again to assail us."

"I may know something about how they may be truly slain," Eldárien begins, "though it is a mystery to me how it has come to be and what it means."

"And what is that?" asks Cirien, curiosity and surprise marking his features.

"Hallowed light dissolves such creatures into nothingness."

"Hallowed light? To what do you refer?"

"When I strike the vrû'ádach with my sword, it glows with a blue light upon contact, almost like it is purging these creatures, and they simply fade away into dust."

"And what is special about your sword, Eldárien? For you certainly imply that this does not happen with the weapons of other men."

"No, it does not," he replies. "It is not the sword itself that is special. Or at least, it was not originally so. It is forged of the rare myéllion, but that is not the source of its power." Eldárien then falls silent again, hesitant to speak about his encounter with Hiliána in the darkness of the eöten's cave.

"What is it?" Cirien asks when he does not continue.

"I... When I was in a crevice in the earth, led there by my word to Rórlain's father that I would save his son, I encountered an ancient creature. I believe that it was an eöten."

"An eöten? They take many forms, of which the vrû'ádach are one. What was its nature?"

"It had the appearance of a troll, massive, strong, and cruel. I believe that it was feeding upon the wildlife in the area and also turning them to madness. It had taken Rórlain and carried him to its lair, a cave filled with shadows become almost solid in their darkness."

"Rarely does a man survive contact with the eötenga," Cirien says, "and even more rarely do two together."

"I am not to credit for our survival," Eldárien says, "for when I was in this place, a voice spoke unto me." He falls silent again, even though he knows that, of all persons, Cirien is the best and wisest person with whom to share this mystery. And now the grandmaster himself does not ask but simply remains silent and waits for Eldárien to continue. When he does, he says, "The voice claimed to be the voice of Hiliána...and it *felt* like her. In other words, what she claimed to be and what I felt her to be were one and the same."

A twinkle glistens in Cirien's eyes, betraying the fact that he is deeply moved. He then says, "Rarely do one of the divines make themselves explicitly known unto the children of men. They act in our world ceaselessly, this is true. But they prefer to work in secret and to speak silently in the depths of the heart, where only those of receptive faith may hear them. She must have had a grave reason for addressing you."

"I think that reason we already well know," replies Eldárien. "She...she addressed me as 'Lightborn,' and she said that I was to confront the darkness, and that my blade, henceforth the 'lightbringer,' was to purge such darkness."

"You are full of mysteries, Eldárien," Cirien says, unable to mask the tenderness in his voice, if to mask it he desires.

"But what does it mean?" asks Eldárien.

"That too is beyond me," says Cirien, "though it does help to guide our steps."

"What do you mean it helps to guide our steps?"

"The goddess named you 'Lightborn,' or she called you that and it was already your name. But there is only one place where any have been called that before, as far as my limited knowledge serves."

"The name has been used before? Where?"

"In the Velási forest," says Cirien, "though none have entered or departed from that place in at least a thousand years."

"How then do you know of such a place and such a title?" Eldárien asks.

"Scattered records and fragments of memory," is Cirien's terse reply.

"You said that the words of Hiliána that I shared with you help to guide our steps. What do you mean by this?"

"They indicate where we can hope to find answers," says Cirien, "answers on how to defeat these creatures in truth, to pierce to the very source of the evil rather than to exhaust ourselves trying to cut off innumerable limbs. Nonetheless, there is a problem."

"What is that?"

"I said that none have entered or left the forest for a millennium. And that is because it is impossible to do. That, of all the things we know, is clear from the records."

"But what is *in* these woods, and why would we wish to go there?" asks Eldárien.

"Answers, I would hope. Though that is all that I can say. Perhaps the source of the power you wield lies there, something that can be used to imbue other weapons with the same light that shines within your own...or wisdom to guide our steps in a way far deeper than martial combat. Or...or it is possible that nothing at all any longer remains that would be of assistance to us."

"But you think that we should venture it nonetheless?" Eldárien asks.

"I do," says Cirien, "though I know not what would await you in such a journey. I will need time to think and pray, to study the ancient records, in the hopes that some small ray of light may shine upon the path to guide your way. And of course, I do not wish for you to walk such a mysterious and perilous path alone. I shall certainly send Elmáriyë with you, and perhaps Rórlain too will accompany you."

"Elmáriyë?"

"Yes," says Cirien. "She is in the city only through necessity. For not until

now, during the years that I have known her, have I received clarity from the goddess Nirániel concerning the path that she is to walk. But since you arrived and your paths interlaced, it has become more and more apparent to me that where you go, she too must go. Her path lies with you, and you too may find that your path lies with her."

Eldárien nods silently to these words, and Cirien laughs softly.

"Of course, you already feel it, so my words come as no surprise."

"I do feel it," Eldárien says. "But..."

"What is it?"

"But I fear that Rórlain will be torn. He is deeply concerned for the city and affairs within it, and there has been an...estrangement...between us. He may wish to remain and aid in the war in a more tangible way."

"Nothing can be more real than the path that you walk," Cirien says, "even if it feels as though you have nothing but hope and desire."

"I fear asking him to come," Eldárien says, "for I believe that his heart lies here or wherever armed resistance may take him. But I saved his life—or rather Hiliána saved his life through me—and he has bound himself to me to follow wherever I shall go and to protect me in all things. If I tell him I depart, he will be torn between his desire to accompany and his wish to remain. And I do not want to put him through such a conflict."

"But what shall he think if you depart without his knowledge?" asks Cirien.

"He would be hurt, certainly, and yet..." Eldárien sighs, rubbing his forehead absentmindedly as he thinks. "I myself do not intend to depart until after we have done what we can to defend the city against the force that comes upon us. After all, if it is my blade alone that can stop these creatures, my absence may mean more ill than we can now imagine."

"You are right in that," says Cirien, "but only to a degree. I think that, in the immediate defense of the city, normal weapons shall be enough to hinder the threat. But it is of the long term that you must think." The old man falls silent, as if being led by a train of thought. "On the one hand," he then continues, "we know not what shall befall these creatures, nor ourselves when we face them. We know from the hints of history and lore that remain, and from your own experience in the barrow, that even normal weapons can slay them for a time. And we know that the light entrusted to you can slay them with greater ease; and we also have reason to believe that it prevents the process of their rapid regeneration. But only a force that we do not now possess shall be enough to dispel them once and for all. That is my firm conviction. So a part of me wants you to stay and fight, to help protect our people, and also to witness what shall unfold when men and beast clash in war. Much may be learned from that. But the other part of me wishes for you to make all haste

to find the answer that we so desperately need... But it may be nothing but a rumor, a vain hope for a power that no longer exists or exists not where you search for it."

"What then would you have me do?" asks Eldárien.

"It is not my place to command you," Cirien replies, "but if you ask for my counsel, I say: stay here at present, but listen to the voice of your heart, and if it urges you to go, then go. If anyone can discern the path ahead, it shall be you, for it is you to whom this light has been entrusted. And Elmáriyë, too, I believe, shall know much or come to know it in time: for what is in you is also in her. And in all things, trust in the powers in whose hands are the fates of all, that they shall make it clear unto you whether you are to stay or depart, and where you shall be led."

"Then that is what I shall do," agrees Eldárien, "for your words appear to me wise, and they invite me to wisdom." He then pauses and draws in a deep breath, deliberating whether to speak or remain silent about his dream and the matters that it symbolized, which weigh upon his heart. After a moment, he says, "But there is something else about which I desire to speak. It also brings further difficulty into my discernment of all that we have discussed."

"It is the nightmare to which you referred when we stood in the corridor?"

"Yes," says Eldárien. "And it concerns Rórlain, albeit not him alone."

"I sense that you fear for him, is this correct?" Cirien asks.

"I do, but I am not able to say even unto myself why this is so."

"Do you not care for him?"

"I do."

"Then that could be reason enough."

"Perhaps that is all that it is," says Eldárien. "But I cannot help feeling that there is more. As I indicated to you, I had a dream last night which has deeply disturbed me. I understand that often dreams are no more than the work of our own minds while we sleep, seeking clarity regarding things that we encounter and feel when we are awake. To interpret dreams as prophecy can be a work of folly."

"That is true," says Cirien. "Many I have spoken to who imagine that the goddess communicates with them and directs them in their dreams, and yet only in one or two cases has this ever been true, and even then not according to the interpretation that the person superficially gives to such a communication."

"So let me say it just as it is, then," continues Eldárien. "I dreamed of Rórlain's death, a vicious and bloody death. It happened before my very eyes, and I was unable to do anything to stop it."

"Do you have cause to fear for him?" asks Cirien. "Is there anything specific that incites your concern for his safety, beyond the fact that we stand on

the brink of battle and of war?"

"It may just be that. However, he has also become greatly preoccupied with the affairs of the hæras, and he thinks that the man is not as he seems. I fear that he shall be led, by his suppositions, to rash action which may bring harm to himself, if not also to others."

"What does Rórlain suppose to be the case?"

"He thinks it likely that Gléndas commanded the fire in the ghetto," Eldárien says, "and used it as an excuse to blame the Imperial counselor and bring about his death."

"Does he have proof of this accusation?"

"Only secondary, indirect proof, though calling it proof is already giving it too much credence, I fear."

"And you do not trust Rórlain's intuition?" asks Cirien.

"I do, at least to a degree," says Eldárien. "But intuition is not the same thing as interpretation. It is not unlike what you said about those who interpret their dreams in a manner unfitting to the true nature of the goddess and her communications. I think that Rórlain senses something amiss in the hæras and, out of concern, seeks some way to set things to rights."

"Indeed," Cirien sighs, thoughtfully. "And there *is* something amiss with Gléndas Medóra. There has been for many years. But I do not believe that Rórlain's suspicions are correct, at least according to the conclusions that he draws from them. I knew the hæras when he was young, at least in a manner. He was quite different then than he is now, but the seeds of his illness were already present."

"His illness?" asks Eldárien.

"Yes," says Cirien. "The lust for power. I suspect that this is what Rórlain has witnessed and what he fears."

"He does fear that the hæras will go so far as to betray his own people in order to maintain or increase his power."

"I know not whether such a fear, as extreme as it appears, is grounded in reality or not," Cirien muses. "Only time will tell. But what would Rórlain do? I suspect that any effort to intervene or usurp the hæras' power would do more harm than the evil it sought to prevent."

"I think Rórlain's inclination would be to unveil the hæras' corruption and thus to rob him of the authority which allows him to do evil, manipulating those under his command to acts of harm," explains Eldárien.

"But we do not have proof of such acts," Cirien says.

"No, we do not. We know only that the murder of the counselor and his men at court happened at the same time as the fire in the ghetto, and that the hæras accused the counselor of starting the fire. It was in the conflict immediately following this that he was slain."

"The Imperial counselor was a good man," Cirien says.

"So I have heard."

"He was a man of peace, to some people's minds even too much so. He tolerated the seeds of rebellion for years through fear of spilling unnecessary blood and causing harm to the people of the city. He served the Empire, yes, but he also served the people of Telmérion."

"Then it is unlikely that he commanded the fire."

"Very unlikely."

"So Rórlain's suspicions have at least some foundation?" Eldárien asks.

"That was never in doubt, was it?"

"No, it was not. It is his interpretation and his course of action, if action he takes, which most concerns me." Eldárien pauses and thinks for a moment before asking, "Do you believe Gléndas such a man as to command the burning of a section of his own city?"

"As an excuse to kill a man?" Cirien replies. "I think not. But perhaps there are other motives of which we are unaware. Nonetheless, Gléndas is no fool. He knows that many of his subjects dislike him, so if he thought there was any chance others would impute such an action to him or look poorly on him for allowing it, he would not risk it."

"What if...I were to approach the hæras myself?" Eldárien asks, at first hesitantly, but then more firmly he continues, "What if I were to try to glean something from his mind? I do not mean that we may pass judgment upon him. I mean that we may learn what to expect of him, may learn how he shall lead the people of this city, and thus find the path of cooperation...if cooperation is possible."

"Unless Gléndas is sided with the Empire against his own people," Cirien replies, "the coming attack will set him unconditionally on the side of the citizens of Ristfánd. Whatever self-interest he may have will be put to rest in the need to ensure the very survival of his city and its inhabitants."

"Then what shall I do?"

"Allow me to speak with him," Cirien says. "We have not spoken in many years, but this may be a good time for me to reintroduce myself. If I judge it appropriate, I may also find opportunity to tell him that I have a man with me who has received the power to confront the powers of darkness that threaten us. It would be most fortunate if he were to accept your aid in protecting his people and fighting back the invasion. Your experience, along with what has been entrusted to you, may give him both hope and wisdom, as well as courage, in the fight that lies before him, and in the future of his people itself."

"If that could indeed be the case," says Eldárien, "then I would have a clear reason to stay in Ristfánd until after the attack. Were he to accept my aid, I

would gladly give it."

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That evening, Cirien comes to Eldárien in his room and says to him, "I spoke with Gléndas, and he seems favorably disposed toward our cause. I sensed no duplicity in him, at least regarding the things about which we spoke. He asked to speak with you as soon as possible. In fact," and with this he sighs, "while I was present, a messenger came in and brought news that an army has been spotted marching in this direction and should now be but a couple days away."

"Do you know any more?" Eldárien asks. "What of the size of this army?"

"Five-thousand or more. Perhaps even twice that," Cirien replies, "though the messenger said that he saw no beasts but only men."

"We know not what form these creatures take when they travel," says Eldárien, "so this is no indication that the alliance between the Empire and the vrû'ádach has failed."

"It may simply be that they, being creatures of darkness, are not visible in the daylight," explains Cirien.

"You mean to say that we may find ourselves fighting an invisible enemy?"

"No, I do not mean that. Rather, it is possible that they only take form in the darkness, being but shadows in the light of day."

"That is a terrifying prospect," Eldárien sighs. "What leads you to this conclusion?"

"Records of ancient times. The eöten take many forms, as I said, but a trait that is often recalled of them, or at least of some of them, is that when exposed to the light of day they become...insubstantial," says Cirien, as if struggling for an appropriate word to express this reality. He continues, "They are not thereby defeated. It is rather as though they retreat into their 'realm,' into the realm of shadow, until darkness has again engulfed the world with night and they can extend their presence freely once again."

"That would explain why they dwell in the caves of the earth. But I wish we knew for certain that this is the case." Eldárien rubs his forehead thoughtfully, as if massaging out clarity of vision and conviction from a mind burdened by cares, and then he says conclusively, "I will go to the hæras early tomorrow morning."

"And I shall pray for the good outcome of your converse," the grandmaster says. "May you and hæras Gléndas both have hearts to listen and to see."

"Thank you, Cirien. Without your wisdom and knowledge, we would be much poorer in this fight. I for one am immensely grateful to have it, and your very presence brings me courage and hope."

After this, Eldárien retires to his room for the evening, and, though it is not yet dark outside, he lays down on his bed above the covers and closes his

eyes. After a while, as his heart sinks into silence, images begin to pass before his interior vision, before the eyes of his heart, beginning as memories of the past and then gradually changing into expectations of the future. Yet at some point the images shift beyond memory and imagination. They become more *real*, more vivid and alive, as if they are now neither of the past nor of the future but of the present or of some timeless state that holds past, present, and future all together. He sees Elmáriyë's face directly before him, more tangible and more keenly impressed upon his heart's vision than in the sight of his waking eyes. And as he looks upon her, the expression written into the lines of her face, at first peaceful, as if she is looking at him with kind regard, is altered, turning to anguished concern. *Elmáriyë...what is it?* He finds himself asking the question unconsciously, so real does her presence seem. But he hears no answer, at least not one explicitly put into words.

For a long moment he looks into her eyes, and she looks into his, and something passes between them, like a voice uttered without need for sound or a silent word that contains in itself the meaning of many words. But gradually this image fades before Eldárien and another face takes the place of that of Elmáriyë. It is the face of Rórlain. But Rórlain is not looking at Eldárien and does not seem to be aware of his presence. Rather, his gaze is intently fixed elsewhere, though his expression manifests an anguish similar to Elmáriyë's anguish, a concern, however, fraught with more fear and uncertainty, whereas even in fear and concern Elmáriyë did not cease to radiate a gentle peace and serenity, afflicted but undimmed. But as soon as Rórlain's face appears full formed before the eyes of Eldárien's heart, so too does it fade away, and the latter finds himself looking once again into blackness. He opens his eyes and sits up in the bed, still fully dressed and still fully awake. What he experienced was neither dream nor vision, but a seeing of the heart. The room is dark now as the last light of day has fled from the sky and no candle or fire is lit within. Eldárien swings his legs off the side of the bed and places them on the floor. *These images...and feelings,* he thinks to himself, *they must be another part of this bearing.*

He then rises and, pulling a cloak about his shoulders, steps into the corridor, which is now silent and still as all have retired to their rooms to sleep, study, pray, or relax. The hooting of an owl echoes gently through the stone hallway, sneaking in through an open window looking out into the courtyard and being amplified against the vaulted ceiling. To the courtyard Eldárien now goes, closing the heavy wooden door quietly behind him. Taking a few steps forward, beyond the eaves, he raises his eyes to the sky, which is speckled now with countless stars and shines with the cold white light of a rising crescent moon. A soft breeze breathes through the courtyard, whistling off the roof and sighing in the boughs of the trees. It ruffles his hair, and he

brushes it away from his eyes, and then he pulls the cloak tighter around him against the chill air of Telméric night. For a moment he does nothing but stand, drinking in the beauty of sight, sound, and feeling, the voice of the owl now clear and loud to his right, mingled with the intermittent moaning of a dove a little further off, and beyond that, the slow chirping of crickets. In the silence, Eldárien notices innumerable sounds that go unnoticed in the daily affairs and noises of life. The trees speak in response to the breeze, their branches groaning mildly as they wave in the air and their leaves tinkling like a thousand little bells or droplets of water. But the silence itself also seems to speak: the unmoving stones of the temple edifice, large, quiet, and yet sheltering, the earth underneath his feet firm and nourishing, and the sky itself pouring forth starlight from an immeasurable distance. There is a music in it, a single music manifest in a multitude of silent sounds, and yet only one.

Suddenly the silence is filled with an unexpected voice, "So you came."

Eldárien turns slightly and sees a figure emerging from the shadows of the trees, in which beforehand she had been invisible. "I did not know that you would be here, though I felt you only a moment ago and almost 'saw' you..."

"I saw you too, if such it can be called," Elmáriyë says, coming to within a few steps of Eldárien. "You did not hear my words, but you must have felt my intention."

"Is it truly possible for us to communicate at a distance with only the mind?" he asks.

"It is more like the heart, I think," she replies, "though I believe that they are one at their root. Or rather, I think that the mind is part of the heart, rooted ultimately in the heart, just as is everything else. It all starts there and ends there, like the center of a basket from which all threads are woven or the place from which ripples come and to which they return."

"I understand that," Eldárien says softly, "more than I ever have before. But what did you try to tell me? I could see that you were troubled...or perhaps concerned is a better word."

"Concerned and troubled both," answers Elmáriyë, and her voice is heavy. "It is nothing specific, or at least nothing beyond what we all await in but a few days' time. And maybe that is cause enough for all that I feel."

"It may indeed be enough. But what did you say to me then?"

"It was not capable of easy expression in words. I rather just reached out to you, as if I felt alone in the pain I bore and..." Her voice falters.

"What is it?"

She finds her voice again and continues, "I wanted you to bear me in bearing it."

"The pain of our time is too much for one heart to bear alone," Eldárien says. "Indeed I think the pain of a single human heart is too much to bear. It

is beyond us, beyond anyone."

"But we are never alone, in the pain or in the bearing," whispers Elmáriyë.

"I see that in you," replies Eldárien. "I have never before seen someone who appears so visibly 'held,' even to the waking eyes. And I understand why. I understand how you can hold, how you can bear, because you so keenly know yourself to be held."

"She has been so close to me from the beginning," says Elmáriyë. "I have always been so alone and yet never alone. But not until now have I known another living soul who can hold me also, in some way, as she always has. It is like meeting a fragment of her alive in you, or rather, like seeing a ray of her light filter through your heart, intensified and magnified before my gaze precisely by passing through you." She pauses, and then adds, "I hope that makes at least a little sense."

"Yes," is his simple reply. "But tell me," he continues, "more of what you feel. Something is troubling you, and it concerns not only the news of the impending attack. It arises from a different place, does it not?"

"Different, but the same," she answers. "I just feel a sense of...dread. I do not know a better word for it, though that one seems just as inadequate as it is helpful. It is like I *feel* that something terrible is coming, something even worse than any of us can at this time expect. And I feel powerless to do anything to prevent it or even mitigate it."

"Is that why you reached out to me?" Eldárien asks, and then he shakes his head, adding, "It is going to take some time to become accustomed...to this kind of language...to this way of relating."

"For both of us," she agrees. "But the answer is no, if by that you mean I wanted to see if there was something that you could do or even advice you could give me. How, after all, can anything be done about an evil that is only felt and whose nature is neither seen nor understood?"

"I suppose that where there is only intuition understanding can be sought," says Eldárien. "Cirien has given me a great deal of illumination in this regard, and though I feel the evil more deeply than before, I also believe that I see it more clearly. And this enables me to feel less helpless, even if no less powerless."

"Maybe you are right," Elmáriyë sighs. "It is perhaps simply too early to know *what* this evil is, and all that can be done is to feel it in expectation."

"But the feeling can become communication, reaching out to the light, as is happening in our conversation right now."

"Again, I think you are right." With these words, Elmáriyë turns away, and the little of her face that was before visible in the light of moon and stars is hidden in the darkness. But he still hears her voice as she continues speaking, in tones soft and strained, "It just feels like a...suffocation. Like I cannot

breathe no matter how hard I try. It comes from all angles, whichever way I turn, a thick fog surrounding me and seeking to pierce even to the deep places within me."

"I felt that in the presence of the vrû'ádach," says Eldárien. "I think that they carry this suffocating fear and oppression with them wherever they go. Or better said, I believe that it emanates from within them. It is their strongest weapon."

"But the expectation of great evil?" asks Elmáriyë, turning back to him now, her voice eager and imploring. "Is that too but a result of their proximity or their influence?"

Eldárien answers, "I know not..."

"I think I reached out to you, Eldárien," she says, "in the hopes that you could give me some air, or some space to breathe, in my suffocation."

"I wish that I could."

"Even if not in the way I expected, I think that is precisely what you did. You cannot take from me the experience that is mine to bear, for it is given to me for a reason. The feeling of it is a gift and not a curse. Thus, you cannot remove the pain, but you can join me in it or take it—and me as well—into yourself. And that makes a difference, a very significant difference. In a certain sense, it changes everything."

"Then I am happy to do what little I can," Eldárien affirms, softly yet enthusiastically.

Elmáriyë nods and turns back to Eldárien with a gentle smile. "Thank you. It is good to have you here with me. Know that I am here with you and for you, too. And I hope that I shall always be."

"As do I," replies Eldárien. "As do I."

Chapter Seven
The Claws of Night

After the conversation with Elmáriyë in the courtyard, Eldárien returns to his room. Stepping through the darkness and lighting a lantern fastened to the wall, he notices a folded note on the floor—clearly slipped under his door. He takes it, unfolds it, and reads:

> *Eldárien,*
>
> *Rórlain spoke with me this evening and brought the news which I had already shared with you. He was surprised that I knew it already, as he was one of the first to speak with the messenger—being at the northern gate when the scout returned—and only this afternoon had begun passing on the message to others. I just want to let you know that he appears quite troubled. He has been given command over a small company of archers who shall be stationed at the said gate, which shall likely receive the brunt of the attack. I know not, however, if it is this that troubles him or if it is the matter which we discussed this morning. I hope that you will find time to speak with him tomorrow after your early meeting with Gléndas. Know that I offer up my heartfelt orisons for a good outcome to this affair and for the safety of you both, as I do for all the people of this city and this land.*
>
> *Cirien*

With heavy heart he retires for the night, though he cannot help feeling some solace and consolation lingering within his heart from his conversation with Elmáriyë. Her words and her very experience ring true within him, and he recognizes that her claim can also be made his own. She lives in him more than he ever knew possible, and his aloneness, therefore, has been permeated by presence. But he does not linger long with the thought of her presence, as consoling as it is, for such presence directs him to another. It stirs a question within him: *Is this what it means to have communion with the divine? The deepest communion but also the most mysterious...which utterly eradicates all aloneness and yet sanctifies solitude in the same act? If that is the case, how little I have known you until this moment... And yet how deeply and intimately you have known me, in everything...*

With these thoughts he drifts off to sleep.

† † †

In the morning Eldárien awakes with an unusual mixture of serenity and

suspension, like he is henceforth called upon to walk on a narrow cord over a yawning abyss, and yet that, in the act of walking, he feels a greater sense of balance and security from falling than he ever has before. He dresses quickly and eats a light breakfast alone before leaving the temple just as the sun crests the horizon in the east, sending shimmering rays of white and orange across the rooftops. The air is quite cold, though above freezing, and a thick moisture in the early hours of the morning has cloaked the city in a dew that now glistens in the sunlight. By the time that Eldárien comes to the entrance to the hæras' palace, the sun shines full against the city and sends up countless shimmers of light from the crystals of condensation that cling to the world before releasing her and joining with the air. As the water releases, a dense fog rises up and hugs the surface of the earth like a cloud come close to the ground, moist and chill but beautiful in the radiance of the early morning.

He knocks at the large doors of the palace and waits for a minute or two before they swing open, revealing the face of an elderly man, wrinkled and weary but with eyes glistening with awareness. The man is hunched with age, but, on opening the door, he stands as upright as he is able in order to welcome the visitor. "And what, may I ask, are you seeking at the palace of the hæras so early in the morning?" he asks.

"Forgive me if it is an inconvenience," replies Eldárien, "but I believe the hæras asked to speak with me as soon as possible."

"You are the one about whom Cirien spoke?"

"I am."

"Well, then you aren't too early at all," the old man says. "Gléndas did not sleep much last night, so I imagine he will be glad to see you immediately." With this, he gestures Eldárien inside and shuts the doors behind him. "My name is Stánda, and I will escort you to the hæras in just a moment. But let me inform him first of your arrival. If you could wait here, please."

Eldárien nods and takes a seat on one of the low wooden benches that line the walls of a small antechamber. The room is fifteen by fifteen feet square, but the ceiling is tall and arched, and windows of colored glass high on the wall, when filled with the light of morning that filters in, give the room a warm hue. He leans back and rests his head against the stone wall behind him, letting the warm light fall upon his face, and in this position he waits. And he waits for a long time, for it is a full hour, at least, before Stánda returns.

"My apologies for the delay," he says. "There was a matter that required Gléndas' attention. But he is ready to see you now. Please, follow me this way." The old man then leads Eldárien through another doorway and into a long vaulted chamber with a blazing hearth in the center and a throne at the far end. Along its length are lined tables that are clearly used for lavish feasts, though now they stand empty and clean, their presence only adding to the

sense of largeness in the chamber. The walls, in their lower sections, are paneled with wood both for decoration and warmth, while the higher sections, where the stone buttresses meet the roof, have windows toned not unlike those in the antechamber, but with a patchwork of mosaic glass that makes the entire room appear bathed in intermingled colors of red, orange, white, and blue. When combined with the warm and flickering light of the fire, the effect is one that is both inviting and mysterious, as if one has stepped into a realm of half-sleep on the brink of dreams. Perhaps that is the intended result.

"Please, approach," says a voice from the other end of the chamber. Eldárien does so, and as he walks he looks upon the hæras seated on the raised throne with a man standing on either side, none of whom he recognizes. Gléndas looks to be about Eldárien's age, perhaps a little older, of large and imposing stature—something visible even when he sits—with a head of thick blonde hair complemented by a long beard braided and jeweled.

"Gléndas Medóra, hail," says Eldárien, giving a gesture of respect to the hæras as he approaches. "I come to speak to you at your request and at the recommendation of Cirien Lorjiës."

"Indeed, and it is well that you have come," Gléndas replies. "I trust Cirien Lorjiës heartily, knowing his words to be true and spoken in truth. Come near that we may speak freely without the need to raise our voices." And as Eldárien does so, the hæras continues speaking, "This man on my left is Ûndan, my personal guard, and on my right is Týrfing, my counselor."

"So I am to understand that you have found another counselor to replace the one who was...lost?" says Eldárien.

"Lost, indeed," Gléndas remarks. "He was a soft man and his passing is little mourned. But you are correct, though only in part. Týrfing has been my counselor for a long time, since before Ovántës even arrived."

"I see," answers Eldárien. "He must then serve you well."

"Indeed he does," says Gléndas. "But tell me: Cirien spoke of the power that you have received to—how shall we say?—cast out the dead. He also said that you were a companion of the man who previously came to me bringing warning of the coming enemy. He said that you were with him in witnessing creatures of darkness making a pact with the Empire?"

"That is correct, though it seems more appropriate to say that we saw the Empire making a pact with the creatures of darkness. It seems to us obvious that they are the stronger party and are using the Empire for their own ends."

"That is an interesting thought. What makes you believe that these... beasts...have more power than the Empire and will not rather be a willing tool in the hands of its might?"

"They are not just beasts, sire," says Eldárien. "They are monsters born of a darkness that is far greater and more powerful than you or I yet know or can

perhaps even imagine."

"And yet you claim to dispel them with a single blow of your sword?" asks Gléndas, his voice betraying unbelief but also a hint of curiosity.

"I do not dispel them, unless by that you mean they are dissolved in their corporeal form, whether ceasing in existence entirely or returning whence they came, I know not."

"Either way, that is not of little import or significance. And how came you by such power?"

"It was entrusted to me by one of the divines whilst I stood in a place of darkness," says Eldárien. "It allowed me to confront and vanquish an evil against which I natively had no chance to stand."

"And now you wish to put your powers at the service of my city as we seek to defend against the assault of such creatures upon our home and, in the process, to stand also against the might of the Empire itself?" Gléndas asks.

"That seems the only appropriate course of action, yes," replies Eldárien. "I do not side either with the rebels or with the Empire in their political goals. I only wish to prevent the loss of life and the victory of the powers of darkness. In that, I place myself at your service."

"I wish that you could give me some 'display' of this power," says Gléndas, "for it almost beggars belief."

"I assure you it is no lie, nor, however, is it simply in my capacity to call it forth at will. It comes only in direct contact with the darkness that it seeks to purge."

Gléndas opens his mouth to speak but is interrupted by Týrfing, who says, "I do not think that we should trust this man. He speaks of a mysterious power, but he gives no proof. He speaks of aid, and yet he wishes not to support you in your plans to fight against the Empire and to bring about the freedom of your people from their yoke."

"That is true," Gléndas replies, turning to his counselor, "but we do not need him for all of that. We seek only his aid in the defending of the city."

"So you shall make a mercenary of this stranger?" Týrfing asks.

"I am no mercenary," Eldárien interjects. "I only seek to freely offer whatever aid I can give."

"Do not interrupt the counsels of the hæras," Týrfing says to Eldárien, anger creeping into his words, an anger that brings about an unusual change in his voice, making it sound almost like a growl. He then turns back to Gléndas, "As I was saying, I think we should send this man away. If he claims to be a friend now, he could easily be our enemy tomorrow. I suspect that he aims only to use us for his own ends."

"And what ends might those be?" Eldárien says, and then, to his surprise, it is the hæras himself who corrects him now.

"Týrfing has told you to be quiet and so be quiet!"

"Sire...?"

"He has plans of his own, I assure you," Týrfing continues, "and he hides a past that you do not know. He is a captain of the Empire, and he comes as a 'bearer of light' whose presence shall bring only darkness to us all. It is better, I say, to nip this flower in the bud, and to win our contest by the might of our own arm."

"Is what he says true?" Gléndas asks.

"I know not how he knows it," says Eldárien softly, "but I was indeed once a captain of the Empire. But I have freely departed from that path and have no intention of returning to it."

"So you see," Týrfing insists. "He has already concealed from you much concerning himself and his intent."

"I have concealed nothing of my intent," Eldárien corrects.

"Why...why did you leave the Empire?" Gléndas asks, torn between listening to the words of his counselor and remaining in a stance of true dialogue with Eldárien.

"Because my eyes were opened to the evils committed under her mantle and because I could not abide by the orders of my superiors."

"So it is evident that he will disobey the commands of those with whom he disagrees," Týrfing says vehemently.

"Enough, Týrfing!" Gléndas cries. "Allow me to speak."

"My liege," the former says, with a bow, "but I have no doubt—"

"Quiet!" Gléndas then rises from his throne and takes a step toward Eldárien. "I believe that you speak the truth. Your words and your bearing assure me, and I feel the truth in what you say."

"I assure you, sire, that I speak only the truth," replies Eldárien.

"Absurdity!" cries Týrfing, and at this moment a bizarre change comes over him. His face transforms in less than a blink of an eye, becoming not only grotesque, twisted with anger and hate, but also inhuman, with wide skull and rotting mouth filled with fang-like teeth dripping with saliva or venom. His hands, too, change, turning into claws, with long bent fingers with razor-like nails. He leaps forward and, before anyone can react, thrusts one of his hands deep into Gléndas' back. The latter can hardly cry out before death takes him. "Long have I desired to crush your heart between my fingers," says Týrfing, his voice now a horrifying baritone of guttural rage. He then draws forth his hand, dripping with blood, and laughs in delight. "And now for you, 'Lightborn,' the time has come to taste the darkness."

Eldárien draws his sword and stands poised, ready to defend himself. But Týrfing—or whatever his true name may be—leaps upon him with such speed and agility that he dodges the swings of Eldárien's blade and then

throws him onto his back. His sword clatters against the stone floor as it is knocked from his hands. With a cackle of hatred and sick delight, the creature strikes Eldárien across the face, his claws tearing deep into the flesh of his cheek. Then pressing a hand to his throat in an iron-tight grip, the beast begins to suffocate the breath and life from Eldárien.

"How I want to destroy you!" the beast cries, but then it hesitates as if restraining one thirst by a deeper thirst. "Ah, but...but I shall not kill you immediately. I shall keep you as a plaything for a while yet. Yes, that is what I shall do... I shall force you to witness the destruction of the people whom you wish to protect. And you shall be unable to do anything, a man of broken bones and broken spirit, chained and conquered by the very forces that you have presumed to resist."

Darkness begins to cloud Eldárien's vision and, moments before he loses consciousness, he sees Ûndan leap upon the creature of darkness with sword drawn, and the creature bearing upward with claws extended. Then all goes black.

† † †

Eldárien awakes in the dim half-light of a dungeon and groans in pain, chained as he is to the cold stone wall, his arms extended right and left above his head, and his ankles, too, affixed to the wall. The pressure of cold metal manacles is tight against his skin and causes him keen pain; the chains also almost entirely limit his movement, being but a few links fastened to the wall with heavy bolts. A barred window high to his right is the only source of light, the narrow beam of sun filtering in through it falling opposite him upon the bars of his cell. He cannot see what lies beyond the bars, but given that the other three walls are of solid stone, it must be the passageway. The left side of his face burns with pain, and his cheek is swollen from the deep cuts inflicted by the claws of the beast, so much so that his left eye is partially closed. He is also naked to the waist, and the cold air of the dungeon stiffens his muscles and his skin, which are already stretched almost to their limit by the position in which he is forced to hang.

The air is silent, with no sound but the mute muffledness of unmoving stone and the hum of anxiety laden stillness echoing in his ears. But soon he hears his own heart beating and his own breathing punctuating the silence, as if a rhythm of drum and flute sounding a lament before an audience of none or a troop of laden warriors marching forth, exhausted already by the trek and stirred on by the drumbeats toward the horrors of war: death, death, death. And yet Eldárien knows that the heartbeat is a sign of life, not of death. As long as he still lives, regardless of where the drumbeats lead him, he has the chance of remaining faithful to the light and of serving it to the very end.

These thoughts are soon interrupted by another sound which enters the

cacophony of silence, which had only just begun to flow again into a sense of peace and serenity: the sound of shuffling footsteps beyond the bars of his cell. And with the sound of the footsteps comes terror—the terror that pours forth from the creatures of darkness like water pours from rivers into the sea or blood spills from an open wound. Soon there is the sound of a key being inserted into a lock and turned, and then the door swings open with a rusty creak. Into the light steps a creature whom Eldárien immediately recognizes as Týrfing, or rather as the beast that had disguised itself as Týrfing. Now the transformation is complete, and all resemblance to a living man has been left aside: before Eldárien stands a creature not unlike the vrû'ádach, a figure of dead bones and rotten flesh, a good two feet taller than the tallest of men, with hunched back and long, twisted arms bursting with muscle, and with eyes like blackest night, from which an intrusive, violating, and fear-inducing gaze looks.

The creature cackles in laughter and draws near to Eldárien until it stands but a couple feet away from him, its form fully visible even in the dim light of the cell and enough to freeze his heart with terror. "My little toy," it says, in a voice like vomit, "I apologize that I have made you wait for our fun. I was delayed. You see, I had some affairs to...attend to."

"What has happened to...?" Eldárien begins to ask, but the voice dies in his throat.

"To what? To whom?" the creature replies. The longer it stands in proximity to Eldárien, the more its stench, a stench of death even worse than an unburied, rotten corpse, fills his senses and causes him to gag. "Ristfánd itself is untouched for the moment...though that shall not be the case for long. Yet the house of the great Gléndas Medóra has been destroyed, all his family and all those in his employ. And how I have longed for this day, abiding that fool for years until our plan was ripe."

"Who are you?" Eldárien asks.

"Another question so soon? I have not even finished answering your first. Let me speak at my leisure, you imbecile, you lesser creature, you worm. Clearly, I am the one with all the power here. I assure you that it is in your best interest not to anger me." With this the creature turns away from Eldárien and paces the room, its bare, claw-like feet scraping against the stone floor. He sees that it wears no more clothes than a rag hanging loosely from its shoulders down to its thighs, a rag in which, to his disgust, he sees maggots freely crawling. He realizes then that these creatures are embedded also in the beast's desiccated skin, crawling almost imperceptibly under the surface with their tiny white bodies. Seeing the expression on Eldárien's face, the creature laughs. "Yes, yes," it says. "Colloquially, I am called 'Maggot,' though I have many names."

"You..."

"I am the Lord of Worms, and them I crush at whim and at leisure. It is my pleasure and my delight. I am not the greatest of my kind, but I am immeasurably superior to you or to any who claim to walk in the light. For light is weakness; it is petty preoccupation with appearances. Yes, people cling to the light only out of fear, do you not see? To embrace the darkness is to act in courage, with vigor and with strength. Human beings prefer the light because it is all that they know; it makes them feel safe. But it is also boring, narrow, and so very, very bland. In the darkness alone are adventure, and pleasure, and freedom. That is something, however, that I fear the likes of you shall never know."

Maggot stops directly in front of Eldárien now and turns to him, leaning forward until his face is but inches from Eldárien's face. "Humans are so easily turned from the light, however, by the same fear by which they cling to it. All that is necessary is to convince them that the darkness is more secure than the light...and, if that does not work...to simply *break* them." He then reaches forth one of his clawed hands and grasps Eldárien tightly around the throat, until the sharp points of his claws begin to pierce the skin and draw blood. "And you, the supposed 'lightborn,' the one that your petty gods have chosen to stand in their name...there is nothing to do for you but to break you. Whether you turn or whether you die, it matters little to me. As long as I have my fun."

He then releases his grip on Eldárien's neck and takes a small step back. With his dark and wicked gaze, he looks up and down Eldárien's body as if contemplating, and then, raising a hand, he reaches forward and slowly draws his claws across the skin of Eldárien's shoulder. His claws, razor sharp, easily split the skin wide open and allow blood to seep freely out and to flow down Eldárien's body. In the excruciating pain, Eldárien clenches his jaw and groans, but otherwise remains silent. And as Maggot does the same on his other shoulder, Eldárien feels the nausea born of intense pain almost overwhelm him.

"Very good," Maggot says with a laugh. "As with every man, I will have you squealing in no time. But for now, I suppose you wish for some time to rest and to reflect upon the things that I have said, and to recall my beautiful face, which shall henceforth be the only one that you see this side of death."

And with this, Maggot turns and leaves the cell, locking the door behind him.

Chapter Eight
Terror in the Night

It is evening of the day of Eldárien's meeting with the hæras, and Cirien walks with bowed head in the inner courtyard of the temple. He hopes that the meeting brought forth good fruit, and he is concerned also for the conversation that he encouraged Eldárien to have with Rórlain. Ever since these men arrived in Ristfánd, he has felt the weight that they carry and has in some sense taken responsibility for them upon himself. He fears for them, as darkness seems to pursue them, whether they know it or not, but he also hopes ardently for their well-being. Yes, in so short a time he has come to love them deeply, almost in some way as he has come to love Elmáriyë over the last two years. In particular, Eldárien and Elmáriyë feel to him as if his own children, and he would without hesitation lay down his life for them, if by this he could protect them from darkness, death, or harm. But in truth he has long allowed his heart to be led along the path of love in the likeness of the tenderness of the celestial mother to whom he has devoted his life. Thus he hopes that, if he were called upon to do so, he would willingly lay down his life for anyone in need, be they close to his heart or stranger, be they friend or foe, if only by such an act he could serve light and goodness in their lives.

The day is fading now, and darkness begins to replace light in the sky as the brilliance of the sun rests for the night and the gentle light of the stars replaces it. Suddenly a horn sounds somewhere in the distance—a horn the likes of which Cirien has not heard before, but regarding the purpose of which he has no doubt. It is a horn of war. A few moments later, it is joined by other horns sounding from different locations.

Are they at our gates already? Cirien thinks. *Surely they cannot have traveled at such a speed. And if so...are they to attack under cover of night? But of course, if the vrû'ádach accompany them, then attacking at night is the best and only strategy. Why would they indeed do anything else?*

He rushes from the courtyard and goes to Rórlain's room. Just as he reaches out his hand to knock on the door, it bursts open and Rórlain steps out.

"Cirien! You hear the horns?" he asks. "Those do not belong to the people of Rhóvas, do they?"

"No, they do not."

"It is as I feared. They must be Imperial war horns." Rórlain pulls onto each of his arms the vambraces which he has been holding and fastens them

tightly. In all other respects, he is fully dressed and armed for battle, with his axe in his belt and his bow and quiver on his back. "But why," he asks, "was there no warning signal?"

"Like shadows among the trees..." Cirien whispers.

"What did you say?"

"I said 'like shadows among the trees.' It is from an ancient poem: 'Like shadows among the trees, they pass from dark into dark, to swallow the light unawares.' Make haste! I shall do all that I can within the walls. Know that any wounded or slain can be sent to the temple. We shall care for them. And let us pray that the enemy does not breach our defenses and enter the city itself!"

"May we be spared that indeed," Rórlain agrees and turns away, running down the corridor at full speed.

After watching him go, Cirien makes his way to Elmáriyë's room and knocks on the door. She opens quickly and, seeing him, asks, "What are those horns? Is the enemy already here?"

"I fear so," says Cirien. "I would like you to help me gather everyone together. Ask all whom you meet to come to the great hall, where we shall take counsel together. However, if you see Fínring, Góra, and Stéfna, tell them to go to the north, east, and west gates respectively. There I wish for them to aid in whatever way they may. After our gathering in the great hall, report to me in my rœdra. I wish to speak privately with you, but the immediate concord of our efforts takes priority."

"As you say," Elmáriyë replies, and she too rushes down the hallway to inform her comrades.

† † †

Meanwhile Rórlain sprints through the streets of the city toward the northern gate as the Imperial horns continue to blare in the distance. It is difficult to discern from which direction they come, as they sound through the night air and echo off the walls and buildings of the city in a thousand different tenors. When he arrives, most of his company is already gathered and in fevered conversation with the guards of the night watch, who only recently came to their posts and replaced the evening watch.

"What do we know?" Rórlain asks as he approaches.

"Little, sir," one man replies, "but enough."

"What is enough?"

One of the night watch steps forward and replies, "We heard them before we saw them, to our shame. But it is as though something was veiling them from our sight until they wished to be seen, if that is even possible. Once the horns began to sound, we saw shapes moving among the trees. And now...well, now it is better for you to look than to try to explain it to you."

With this, he leads Rórlain up to the top of the wall, and they stand on the battlements looking out over the plains to the north. The landscape is dotted with the fires of many homesteads that have been set to the flame, and in the light of these flames, the dim figures of soldiers can be seen, standing in formation facing the city, though still beyond the effective range of the strongest longbow.

"For what do they wait?" Rórlain asks. "They have the advantage now, and yet they do not attack. Do they wish to wait for us to be fully armed and prepared before they attack?"

"What tactics these are, I do not know," says the guard, "unless they be ordained simply to induce fear. And in that they are proving quite effective."

"Do you truly think they shall attack tonight?" asks another man.

"Perhaps they only wish to give us a sleepless night and to attack in the morning," answers Rórlain. "An unusual tactic, but effective. Yet I suspect battle shall begin forthwith. Let us return to the men. I wish to address them before fighting begins." They return to the courtyard inside the north gate, and when all the members of the company are gathered together, Rórlain speaks to them in raised voice. "We know not what the night holds for us, whether conflict or expectant waiting. But for both we must be ready. Until we receive word from the captain himself, we stand in readiness. For the present I recommend that you find a sheltered place near your station to rest. Leave the vigil to those whose duty it is. You shall be called upon at need. Sleep, if you can. Seek peace as you may, for in that you can hope to find some strength against the trial that awaits us."

Following these words, the members of the company take their stations on and around the battlements. Some remain standing, looking out into the fire-illumined night, and some sit leaning against the wall, talking softly with one another or trying to sleep. The moon is not yet half full, and the air is dark, both in and around the city, and the half-light of night, joined with the feeling of fearful expectation, creates an eerie and dreamlike atmosphere. Rórlain paces slowly on the top of the wall in the center of the battlements, looking out over the plains for any sign of change. Yet there is nothing but stillness from the enemy forces, as if they stand not only unmoving but without the need to move. At present it is impossible to gauge their number, and even the little that is seen of them soon sinks into oblivion as the fires die down to smoldering embers, sending swirls of black smoke into the air, stark against the night sky and against the even blacker silhouette of the earth. As he paces, Rórlain tries to ignore the growing sickness in the pit of his stomach and the gall that rises in his throat. He feels gripped by fear, but he does not wish to reveal this fear to his comrades and those under his command.

He finds himself longing for the solidity of Eldárien's presence, for his

weathered and war-torn insecurity that feels more secure and safe than almost anything that Rórlain has known. For a man so full of self-doubt and self-accusation, Eldárien has indeed become a surprisingly firm rock on which he leans, and on which, Rórlain suspects, many will come to lean in the coming days. Reflecting on this, a newfound awareness is impressed upon him, the awareness that the stability of a man and the security of his heart in times of trial come not so much from his own innate ability or resolve but from a power greater than himself by which he is held. And such power, in their current dire circumstances, seems to be the most reasonable hope. Indeed, it may not be long until it is the only remaining hope at all.

If that is truly the case, then well and good, Rórlain thinks, *for at the moment I feel utterly weak and helpless. I however do not understand why the forces of light always appear so much weaker, so much more frail, than do the forces of darkness. If I could find some way to lay hold of more strength for those who fight for goodness, for life over death, for unity and peace...I would not hesitate to do so. But where could such strength be found? Perhaps we should have sent for more recruits long before the conflict came to this moment. Or perhaps we should have evacuated the city rather than stay and wait for our doom to draw nigh.* Rórlain shakes his head as he tries to dismiss these thoughts. *What am I thinking? Now is not the time to be preoccupied with doubt and regret. We stand where we stand, for good or ill, and all we can do is fight with all that we have and all that we are. But I hope that I survive this night, to discern a better path for the future. And...and I hope that these men survive the night. I will do what I can to assure that they do.*

The horns have fallen silent now, and the night is quiet. Indeed, the quiet that falls upon them is not the serenity of restful nocturnal slumber and repose but an oppressive muteness in which it seems that even the ordinary nightly sounds are silenced: the dove has quelled her song, and the owl hoots no more, and even the wolves are mute. The winds that caress the surface of the land and make music against the rooftops have ceased, with a stillness not of rest, like a moment of leisure in the midst of their activity, but rather with the immobility of oppressive fear. This, at least, is what it feels like to those who hear it, this dread silence and this suffocating stillness. Rórlain recognizes this feeling, this suffocating terror, though now it is multiplied a hundredfold. *The vrû'ádach are here. I feel them,* he thinks. *How can I possibly protect my men from such horrors? And how can we possibly protect the people of the city?*

Suddenly a cry sounds from somewhere inside the city—a cry of terror—followed then by a shriek of pain.

"W-what is that?" one of the men on the battlements cries in alarm.

More screams arise from within the city—not the cries of men engaged in

battle but the cries of fear and anguish and physical pain, from the voices of women and children as well as of men. And now, in the midst of these cries, the war horns begin to blow once again, loud and shrill, shattering the stillness of the night air. Like water from a dam that has burst, the icy fear that has been gripping them bursts forth in a tidal wave of terror that washes over them, and many of the soldiers themselves cry out in fear and cower as if being struck. Some cast down their weapons and turn to flee.

"Hold fast!" Rórlain cries. "Hold fast! There is nowhere to run, and in flight shall be your doom. Stand strong and prepare to fight!"

Suddenly a voice sounds from behind, in the courtyard, "Sir Rórlain!"

He turns to the sound and sees a soldier standing in the gateway that leads into the city.

"Sir Rórlain, the captain has sent me," the soldier calls up to him. "We are besieged from within. There are men emerging from the shadows as if from thin air. But they are not...they are not men. And they slay all in their path."

"What would he have me do?" Rórlain asks, shouting back in response, while trying to ignore the cries of despair and anguish that erupt around him on the arrival of this terrible news, causing him to wish the messenger had addressed him privately.

"Leave half your men at the gate, and take the other half to do whatever you can to save those within the city," is the reply.

"Very well," Rórlain responds, and then, turning back to those who stand around him, he draws in a deep breath, trying to still his throbbing heart. Once he has found his voice again, he says to them: "Courage, men! Courage, husbands, fathers, brothers, sons! Today we fight for the very lives of those whom we love. Yield not to fear, for that is their greatest weapon. There is hope yet to turn the tide, but only if we withstand them with the same vigor with which they besiege our very hearts. Come! Who shall come with me into the city? To me!"

With this, he clambers down the wall and runs to the center of the courtyard, drawing his axe and raising it in the air. "We have no time to count numbers. Half of you, join me, and we march in haste into the streets of the city."

Stirred by their concern for their families and loved ones as much as by his words, easily half of the men join him without hesitation, though their faces are wrought with fear.

"Let us make haste!" he cries and leads them on toward the gate passing from the courtyard into the city.

But at that moment, there is another shout from the north. It echoes from the plains and reverberates across the wall, breaking through all the other noises. And at the sound of this voice, Rórlain's heart falters within him.

For he hears what it says: "Loose!"

A moment later, a volley of arrows rains down upon them.

"They attack simultaneously from without and from within!" Rórlain says. "Now it takes as much courage to stay as to go. To arms, men! To arms!"

At this, his spirit broken and his heart divided, he tears himself away from the battlements of defense and leads half of his company into the city and straight into hordes of vrû'ádach intent to kill.

† † †

Eldárien listens with anguished heart to the cries that echo, dim but clear, through the window of his cell. His body is strained against the chains that bind him as he unconsciously leans forward as if to break free and rush to the aid of those who now face a threat that—if the sounds are any indication—runs them down in slaughter like fire blazing through a forest of dried leaves and dead grass. But unlike the burning of a forest, these men and women feel! They hurt, they fear, they anguish, and they despair!

Hæliána, inclés a me, en difé illó tua a cærá me dia tan loca obscála. Difé illó tua a enía qua parás tan marís medlúr nu bánda.

The words come to his lips unbidden and yet deeply desired, and he pours his whole soul into them, as if by the force of his entreaty he could burst the bonds that hold him and take flight like a bird on the wing. He is carried on the current of this movement, and a song comes to him now to which he gives voice. He knows not from whence it arises, whether from his long-forgotten past, or from the mind and heart of another which he bears within himself in this moment, or from the unspeakable origin of all music at the dawn of time. But he sings as if his only hope lies in singing:

Entra tan astási nu náta seng
ena enén asáng moéndas svaténg,
melén ya sanó, meldía angá
qui en iyén proyéng illó eä.

Hygás a noän, Heillás, hygás,
en inclés a noän en hund nu ohómë,
en seng asáng sua eya noën cakráë,
hatá cruna malási, eäta meldáë.

Among the stars of night there sing
those whose song sweetens everything,
gentle and pure, melodious delight
which in its very sounding is also light.

Take heed to us, Blessed Ones, take heed,
and incline to us in the hour of our need,
and sing forth your song into our cacophony,

that the discordant notes may become melody.

After his song has ceased and he falls again into silence, he hears the shuffling of feet in the hallway. Only a moment later, Maggot again appears at the door of his cell and, opening it, enters.

"You hear the sweet sound of terror, agony, and death?" he says with a laugh devoid of all mirth. His face betrays a smile that is neither delight nor joy but only illicit and twisted pleasure and haughty mockery.

"Do you command these creatures?" Eldárien asks, shifting in his chains, which have begun to cut into the skin of his wrists and ankles and to cause them to bleed. The wounds on his face and shoulders also bleed, not as freely as they did at first, but still dangerously, and the loss of blood makes him deathly weak. The wounds inflicted by the beast's claws also burn unlike any wound that Eldárien has yet received, as if some poison has been placed within them.

"Do I command these creatures?" Maggot echoes. "It is I who summoned them, yes. And as you can hear, defensive walls are no hindrance to beings that take shape from the very shadows, who dwell in the darkness and from it emerge in answer to the will of the one who calls them."

"Who are you to command such forces of darkness?"

"As I mentioned to you before, I am a 'lesser one' of my kind. Or at least, such would they have me believe, trying to keep me in my so-called place. But it is folly for them to seek to constrain me, for we are defined not by what may be given to us or allotted to us by another, but by what we choose to take for ourselves, by the path that we forge all our own. All you need to know, however, is that I am infinitely more powerful than you or your kind shall ever be."

"And what then do you seek, if you are already convinced of your superiority?" Eldárien asks.

"Such petty questions need not be asked, and they shall certainly not be answered," says Maggot, walking forward until he is face to face with his prisoner again. "I only wanted to assure you that the people of Ristfánd are slain in great numbers, and that there is nothing you can do to save them. You cannot save a single one. The city shall soon fall into ruin, and from it the reign of dark shall spread to engulf all of Telmérion. Listen, worm, and despair." He reaches forward and lays a hand upon Eldárien's shoulder, almost as if offering a gesture of affection. But then he tightens his clawed and gnarled fist, and the wounds reopen and flow profusely again with blood. "Yes, listen and despair. Yield to the darkness and you need not stay here alone, helpless to the cries of so many descending into death. I could make you a great leader, the very lord of this city, imparting to you a power far greater than the petty toys given to you by the so-called goddess to whom you

vainly pray.

"Let despair be your doorway into power. That is my offer to you. Look deep into yourself and realize the darkness that you bear within. Does it frighten you? Does it cause you shame? But I tell you: Do not ignore it. Do not fight against it. Rather, embrace it, yield to it, and realize the power surging up within you from the very heart of your darkness. This is the only way that you can save the people of this city. They die, do you not realize, because of you? They die as my little game. For rending your flesh is not enough for me. Breaking your plans and shattering your so-called 'gift' is not enough. No, I must let you taste the depths of darkness that the pretty veneer of this world hides just below the surface. Only in this way can I open up to you the pathway to true power. And only in this way can you protect those whom you wish to protect. For at one word of yours, I shall call off the attack. Only tell me that you shall accept the allegiance of these weak men and women, that you shall allow them to bow down to you. Then I shall bestow upon you a share in the power that your heart craves, and you may not only use it to be guardian over others but may give this same power also to them. Then they shall never fear again, neither darkness nor death. For in pact with darkness, there is nothing to fear. Certainly you see this?"

"How could you imagine that what you say is obvious to me, Maggot, or that it is in any way desirable?" Eldárien replies when the flow of poisonous words has ceased. "Is it not obvious to you, rather, that you lie and that to me your lies are apparent? Do you imagine that you can force me into the darkness by the very darkness that threatens me?"

"But is that not the origin of peace throughout all the ages of time?" Maggot says. "Every war has come to an end because the weaker have yielded to the stronger, because those who naively cling to pure light finally realize that they must compromise with the darkness that belongs just as truly, just as validly, to the nature of this world. It is the blindness of those who presume to belong to the light, to be servants to the light, which is the true source of conflict and of death. For the darkness alone absolves these absurd distinctions, these wretched categories that men create in order to make themselves feel secure: right and wrong, good and evil, light and darkness, true and false. Rather, in the darkness a person realize that all is one. It is not evil; it is not fear; it is not loss. It is the finding of everything and the peace of universal serenity. Are not the stars one and united in their radiance precisely because they all shine in the darkness of a single sky? Stop trying to be the sun; stop trying to shine more brightly than others. Accept the inevitable darkness and come to terms with it, and only then can you find your place as a shining star of true power among the firmament of the mighty."

This outpouring of words oppresses Eldárien's mind and heart not only

from without but from within, dulling his senses and suffocating his thought until he feels as though he is in a thick fog wherein all the distinctions in the world fade away into a uniform mass. In the oppressive twisting of reality that they force upon his mind and heart, added to the loss of blood and the continuous cries of anguish echoing into the cell, Eldárien struggles to move his mind toward clarity and his will toward resistance. Instead, a sense of inertia overtakes him, as if even though Maggot's words are repulsive to him, h recognizes that resistance to them is ultimately futile. At last, weakened and exhausted, Eldárien whispers, "Blaspheme no longer, you beast. Why is it that evil is always so loquacious and yet in all its words says nothing at all?"

"It is not nothing, you fool. It is everything. You are simply too petty and narrow-minded to yet see it for what it is. But it need not always be that way."

"The only thing..." Eldárien begins, but as he speaks, he swoons, and his words die in his mouth. A moment later he emerges again into consciousness and is overtaken by vertigo. A long moment passes before the room ceases spinning and the sickness subsides.

"You were saying something?" Maggot asks by way of reminder.

"I..."

"Worry not, I too weary of this converse. I wish to speak with you, worm, even less than you wish to speak with me."

"I doubt that," Eldárien breathes.

"But join me, or at least tap into my power, and then we shall be on equal footing. No longer need you suffer in this way."

"The only thing in all that you have said," Eldárien begins again, picking up on the words he intended to speak before consciousness escaped him, "that has any bearing on me... The only thing...is my desire to save these innocent people from the wretchedness of suffering and death that you inflict upon them."

"That is not true. Both you and I know the insecurity and fear in your heart, and the profound darkness that you bear within. You know that what I say strikes a cord deep within you, and resonates with unspoken fears."

"And what if it does? Man was not made to live by fear, but by desire. And I desire nothing that you can offer to me."

"Except to save the people of this city and this land," Maggot reminds him.

"Aye. But even then..."

"Come, come. Simply do as I ask, and your wish to save them shall be fulfilled."

"I cannot be a ruler in the empire that you offer."

"Then rule not," says Maggot. "Offer me your word only for a moment. I am willing to yield to you on that. If you do not wish to rule and desire rather to go your way apart from what I offer to you...then very well. It shall be so.

I shall strike a deal with you."

"What are you implying?" asks Eldárien, trying to cling to the last shreds of consciousness that remain with him.

"Make unto me a vow that henceforth you shall not wield the light that has been entrusted to you. If you agree to step away from your so-called righteousness, then I shall agree to step away from this city, never to touch it again. No longer shall the minions who answer to my call come near to the city or its environs. I shall even make sure that the denizens of the Vælírian Empire, our poor little puppets, withdraw. Do you doubt me? I do have such power."

"And if I refuse?"

Maggot laughs and then says, "If you refuse, it is as you hear now, unto the end. It is death and destruction for all the children of men. Unless... Well, suffice it to say that I have another offer if you refuse the first."

"I refuse the first... This is not about me, Maggot, nor about my righteousness. It is about something both deeper and wider than I."

"Petty creature," Maggot says, "thinking that you are doing good by rejecting the darkness and standing with the light. But you really only safeguard your own conscience by casting an entire city into the pits of destruction. Do you not see? You cling to the light in your words, but in this very act you give free reign to the very thing that you profess to resist. It is you, you alone, who are responsible for these deaths. It is you who are feeding these people to the jaws of suffering and death."

Eldárien's head sinks to his chest and his eyes close. When he does not reply for a long moment, Maggot reaches forward and swipes his claws across Eldárien's torso, leaving four wide gashes across his lower chest, and blood seeps freely down and begins to soak into his breeches. Eldárien cries out and raises his head, looking at Maggot with a mixture of confusion, anger, and disgust. There is resolve also in his eyes, though to Maggot it appears to flicker in and out just as does his very consciousness.

"What..." Eldárien asks, "what is the second offer?" After a long pause, he adds, "And if you wish to come to an agreement with me, why do you strike me?"

"I thought that was already made clear," replies Maggot. "I strike you to teach you of your weakness and to stir your longing for strength. Pain begets power. But it does so only if you allow yourself to desire power and to seek it. Yet you have proven your folly, your love of weakness and the false security that it provides. Therefore, I revoke my first offer and give you the second. There shall not be a third."

"What is it?" Eldárien asks, struggling now for breath as his chest constricts in pain.

"I ask for your life," is Maggot's terse reply, and all of his loquaciousness falls away. He simply looks at Eldárien with fire in his eyes and says, "Give me your life, and you shall die that thousands may live. It is not a fair price, of course, but it is a deal that I am willing to make."

Chapter Nine
The End of the Contest

Rórlain leads his half-company of archers through the narrow streets of the city, though now they fight not so much with bow as with sword, lance, and axe. For these streets are flooded with the creatures of darkness, the vrû'ádach, who, even with bare claw and teeth, sow terror among the people. If these beasts were fully armed, Rórlain fears that there would be no chance of victory, for even fighting only with the viciousness of their own bodies, the vrû'ádach are a formidable foe. Soon it becomes apparent that the hacking of limbs and the piercing of the body does not stop them. Rather, they continue to assault their foe with inhuman strength, even with missing limbs and bodies torn to shreds, until they are either beheaded or pierced in the heart. About this, Rórlain informs his men and calls upon them to fight accordingly. He also adds, "They are terrible creatures, and they do not fall easily. But there is yet hope, for their range is less than the range of a weapon, and they wear no armor nor protection. Take heart in this and hew them down!"

Along every new street or passage down which the company turns, there are vrû'ádach, ten, twenty, or thirty, roaming in their bloodthirst or clawing with their hands against the closed doors of citizens' houses. The bodies of any men or women who were unfortunate enough to be out of doors when the vrû'ádach emerged now lie slain in the streets. Other houses lie open, their doors torn off their hinges from without or even opened from within, hinting to the terrible truth that the vrû'ádach have been appearing also within the homes of the citizens and not in the streets only. Realizing this, Rórlain's company also clears of vrû'ádach any houses that they come upon which give the slightest hint of conflict within. And yet even as they do this, his heart grieves, for he knows that there are probably countless houses that, when they are inspected after the conflict has ceased—granted that such a moment comes—shall contain the bodies of the fallen. How few there are to defend the helpless against so many creatures of nightmare seeking only to destroy!

As the company moves forward, slaying all the vrû'ádach they encounter, Rórlain experiences anew another fact, in which he feels helpless to aid his men: worse than armor or weapon, worse than claw or tooth, is the fear that

the vrû'ádach instill in human hearts. For the men in his company to continue in their fight requires a continual surmounting of fear rather than a one-time choice, and on every renewed encounter with the creatures of darkness, Rórlain finds it necessary to call out to his men in words of encouragement and hope. And this requires a great deal of him—of his spirit and his heart—and he finds himself becoming so exhausted that his vision blurs and the world around him seems to spin. Repeatedly, he must pause to regain his bearings and to push beyond the sense of disorientation that assails him, finding a path through his own fear and through the cloud of confusion that threatens to engulf the entire city, leading to panic among the population and among the men who fight to defend it.

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The temple of Nirániel soon echoes with the cries of the wounded and dying who line the corridors and fill every possible room. It becomes a safe haven for the living too, and the inner courtyard and the sanctuary both are crowded with so many persons that there is hardly any room to sit. The great doors at the entrance remain tightly shut except to let in those who seek refuge, and stationed within these doors are guards heavily armed to fight off any beasts who seek to gain entry. But even more effective than the doors and the guards is the aura of peace that envelops the temple precincts, an aura that causes disorientation among the vrû'ádach, and, were it possible, even fear. As they draw near, something happens to them: it is as though they are cut off from the inner voice that commands them to hunt, kill, and slaughter. Instead, they walk around as though confused and lost, bumping into one another, growling in their horrible voices, and then eventually turning away to another street. But there, sadly, they regain their vigor and their lust for death.

Seeing this as she looks out upon the stone courtyard from one of the windows in the corridor, stopping for but a moment as she passes from one wounded person to the next, Elmáriyë is filled with wonder. Cirien walks past and, seeing her, pauses to turn to her. "You wonder why they turn away from the temple?" he asks.

"Rather, I marvel," she replies. "And I am grateful... However, my heart is torn with grief for all those many persons who have not found refuge from these beasts. And I wish that there was more that we could do, or that *they* could do, all the men who fight to defend us. For even if the beasts are hindered, they are not stopped. And the darkness still conquers, to the death of many. What can possibly stop the horrors that befall our city and our people this terrible night?"

"Do not lose hope, my dear Elmáriyë," says Cirien, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Whatever lies within our ability, that let us do. We need to attend

to the wounded and to encourage the despairing. Much lies beyond us that may yet turn the tides of battle, though we know it not."

"But where is Eldárien?" asks Elmáriyë. "I know that it is not to him that you refer, yet he weighs heavy upon my heart nonetheless. Why has he not returned?"

"I am as puzzled about that as you are," Cirien says. "I know not why he did not return earlier. But now I expect that he has joined the defense." He pauses for a moment and looks deeply at Elmáriyë. "Or is there something else? What does your heart tell you?"

Elmáriyë does not answer immediately but pauses and draws in a deep breath, listening to that sound deeper than words, that feeling deeper than ordinary awareness. "I..." she begins but falters.

"Trust your judgment," Cirien encourages, squeezing her shoulder gently with his hand.

"I feel that he is in dire need, and that his very life hangs in the balance," she says at last. "He never departed from the palace of the hæras, and there he is yet to be found. That is what I feel."

"If that is the case, then I believe that much more is to be found there than Eldárien only," says Cirien. "A great evil has dwelt in the court of Gléndas for many a year. You know this, as you have felt it. Even Rórlain has felt it, though he did not know how to interpret what he experienced. I regret now that I sent Eldárien alone to confront such evil, and without warning. I allowed myself to be encouraged by the fact that Gléndas himself was favorable to our cause, that he proved to be a man of greater integrity than I had feared. But I was blinded to other threats, true if less visible, that also awaited Eldárien there."

"How do you know this?" asks Elmáriyë.

"Even those without the gift of bearing may yet feel what is beyond normal feeling," Cirien replies quietly. "The sense that dwells in you innately has grown in me over a lifetime. The world of the gods is open to us all, and deep acquaintance with the invisible begins to make the unseen seen and the unheard heard, and the hidden ripples at the heart of the universe begin to vibrate against the sinews of the soul that are now made sensitive, permeable to their touch."

"So you feel it too?" asks Elmáriyë.

"I feel certain things that you do not feel, and you feel things that I do not. And yet we feel also much that is the same." With these words Cirien sighs deeply, as if hesitant to continue.

"I shall go to him," Elmáriyë says suddenly, though her words betray no haste or impulsiveness, only simple and sober decision. "We cannot leave him to this fate...whatever it may be. I know it not, though I feel it vividly within

me."

"But the danger is too great," replies Cirien. "How could you ever make it to the palace unharmed?"

"I... I do not know," she breathes, turning away and looking out the window again. As she does so, the sounds of combat echo in from outside: the deathly cries of the vrû'ádach and the sound of metal against flesh...and the voices of living men. A moment later, a small company of soldiers appears at the far end of the courtyard, and Rórlain stands at their head.

"If anyone would wish to accompany me, it would be him," says Elmáriyë.

Cirien steps forward and looks out the window as well and then says, "I do not forbid you to go, but I worry for you. Take care, but make haste. I shall do all that I can here even as I anxiously await your return."

"Cirien...thank you," Elmáriyë replies, embracing him. "You know that I must do this."

"Yes, I do. May the divines go with you."

With this, she leaves the temple precincts, and the guards shut and bar the heavy doors behind her. The company that Rórlain leads, now thinned greatly in number, stands before her in the center of the courtyard, visibly exhausted and pausing for a moment to recuperate their strength.

"Rórlain! Rórlain!" Elmáriyë calls, running forward.

"Elmáriyë!" he replies, turning to her. "How fares the temple?"

"The vrû'ádach have not gained entrance," she replies, "though little more room do we have for refugees and the wounded. But why are you so far from your position upon the northern wall?"

"Is it not obvious? I was stationed there in expectation of an assault from outside the city. But now our enemy attacks us from within as well as from without. Half of my men I left at the north gate; the other half I have led to where you now see us, though many have fallen along the way." At these words, his face betrays an expression of intense anguish.

"I am sorry..." Elmáriyë sighs. "Are there any men who wish to seek refuge in the temple?"

Rórlain turns back to his company for a moment and then says, "Aye, there is one. He is badly injured and no longer able to fight." Then he steps into the group of men and lays his arm around a man whose face is covered in blood and whose torso is torn in rugged flaps of loose flesh, clearly by the claws of the vrû'ádach. "Neílas, here you shall seek rest and recovery and find hope to yet live through the night. Thank you for your courage."

The man, weak on his feet, steps forward and almost stumbles into Elmáriyë's arms. She and Rórlain both catch him and hold him up.

"Is it...is it not too late for me?" he asks, his voice frail, almost like the whine of a little child, though betraying deep underneath the courage of a

man sustaining him.

"That need not be the case," says Elmáriyë. "The healing vigor of the temple is greater than you yet know." Then, looking at Rórlain, she says, "I will bring him inside, but there is something I want to ask you."

"What is it?"

"Where shall you next lead your company?"

"We have no destination," replies Rórlain. "We walk through the streets and slay any of these creatures that we encounter."

"Then might we go to the palace of the hæras?" Elmáriyë asks. "Eldárien is there, and he is in dire need."

"How do you know this?" Rórlain asks, anxiety creeping into his voice.

"It is hard to explain," says Elmáriyë, "but even you felt the evil in the court of Gléndas, did you not?"

"I...I did."

"Then let us go before it is too late. He needs us; this much I can say with certainty. Will you trust me?"

"I do trust you, Elmáriyë," says Rórlain. "But you wish to go as well? The streets are a place of horror and death."

"Rórlain," she replies, a mysterious fire in her voice and in her eyes. "It is not a question of whether I go with you or not. It is a question of whether I go alone or whether you also go with me."

"I have a promise to keep and a debt to pay," says Rórlain. "And since this act is in full accord with leading my men in this battle, I have no hesitations at all."

"Then give me but a moment to help Neílas into the temple, and we shall depart," says Elmáriyë.

"I shall assist you," Rórlain says, and with this, he lifts Neílas into his arms. As he does so, he says to him, "Loathe not to be carried by another, my friend. You have fought bravely, so allow me at least to do this one thing for you. I look forward to seeing you again in the morning light, when, I hope, some peace has come for us again."

† † †

"What is your secret intent?" Eldárien asks. "You know that I would not hesitate to die if it meant saving the lives of these people. But you already intended to kill both me and them. Why then this farce of self-sacrifice when I am already in your hands and my fate lies wholly subject your whim? Certainly you do not need my permission to kill me."

"No, I do not need your permission," Maggot replies. "I can kill you if I please and in the manner that I please. I suppose you can call it a stroke of benevolence, an offer to give your death some meaning."

"I do not believe you."

"Well then, it is your loss. Shall I revoke the offer, therefore?"

"What do you gain by my free surrender?" asks Eldárien.

"Free surrender?" Maggot repeats, licking his lips in relish. "Ah yes, free surrender. That is what we all seek, that others will freely surrender themselves to our power. That they will subject themselves to us of their own free choice because they recognize our worthiness. So it is with your beloved divinities, is it not? You cower before them because they are greater than you and their brilliance dazzles your eyes. What a foolish thing to do. At least in my case, you surrender because you truly recognize that I have power over you, power over your life and your death, and power over the lives of thousands."

"But what do you gain by my death? What do you gain by any of this?" Eldárien asks.

"So very little, and yet so very much," replies Maggot. "I am surprised that you do not know. Your people have grown ignorant and lazy, forgetting both their past and its promises. But we do not mind, myself and my kind, for it makes it that much easier to steal from you your future. And I myself gain much from defeating, as we say in our tongue, the *lugbuch gordas lug*. But I must admit that I am a little disappointed. There is less savor in defeating an enemy who does not even know his true nature than there is in conquering him at the height of his power. But victory is victory, and having you and your people as my playthings, subject to my desires, is reward enough."

With this, Maggot turns away and paces across the room, uttering an incantation, a guttural chant with no pleasing melody and filled with dissonant notes, in a language that fills Eldárien's heart with dread and fear.

Quandas din creshas, burgusmandur,
quandas lug demdegas, argmashkandur,
quandas Dray askandur, Anay falteandur,
lors Unas dimindur kar les shekranur
mortegs, mortegs in agronis kar terganur.

Verdrex, roga, roga promkes, lug bucha,
bur verdex capagka maxor, crynucha,
lug faltye, faltye ab eroak, eroak eg eroak.
Lugbuch gordas lug, vardas in terganur,
lors din crynucha, kar mortga jonanur.

After his incantation has concluded, Maggot turns back to Eldárien and says, "I grow tired of this conversation, and I think that the time has come to revoke my little offer. For there is more pleasure in watching you die in agony at my hands whether you wish so or not, tortured by the awareness that there was nothing that you could do to save the lives of thousands of persons who

shall be slaughtered this very night."

He then raises a hand, claws poised, to run Eldárien through, and says, "Goodbye, *lugbuch.*" But at this very instant a blade passes full through Maggot's torso, coming out from his chest on the other end, having pierced his heart. Eldárien recognizes the blade as that of the lightbringer…but it does not glow.

Maggot laughs even more maniacally now, as if drunk with delight, and, turning his body in a fluid motion, swings with the back of his hand as if swatting an annoying fly, and Eldárien sees Rórlain fly helplessly across the room. The sword clatters to the ground with an echoing clang, and Rórlain strikes the wall so hard that he falls to the floor unconscious.

"Poor fool…" Maggot mocks. "Not just any can presume to strike down a great lord such as I. No, I cannot be harmed by the likes of you."

Then as he makes a move to turn back to Eldárien and finish what he had begun, another figure enters the room, like a blur of motion in the darkness, and the face of Elmáriyë appears in the dim light, the lightbringer held firmly in both of her hands. Her face, though wrought with fear, shines with resolve.

"Leave him alone!" she cries. "If you wish to destroy, then take me first."

Maggot looks at her with a subtly concealed rage. "Who are you to defy the Lord of Worms, petty filth?"

"The time of words has ended, you foul beast!" She raises the lightbringer high in the air, preparing to strike, but Maggot simply laughs.

"You are playing the fool, little girl," he says. "The blade you carry is but a trinket, a child's toy. Do you suppose that it gives you some special power? Do not interfere in things that you cannot understand. The light and the darkness both are too great for you, and you could never understand how light perpetually seeks to confront darkness, to give all to overcome it, and in the end is destined to fail utterly. That is the destiny of things: that light may flicker for a while yet, and then that darkness shall engulf all in endless night."

"I know not what lies within me to resist you, but resist you I must!" Elmáriyë cries, and suddenly a brilliant light bursts forth from within her, as if irradiating her whole body. Maggot recoils in anguish and tries to shield his eyes from the light. Elmáriyë, after overcoming her own surprise at this unexpected radiance, leaps forward and thrusts the lightbringer again into Maggot's flesh. And the sword burns with brilliant blue flame, and the creature of darkness dissolves at its touch.

"I shall…return!" he cries in a voice that grows distant even as it speaks, and then all is silent.

† † †

"You are bleeding badly," Elmáriyë says after dropping the sword to the floor and rushing to Eldárien. Immediately she seeks for a way to remove his

chains.

"I have a while yet before such wounds threaten my life," Eldárien answers, "but Rórlain, please tend to Rórlain."

Elmáriyë nods and rushes to Rórlain, slumped as he is against the wall. "Worry not," she says. "He is breathing and does not look greatly injured, merely unconscious."

"Good..."

"How shall I remove the chains about your hands and feet?" she then asks. "Is there a key to be found somewhere?"

"I know not," Eldárien replies. "I was unconscious when I was placed here and woke to find myself as I am now."

"And the wounds?" she asks.

"I was awake for those..."

"Oh, I am so sorry."

"There is no time," says Eldárien. "What is happening in the city? I hear much but have seen nothing."

"It is a slaughter, Eldárien, a slaughter," Elmáriyë breathes, anguish washing over her features. "The vrû'ádach simply appeared within the city, stepping out from the shadows as if they had always been there. And at almost the same time, the Imperial forces began to assault us from without. We cannot fight on two fronts, and both soldiers and civilians are falling in great numbers. The temple is flooded with wounded, and yet they die so fast that we cannot even keep up...and to go out and look for them is near suicide."

"But you made it here," Eldárien remarks.

"Yes. That is thanks to Rórlain and his company. They, along with many others, have been seeking to clear the streets of our enemy. Even while I was within the temple, I felt you, and I knew you to be in danger. And we thought that if anyone is able to do something to turn the tides of the battle, it is you."

"Not me...but..." sighs Eldárien, and then he looks intently at Elmáriyë and says, "You...you wielded the blade yourself. I know not how, but the light poured itself through you as it has done through me. And I rejoice in the fact, for without it I fear we would all be dead."

At that moment Rórlain awakes with a groan and looks around.

"Where is the beast?" he asks.

"He is gone," Eldárien replies. "We know not how, but Elmáriyë was able to destroy him with the light of the sword...though I think 'destroy' is too strong a word. I suspect that he has only been dispelled, cast back to his realm until he is able to return again in bodily form."

"He spoke, unlike the rest of the vrû'ádach," Elmáriyë remarks. "Why is that?"

"He is their commander, a being far superior to them," answers Eldárien,

"though I know not what that means."

"If their commander has been slain," Rórlain says, rising to his feet, "does that mean they have ceased their attack?"

"He said that they only move at his command, so it is possible," Eldárien says, hope coming into his heart, a weak spark that nonetheless, at the slightest sign of confirmation, shall kindle into flame.

"I still hear the signs of battle," says Rórlain, "but they sound dimmer now, more distant. Here, let us get you out of these chains and then leave the dungeons." With these words Rórlain pulls a ring of keys from his belt and begins to try them, one by one, on the manacles around Eldárien's wrists.

"Where did you come by those?" asks Elmáriyë.

"They were on a peg in the antechamber to the prisons. I am sorry, I should have told you that I grabbed them, in case something had happened to me."

"It matters not at this point. All has ended well."

"It has ended well for us...but I worry immeasurably for the rest of Ristfánd," says Eldárien.

One of the keys clicks in the lock, and the manacle holding his right wrist opens. Immediately, his arm falls limply to his side, and his whole body swings to the left. Elmáriyë catches him and tries to hold him up, easing the weight on his other arm until Rórlain has unlocked that manacle as well. In only a few more moments, his ankles also are free.

"My dear friend," Eldárien says softly, placing his hands upon Rórlain's shoulders. "Thank you. I would embrace you but my body is a mess of wounds."

"Let us bring you to a place where those wounds can be tended. You are not out of danger yet, and worse shall befall you if you do not soon receive treatment," Rórlain replies. His countenance is then suffused with tenderness and compassion, and he adds, "I have learned now what happened to the hæras. He and his entire court have been slain. Was it that beast?"

"Yes," Eldárien replies. "He was disguised as a man for many years, counselor to the hæras even beyond his other counselors. He is responsible for great ill in the court, and this whole plan has been of his devising."

"Then the fire in the ghetto too?"

"I suspect it was his doing, and the conflict between Gléndas and the Imperial counselor as well."

"Then I am sorry for my suspicions and the worry that they caused you," says Rórlain.

"You were not far off from the truth," Eldárien replies. "There was great evil at work in the court of Gléndas Medóra, but you imputed it to the wrong man."

"And I hope that I have learned my lesson."

"And I mine."

Rórlain nods silently to this and then returns to the earlier subject, "You look terrible. Did that creature do this to you single-handedly?"

"There is no one else left alive, I fear," says Eldárien. "Did you see anyone?"

"None."

"Come," Elmáriyë interjects. "We have said all that is fitting at present. If we do not manage to bring Eldárien to the temple soon, I fear greatly for him."

"Aye," agrees Eldárien, "but I shall need your help to walk."

Chapter Ten
At the Breach

As Elmáriyë, Rórlain, and Eldárien emerge from the palace of the hæras, they find the streets quiet and the light of dawn cresting the horizon in the east. The sun's rays paint the sky a deep reddish hue and its light refracts from the buildings of the city in a similar tenor as if it mourns for the blood that has been spilled this night. The company of men over whom Rórlain has command stand in the gardens of the palace as in a dream, exhausted and scarred, both externally and internally, while they await leader. "They are...they are gone," one of the men says as they step outside, as though he cannot believe it. "Have they fled once and for all, or is there another reason they have called off the attack?"

"I know not," replies Rórlain. "But right now I wonder how fares the battle at the walls. Have the Imperial troops also retreated with the disappearance of the creatures of darkness, or do they persist in the fight?"

None speak in response to this, for none know the answer.

Then Eldárien says softly, "Dawn."

"What is that?" asks Rórlain, looking at his friend whom he upholds in his weakness.

"It may be nothing other than the dawn," he explains. "I do not think that the vrû'ádach can take form in the light of the sun. And though the sky is still dim, betraying only the first rays of the day's light, perhaps it is enough."

"You do not think that the slaying of their leader has...?" Rórlain asks, though he does not finish the question.

"We may only know with the return of night."

"I don't..." says the same man who had earlier spoken, "I don't know if we can survive another night of this."

"You fought valiantly, all of you," says Rórlain, "and against horrors worse

than imagining. Many men and women have died this night, and yet we have also slain innumerable numbers of the enemy, including their commander. There is hope yet that we may drive them back and safeguard the life and security of this city. But for now, all of you, take your rest. Sleep if you can. I shall call upon you this afternoon."

"But what about the fight along the walls, granted that it still persists?"

"I do not want you to continue fighting after an entire night on your feet with weapon in hand. I shall call upon you at need, but it is important that you rest now. I desire for you to rest."

With this, the company disperses, and the men return to their barracks while the three companions make their way to the temple. Thousands of bodies litter the streets as they pass, the vast majority of which are the carcasses of the vrû'ádach, though mixed among them are men and women slain in battle or in flight.

"A great grief has fallen upon us this night," says Eldárien sadly, leaning upon his friends for support as he walks, though considering the extent of his scars there is little place on his body by which he can be supported without causing intense pain. He grimaces frequently as they progress, but his companions both remain silent while they support him as gently as they can, a gentleness, they know, of which he is vividly aware.

"Yes, we have great need of lament," agrees Rórlain, "but we also have need courage and clarity. For how shall we fight against an enemy for whom walls are as nothing?"

"It is not a fight that can be won with force of arms alone," sighs Eldárien. "But your question remains, the question that is indeed in the hearts of all."

When they come to the temple, Eldárien reclines in what little space they can find in a hallway while Elmáriyë begins to treat and bind his wounds. Rórlain continues to the northern wall to learn of the state of the siege. After Eldárien has been treated in the essential ways, Elmáriyë departs and busies herself with attending to the needs of the hundreds of other wounded persons who fill the temple precincts. Alone now, Eldárien closes his eyes and allows the warmth of the sun falling in through a nearby window to play upon his face, shining in through his eyelids with warmth of color tinted through the veil of thin flesh. A great silence falls over him, even though the hallways are crowded and echo with the voices of men and women and with their cries of pain. Soon he finds himself slipping from consciousness into a half-sleep, born of deep exhaustion and loss of blood, and of trauma and fear that have been long held behind a dam which now, with the easing of tension, bursts. And then, lulled by the sounds which feel so distant and yet so near —sounds of pain and anguish but also of love and care—he falls into a deep sleep.

He awakes to the feel of a cold cloth against his forehead. Opening his eyes he sees the kind face of Tilliána while she kneels over him. "It looks like you fought hard," she says.

"But the battle I fought was not with arms or skill of body," he says, his voice surprisingly hoarse. "Power and powerlessness entered into contest. And it seems that powerlessness is allowed to live yet, while power flees away."

"I wish it were so for all of us," Tilliána says simply, and Eldárien feels the great sadness within her.

"As do I. Maybe it shall be so yet...though for those who have departed from this life, another hope must be born beyond the confines of this world," Eldárien whispers, and then he asks, "What news of the battle with the Imperial forces?"

"They have retreated for the moment, though how far and for how long we know not. We expectantly await nightfall and the tidings it shall bring."

He nods silently and then, trying to focus his eyes which swim with the pain he feels, looks up at her, "How do you fare, Tilliána?"

"I have been spared the sight and feel of battle," she replies, "except in its ill effects. I have remained within the temple and have been busy tending to the wounded. It has been long since I slept, but there is no place for me to complain of my own exhaustion when so many face anguish and death."

"And what of your heart?" Eldárien asks. "Hope and despair, courage and fear fight in each one of us. Will you allow me to hear an echo of these in you?"

"Eldárien..." Tilliána lowers her eyes and turns away. "You are a great one, valiant and heroic. But we are lesser people, men and women who are frail and small, weak and limited. We do what we can, and most of the time we hardly know either what we are doing or how..."

"I am neither great nor special," replies Eldárien, trying to sit up and restraining a groan of pain as he does so. "We all walk the same path together, and though none of us are the same, we are all equal."

"But you carry the lives of many," Tilliána says, turning back to look at him. "Most of us cannot carry even our own."

Eldárien does not at first speak but simply looks at her in silence. After a long moment he asks, "What are you trying to say?"

"You are...you are a rock on which one could build a city, even a civilization, and you know it not. You hold our entire people within you as if they were your own...your own family and children, even your own self."

"I would debate whether you impute such capacity to the right person, or have traced stability to its true source. I also cannot even carry my own self, and find my own being and existence a burden too great," replies Eldárien softly. "But this does not mean that I can close my heart to others who elicit

my compassion and care. And regardless of whatever truth is present in your words, this does not make me a greater man than any other. Each one of us must simply live according to the gift entrusted unto us. And without being held by forces greater than we are, nothing can we ourselves hold, however small it may be."

"You are right, it is only..." she begins to say but falls silent. And when she has found words again, "It is only that I also feel called upon to give, to live, to bear something greater than I have yet known. And it scares me. The lives of many men intersect also in me, and it is a feeling with which I am wholly unacquainted, at least in this manner and this degree."

"So it is for all of us during these times, in which the very fate of our people shall be decided," says Eldárien, and he reaches forward and places a hand on Tilliána's arm. "But you are not being asked to be, nor to give, any more than you yourself are. The only gift that any man or woman is ever asked to give is the gift that they are and that they bear within themselves, and nothing else. Thus, when the gift wells up within one's very self, however limited or inadequate it may seem, there is no need to fear ever falling short through lack. The only thing to fear is infidelity and refusal of the gift. And even our fidelity is a gift, a gift in which I assure you of my support and my prayer."

"Yes, pray for me, Eldárien, for I feel so weak," whispers Tilliána, tears coming to her eyes. "For I have already lost so much. I fear loving again and letting my heart care for others, when so easily they can torn once again from my heart."

"I shall pray for you, Tilliána. And I shall be here for you," Eldárien assures her. "And lean on others in your weakness, for from that none of us need be bereft."

Wiping the tears from her eyes, she looks deeply at Eldárien, and a spark is kindled in her gaze and in her heart that is manifest through her gaze. "That I shall do," she says. "But please lean on me too. I ask you to do so. I want you to do so. Your words have helped me to understand. We are all weak and frail, and our hope lies not in strength." She falls silent again for a moment, as if thinking, grasping for the right words. When she has found them, she concludes, "Our hope lies only in love. Love is the only true strength that can confront such horrors of evil and hatred."

Eldárien in reply gently squeezes her hand and looks in her eyes with kindness, affection, and gratitude. The moment lingers between them as if time has paused to catch its breath, and then she rises to her feet and turns to another person to whom she gives her care.

† † †

His heart passes through nightmares of pain and loss as he sleeps, tossing and turning on his small pallet in the corridor of the temple. So fades the day,

and twilight fast approaches as he wakes from a fitful repose. Rising to his feet, Eldárien walks through the hallway, lined with the wounded left and right. His room, too, is filled with people, and the sanctuary as well. Only when he comes to the rœdra of Cirien does he find a room not inhabited by the warm bodies and strained voices of those seeking refuge or needing treatment. Rather, he finds Cirien sitting alone, his head buried in his hands as he leans against his desk. Just as Eldárien turns to leave, Cirien looks up, as if having heard him or sensed his presence, and says, "Ah, so you can still stand on your own."

"That is thanks to Elmáriyë's ministrations," Eldárien replies.

"She told me what she witnessed and what she understood, as far as she could," Cirien says, and then he gestures with his hand. "Please, take a seat."

Eldárien nods and does so, and then he asks, "Have you been able to rest?"

"So few have..." Cirien sighs. "I was as you just saw me. That is the only rest I have had, more of thought than of sleep. But for years I have slept little, though also little do I need. So worry not for me."

"Has Rórlain returned from the wall?" asks Eldárien.

"No."

"What about other news? Has anyone brought word?"

"Nothing has changed since this morning," says Cirien. "The Imperial troops remain at a distance, veiled by the woods. We simply do not know their intentions, though I am certain that all await with trepidation the return of night."

"I know not whether nightfall shall bring the vrû'ádach into our city once again," says Eldárien. "The commander of the vrû'ádach was dispelled, at least for the present. But how long until he is able to resume his command, I do not know. The creatures of darkness could easily return this very night and ravage the people once again, if they were to find another leader, or if their leader has returned, or even perhaps on their own power. It is all an enigma. And I fear that if they do return there shall be little we can do to stave off the destruction they bring."

"As we discussed, no power we now possess can dispel them for more than a time," Cirien says. "And even the light entrusted to you, though it undoes their making, does not hinder their being made again."

"That is true even of their leader. What would otherwise have been his unconditional defeat was only a temporary advantage on our part, or a hindrance on his."

"It could be no other way in his case," Cirien replies, "for I believe that he is immortal. Though visible form he takes, he is not like the others. Vrû'ádach he is not, nor mortal creature at all. At least if my suspicions are correct..."

"What then shall we do?" asks Eldárien.

"The leadership of the city is in ruins," says Cirien. "That beast slew the entire household of the hæras, correct?"

"I do not think a single person yet lives."

"Then we are both leaderless and without the means to conquer the beasts that assail us."

"And the troops outside the walls? How do their numbers compare with our own?" Eldárien asks.

"In that there is a bit more hope," replies Cirien. "The Imperial forces clearly intended to rely on the vrû'ádach for the success of their plans. Should the latter fail to return, there is a possibility, however slim, that we may yet hold them off. That at least is the word that I have received."

"But after how many days or weeks of siege?"

"Less than that, I think. Unless reinforcements come to aid them, the Imperial troops do not so far greatly outnumber our own, and we also have the entire city and its defenses as our ally and our support."

"So at present much seems to depend upon the vrû'ádach and their return?"

"Perhaps everything depends upon that." Cirien buries his head in his hands again, and Eldárien can clearly read his exhaustion and anguish, exhaustion not primarily from lack of sleep as from the pain of the heart at witnessing so much loss, suffering, and death. "You should find Elmáriyë and speak with her," Cirien continues without raising his head. "She is worried about your welfare and is also startled, it seems, by what happened when she wielded the lightbringer."

"Do you know why she too was able to harness the light?" asks Eldárien.

Cirien raises his head and looks deeply at Eldárien and says simply, "I do not."

At this Elmáriyë herself appears in the doorway of the room. Cirien smiles softly and says, "We were just speaking of you."

She nods to this but says something unrelated, "I came for you, because Énvald is dying, and I thought you might like to see him before he…departs."

"Yes, yes," Cirien says, his face grave. "I will go. But you two should speak sometime," he adds, gesturing to both of them.

"I am unable at present. And we know not what the night brings with it," says Elmáriyë.

"I do not mean now," Cirien replies. "But there may be opportunities yet."

"Is there anything in which I may be of assistance?" asks Eldárien, rising from his chair and turning to the door, where Elmáriyë and Cirien now stand together.

"Rest," says Cirien simply and firmly. "Many things lie ahead, whether tonight or another night, for which your hand and your heart shall be

required. Therefore recuperate and gain your strength while you may." And he smiles again, a smile which does not eradicate the pain marking his face but rather pervades it, saying, "We also simply care for you and wish for you to fully heal."

With that, he and Elmáriyë leave the room.

After they have gone, Eldárien says softly under his breath, "But how can I rest when night again descends?" He resolves in himself, therefore, to join in tending to others whose injuries are more grievous than his own, until weakness or fatigue take him and he can do so no more.

† † †

The company stands atop the battlements, silently at attention, while dusk gives way to night. They abide in readiness for what may come, though their presence is divided—inward looking and outward looking—unsure of whence the threat shall arise with the coming of the darkness. Rórlain, not unlike the rest of the men, is beyond the point of exhaustion, bereft of sleep for thirty-eight hours, hours which have proven to be some of the most arduous and stressful of his entire life. Were it not for fear and the desire to protect, sleep would likely take him where he stands. But instead, he is fully alert, and his senses are heightened as he listens and watches for the slightest indication of danger from both sides of the wall.

After the sun has hidden and his last lingering light has departed and yet before the moon has shown her face, a sense of dread comes upon Rórlain. Yet it feels different somehow than the fear stirred by the presence of the vrû'ádach. This, rather, feels like the intuition of impending danger, though from where he does not know. As he seeks to navigate this feeling or at least to push beyond it, the moon crests the horizon in the east and bathes the earth in her pale light. The darkness is thus significantly changed, from a formless mass of black to a kind of half-light in which many shapes both near and far are seen, even if their specific contours and nature cannot be discerned. And in this light Rórlain sees movement among the trees in the distance. Scanning the landscape with his eyes, he discerns hints of movement nearer as well, along the very slope that leads to the walls of Ristfánd.

"They move nearer to us now!" he cries. "Prepare your—"

But before he is able to enunciate these final words, the whistle of arrows sounds through the air, and a moment later they come falling down upon them like a deadly rain. Many of the arrows clatter against stone or stick fast in wood, and others strike the raised shields of the men upon the wall or in the courtyard. But others also find their mark, and the cries of injured men ring out around Rórlain.

"Wounded, withdraw!" he cries. "The rest, raise your shields or find cover! But prepare your bows!"

After another loosing of arrows from the enemy, Rórlain commands his company to send a volley in response, into what is now clearly the form of a large company of soldiers drawing near to the wall, their armor glimmering dully in the light of the moon.

They still besiege us, even though the creatures of darkness have not returned, Rórlain thinks, *or perhaps the vrú'ádach simply bide their time to appear at a more opportune moment.*

After a few more volleys, the Imperial forces have drawn to within thirty yards of the wall, and their shields are clearly visible in the moonlight, upheld, and littered with arrows. It appears that very few have fallen in response to the volleys loosed from the city of Ristfánd to deter them. This is discouraging but also understandable, since they have been until now at such a distance. Yet as if until this moment they sought to conceal themselves and now, for whatever reason, wish to reveal their location, innumerable torches are kindled. A long moment passes as he squints his eyes in the effort to see, before Rórlain realizes what is happening. They are igniting the tips of arrows.

"Draw now and loose freely upon them!" he cries. "Stop them from releasing fire arrows upon us!" Quickly he releases an arrow and then another toward the mass of men before them. Those around him do likewise. But it is too dark to see where the arrows strike. And then the Imperial bows are raised all at once, at a cry of command, and a moment later they fly through the air like shooting stars.

The arrows pass beyond the wall, high over their heads, and land deeper in the city behind them. "Why?" Rórlain cries out in frustration, though he knows that at this distance they cannot hear him. His question is addressed to no one, being but an expression rather of anger and pain. "Why do you aim as though to raze the city to the ground? Fight and take the city as your own if you must, but do not set it ablaze!" Nonetheless, some of the arrows have found their mark in the wood of pillar or roof, and soon the reddish glow of fire begins to tint the night air behind him.

Rórlain turns back toward the city for a moment and his heart screams within him at the sight of the flames. *But it is not too late,* he thinks, *for the flames can be extinguished, and the assault can be repelled.* Then, turning again to the north, he commands another volley of arrows. As he hears the voices of other captains to his left and his right, issuing similar commands further down the wall, he is filled with a vivid sense of his own smallness and insignificance in the battle. He commands so few men among those who defend Ristfánd, and they stand like a small point against a wide-crashing wave of Imperial might that seeks to break against the city and to bring it to its knees.

For another half hour the battle continues as it has until the Imperial tac-

tic changes: now the vanguard moves forward with shields raised, and in their midst are ladder-carriers, pressing on to approach to the wall and to surmount it. And despite the deflecting arrows of the soldiers of Ristfánd, not many moments pass before the loud clanging of the ladders against the wall echoes for a good quarter mile in either direction. They are raised up and land hard against the stone, and immediately the soldiers of the Empire begin to ascend. Since it is impossible to aim a longbow downward at such an angle, the defenders must rely instead upon javelins or stones to fell those now rapidly climbing. But despite their efforts, Imperial soldiers begin to crest the wall and to leap onto the battlements, swords drawn and swinging.

A man appears over the wall directly before Rórlain, leaping toward him, but Rórlain stops him with an arrow in the shoulder. Then he quickly hangs his bow over his back and draws his axe from his belt. Intense melee combat commences as the forces of the Empire flood over the wall. Now is brutal, face to face warfare between the highly-trained warriors of the Empire and the mostly ragtag militia of Ristfánd.

And soon Rórlain is forced to call out the command, "Fall back off the wall! We will be run down if we seek to make a stand here. Regroup in the courtyard!"

He then leaps off the wall to the south, a good ten feet drop to a bend in the stairs, and then sprints to the center of the courtyard, where many soldiers of Ristfánd stand at the ready. Those of his men who have not fallen at the edge of arrow or blade soon join him. As the Imperial forces flood into the courtyard, they fall in great numbers by the arrows of archers who line the inner wall of the city, the last line of defense before the streets of Ristfánd open before the invaders.

"Hold them back!" cries Rórlain, taking a step forward and again entering the fray, his companions in battle at his side.

† † †

Eldárien, having exerted himself caring for the wounded until his wounds began to bleed freely and his body to shake, retires to his pallet to rest. But even so, he passes fitfully in and out of sleep as the night wears on, too weak now to do more than sit or lie, as the intense trauma to his body and the great loss of blood at last overtake his ability to push on. But he is tormented by his incapacity, for he hears the sounds of battle in the distance and can do nothing to aid the men who make the defense, nor can he care for others whose labored breathing is audible all around him. One relief, however, he does have. The vrû'ádach have not returned, and the inner city is quiet. His inability to be of assistance to others begets in him a sense of powerlessness, even of guilt, even though he recognizes it as unfitting since the omission of the act lies beyond his choice. Others have fought. Others have died. Others

have ministered. But all he has done is remain chained to a wall and now lie, forced to bed-rest, on a pallet on the floor.

In this twilight of half-sleep and half-waking, he experiences anew the terrible evil with which he was confronted and which he escaped beyond expectation, an evil that threatened to crush him in body and in spirit. But the words of Maggot were folly. A higher member of his order, whatever such an order may be, would probably have spoken words more like to endanger Eldárien, to confuse his mind and break his heart; Maggot himself seems to have known little beyond violence and hate. But are such creatures capable at all of subtlety? Can they mislead by sweet lies and half-truths, or are they so blinded by the lust for power and their hatred of the light that violence alone can be their speech and their act? Now, at the passing of this thought, Eldárien feels keenly his own insecurity, the precariousness of his situation were he to rely upon his own ability and comprehension in the confrontation with the powers of darkness. For they are greater than he, both in intellect and in will, in mind and in capacity. And there was indeed truth in Maggot's words that spoke into fears and doubts in Eldárien's own heart.

Even for a moment under the impress of Maggot's words, the world had indeed begun to appear to Eldárien's eyes as a monotone gray shading to black, nothing but a half-light which was a compromise of light and darkness, in which all is night and the light of dim stars alone shines, a weak consolation and a weaker guide amid the fumbling efforts of man to find his way. Such a world horrified Eldárien, though it seemed to delight Maggot. And woe betide such a day when man and woman upon the earth would prefer a gray world to one in which dark and light are clearly distinguished, in which good and evil are named! Woe betide such a day when man would no longer believe in unadulterated goodness or would think that the blackness of evil had a rightful place to fellowship at the table of being. The heart of man, yes, the heart of man bears darkness within it, and darkness man often chooses. And he brings this darkness with him as he comes to the table of goodness, as he seeks fellowship with the light. It can be no other way. So too does a man who seek goodness discern in his heart the call to draw near to those who remain in darkness, burdened under the shadows of evil and death, and to sit with them at the table of the fellowship of compassion and love. But darkness remains an enemy, a threat not only to himself but to all that he loves, and he fights it within himself, divided within by his aspirations to ascent unto light and by his inclinations to debasement unto darkness.

What then to make of Maggot's words about the darkness that allows light to be seen, like the nocturnal darkness in which the beauty of the stars shines down upon the earth? As Eldárien thinks about this, exhausted in mind and body, he feels again the fear, the suffocating oppression, that he had felt when

Maggot stood before him. It is as though a dark cloud enshrouds him and begins to blot out the slightest capacity to think or even to feel his way forward toward clarity. His mind is paralyzed and he is unable even to fight his way through this paralysis. Instead, words fill his mind that seem so reasonable, so intelligible, that he finds himself inclined to assent to them as evidently true, as the key to opening the door of this prison of suffocation and finding space to breathe again. *You underestimate the importance of the darkness. Do not be a simpleton who cannot grasp the subtler matters of the heart and who hurts people simply because he clings so tightly to his own narrow path of self-righteousness, who cares more for his own peace of mind than he does for the welfare of all.* And yet in the very midst of these lies, even as they carry him forward toward absurdity, another train of thought introduces itself. And his mind follows it spontaneously, almost without choice, as if drawn along it by some mysterious magnetism. *Seek not the dark, but neither fear it. In order to care for others, in order to understand them and to walk with them and for them, you must embrace the darkness, you must accept it as a part of you, not a welcome guest but present nonetheless in the shadows of this fallen world. Only then can you be rid of the shame that weighs upon you each day, which binds and suffocates your heart. You must recognize the darkness, accept it, and yield it up to the light. Are you not burdened and hindered in your heart by inadequacy, feeling that you always fall short of an ideal that forever escapes you? It need not be that way if you accept the actual truth of your being, the truth of who you really are, rather than ignoring it and fleeing from it. Yield to the truth; only in recognizing the darkness within you, accepting indeed your desperate misery and need, can you become permeable to the light, a vessel of light, one in whom, at the very heart of darkness, light has shone, and conquered.*

This train of thought brings a sense of clarity and peace as it carries him forward, but it fades away as quickly as it has come and soon Eldárien finds his mind and heart sinking again into the murky ocean of lies that threaten to swallow him. The world again appears to him as mere half-light, which is in fact the victory of darkness without any hope for the definitive triumph of good. The promises of the light appear to him absurd and empty in comparison with the all-enveloping darkness, the oppressive and suffocating presence of the darkness that invades all things and violates them, until there is nothing left but darkness and loss. Turning this way and that in the turmoil of a confused heart and in exhaustion at the edge of sleep, Eldárien gradually slips from consciousness, and the half-light in which he has found himself, this voice of seduction echoing within the ears of his heart, gives way to the blackness of utter darkness. He lies, unable to move, upon a cold floor and sees nothing. He is naked in the darkness, helpless and alone. He opens his

eyes and looks around but can see nothing. He reaches out, but his hands touch nothing but empty air. He opens his mouth to call out, but no sound escapes. Panic fills him, as of one drowning under the crashing of waves or of one buried alive under the earth. But then, as if a sudden and unexpected dawn, a glimmer shines before him in the distance, a glimmer of light. And it draws near until it burns before him, almost within his reach. He stretches out his hand to it but finds that he cannot touch it. It is not however that it is too far removed...no, it is simply that the light is impossible to hold, impossible to grasp, however hard he might try.

"Why do you flee from me?" he cries out to the light. And to his surprise he hears the echo of a response within him,

I do not flee from you. But you cannot grasp me or possess me.

"What then?" he asks in turn. "I desire...I desire only you. With all of my heart. The darkness, it seduces, it threatens, but I...I hate it. I wish only for the light."

I know this. You need not tell me, for I see all that is within your heart, the good and the ill, the light and the dark. And light you do indeed desire, beloved and chosen.

"What then would you have me do? For the darkness is greater than I, and I know not how to hold to the light such that it is not taken from me."

You cannot protect the light on your own, child. But the light shall protect you. You cannot possess it, but you can yield to it. Reach out not to take. Rather, surrender yourself. Yield yourself to the light, not to possess, but to be possessed, not to hold, but to be held.

There is a pause, and the meaning of these words flows into Eldárien's mind and heart like gentle and sweet water, like the warmth of the sun breaking through thick clouds to warm chilled heart and body. And then the words continue:

Only in this way, with empty hands and open heart, little one, can you also hold to the light such that it fills you and flows through you, freely, into others. Held, you shall also hold. As Lightborn, you shall also bear the light, and in the light you shall learn to bear others, even in the most agonizing places of their darkness, as of your own. For it is not you alone who hold. For all are held; all are held by the light from the origin of time. This light is ever near even in the darkness of the night of life, and it shall shine fully with the coming of true dawn. And in this alone is found your security and your hope.

With these words the voice subsides into silence, and Eldárien slips into restful sleep.

Chapter Eleven
The Thinnest Thread of Hope

Eldárien's heart stirs him awake as deep anguish settles upon him as an incalculable weight begging to be borne. And were it not for the preceding peace, which even now does not depart, holding him at the very foundation of his awareness, deeper than thought or feeling, he would be crushed by the feelings that now flow into him. He sits up and leans against the wall, resting his head against the cool stone. The corridor is now quiet, filled with sleeping bodies and lit only by a few oil lamps along the walls, sending their flickering light in reddish-orange and casting long shadows on ceiling and floor.

At this moment, he hears footsteps approach and looks up to see Elmáriyë drawing near, her eyes flowing with tears and an expression of deep sorrow and pain upon her face. Without words, she collapses before Eldárien, and he draws her into his arms, burying her face against his chest. Together they silently hold and are held, as they carry the pain of a hurting city on the brink of collapse.

† † †

"Pull back! Pull back!" Rórlain cries in command to his men, knowing that resistance in the courtyard is no longer possible. If they were to remain, they would be hewn down to the last man. Therefore the remaining defense quickly withdraws beyond the arch of the inner wall, and behind them the heavy iron portcullis slams shut, closing out the Imperial forces, at least for the moment.

"The gate! Close the gate as well!" shouts a man near Rórlain, and soon a few soldiers push shut the thick wooden doors of the gate and lay a reinforced beam across it, sealing it closed. "Good! That shall hold them for a while. But it is only a matter of time until they bring the ladders to the second wall, if they do not break through the door first."

Rórlain takes a step away from the doors and draws in a deep breath, trying to lay hold of any thread of thought which could give him insight into what to do next. But he is interrupted by a voice from behind him, "Rórlain!" He turns and sees the commander, Hérsir, approaching.

"We have lost the outer gate and the first wall," Rórlain says as he approaches. "Only the second gate and the inner wall still restrain them from pouring like a flood through the city."

"Then you fare better than other sections of the wall," Hérsir answers.

"There are more defenses here, and so you have been able to hold them off more effectively. To both the west and the east, the single wall was all that held them. We fight now in the streets themselves."

"What would you have me do?" Rórlain asks. "I fear we have little hope to hold them off."

"We have no hope, my friend," says Hérsir. "Even though the vrû'ádach have departed, we have already suffered a fatal blow to our resistance. Our numbers are too thinned, and too many have been wounded or slain."

"What then can we do?"

"I go to request a parley," Hérsir responds. "I mean to surrender and to ask for peace."

"But they shall want the city," says Rórlain.

"It is better than allowing them to burn and slaughter until we are on our knees and have no choice except death or surrender."

Rórlain shakes his head in frustration. Nonetheless, after a moment of thought, he says, "I fear that you are right."

"There is no doubt," the commander replies, and, looking keenly at Rórlain, he says, "I am not willing to sacrifice my people." With this he turns away and ascends the stairway to the top of the inner wall and raises a white banner high in the air, crying out in words pleading for a cease in the conflict so that he may speak to the leader of the Imperial forces. It is a while before his gestures and his words begin to calm the combat that has now reached a frenzy of intensity between the two armies, like a ripple gradually spreading from those who stand nearby to those who are far away. But at last, everything becomes still and quiet, though the air vibrates with tension on both sides of the conflict.

Some words echo from across the wall, which Rórlain cannot hear, and then Hérsir descends the stairs that he had just climbed. "I go to speak to their commander," he says loudly to those around him. "I wish two captains to accompany me." Then, after a pause, he says, "Fûlting, Rórlain, please come with me."

"Aye, commander," says another of the captains from ten yards off, and he quickly steps forth from the crowd of men. His armor is stained with blood, though not his own, and he rests a heavy studded mace against his shoulder. In his other hand is a great shield with the crest of Rhóvas upon it. Upon his head is a leather helm plated with iron.

Next Rórlain comes to Hérsir and says, "I know not why you wish for such a new captain to accompany you, but I shall not depart from your side."

"Shall we foolishly walk into the midst of the enemy forces to speak with their leader?" asks Fûlting. "Why does he not draw near to speak to us?"

"He probably wishes to emphasize his power and to safeguard his own

well-being."

"By endangering our own?"

"Precisely, but we have little choice," says Hérsir. "I am sorry, but I do not think we are in a position to complain. Let us go." Together the men then turn to the wall and ascend the steps. There is no point of access to or from the wall from within the courtyard, and the enemy is unwilling to open the gate, so a rope ladder is thrown down, and they descend it into the mass of Imperial soldiers. These step aside to make room for them as their feet touch the ground, and then they part to make a path to the north, leading out of the city and into the plain.

"At least some honor still lives among the soldiers of the Empire," Hérsir says under his breath. "They restrain themselves from slaying us in cold blood."

The column between the Imperial forces leads the three men a hundred or so yards past the wall until they come to a halt before a man bearing the armor of a commander—glistening steel plate—with long hair braided on either side of his face and knotted according to his position. He is clean shaven though his face looks neither young nor old, only stern, proud, and immovable.

"Are you the commander of the Imperial forces?" Hérsir asks, with a slight bow. Though it pains him to do so, Rórlain joins Fûlting in bowing as well.

"I am," says the man, leaning upon his shield and looking at the men with satisfaction. "My name is Erinéäs Laréndæ, of the city of Authringhaem. Thence I hail, and long have my sires ruled over the people of that city and its surrounds."

"A true Imperial, all the way from Vælíria," Fûlting sneers quietly.

"The quarrelsome nature of your nation has necessitated my arrival," Erinéäs says as if by way of explanation. "Why do you continue to fight when you are so evidently defeated?"

"Why do you ally yourselves with inhuman creatures of despicable wickedness?" Hérsir asks in reply.

"Such was not my choice," Erinéäs says. "Not all orders originate in myself alone. I am a man under orders just as much as I am a man who gives them. Surely you yourself know this?"

"I do, and yet even so I come in the name of our people to plead with you to spare the lives of the citizens of Ristfánd, to spill no more innocent blood," Hérsir says vehemently. "If you do it not out of pity, do it at least out of strategic consideration. We wish to lose no more life unnecessarily, and we are willing to speak with you about the terms of our surrender, relying upon your clemency, whatever measure of that you may have."

"Surely you have already achieved your goal," Fûlting interjects. "The re-

bellion in the city has been crushed, and our will to stand against the Empire has been extinguished. There is no more for you to fear from us. Your duty is already done."

"What do you know of my duty?" replies Erinéäs angrily. "What do you know of our goals in besieging this city?"

"What other goals could you possibly have?" Fûlting asks.

"Quiet, Fûlting," says Hérsir softly, holding out his hand as though to calm his captain. He then speaks to Erinéäs, "Let us then converse together. What is it that you seek? Can we not come to terms peacefully?"

"I came to conquer, and conquer I must," replies Erinéäs shortly. "The only possible terms are your complete and unconditional surrender. The city shall be ours, held under total Imperial occupation, government, and control. Hence it shall be a base for our operations east of the Teldren and Yjind Mountains. And all men who refuse to join in the efforts of the Empire shall be punished severely." He then turns to look over his shoulder and says, "Jínda, step forward." A man who is clearly a lesser officer and secretary to the commander joins Erinéäs. Turning back to the three men from Ristfánd, he continues, "Where is the leader of your city, that we may make an agreement by which all must abide? That is assuming, of course, that you do not wish to continue the battle and assure the massacre of the entire population?"

"I already told you that we do not," replies Hérsir. "However, our leader and all his court have been slain. I alone, therefore, stand as the current leader over the people of Ristfánd."

"Well, that is an unexpected boon," laughs Erinéäs. "Not only have we taken the city, but we have beheaded the government of the entire clan of Rhóvas. For you are certainly not going to replace the slain jarl and lead these people in his stead. The Empire shall make the appointment, and in the meantime I shall assume all authority over the affairs of both city and clan."

"Perhaps you do not understand," says Hérsir quietly, "but the settlements outside of the city, both near and far, live and act mostly independently from the guidance or authority of the hæras."

"And perhaps *you* do not understand, but the leader of the clan has authority over them, whether he has in the recent past exercised it or not," Erinéäs says. "And the Empire has absolute claim over the entirety of the land of Telmérion, as you are our subject and a colony integrated into our governance. Whatever boons you have from your membership in the Empire would be forfeit were you to resist, and death only would be your reward. Perhaps, at long last, you are beginning to learn such a lesson?"

Hérsir is silent for a long moment, and then he turns to Rórlain and Fûlting. He looks at them with pain etched upon his features, and many things are exchanged between them without words. Then he turns back to the

Imperial commander and says, "Will you give us some time to discuss this among ourselves?"

"Discuss as you need, though there is little choice open to you," answers Erinéäs. "Report to me by midday tomorrow—or is it today? Yes, it is already past midnight. Report to me by midday, or I shall make plans to commence the attack with the coming of night."

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Tilliána, Elmáriyë, and Cirien sit together in the grandmaster's rœdra, taking advantage of a moment of respite in the early morning, just after daybreak, when most of those under their care are still asleep. The sounds of warfare fell silent sometime during the night, and yet no word has come to them concerning the state of the conflict. Many persons from the temple, in the nocturnal darkness, had assisted in extinguishing the flames that ignited upon hundreds of walls or roofs from the arrows loosed by the Imperial forces. But in the early hours of the morning this crisis had been averted and all had grown calm, falling into stillness, silence, and waiting.

"So much death, in flame and darkness and blood..." Tilliána whispers. "Never in my life have I witnessed such evil and such suffering as in the last few months."

"Did you behold the vrû'ádach with your own eyes?" Elmáriyë asks her.

"I did," she replies. "I was absent from the temple at the time that they appeared and could not but encounter them before finding refuge here."

"That I did not know."

"We have had little time to speak about anything these past days," Tilliána says. "But only by a thin thread was I spared being one of those who lie prone upon the floor of the temple, whether in injury or in death. The former indeed I fear more than the latter, for to join those who have departed before me is a welcome journey. But pain...pain scares me."

"How were you saved?" Cirien asks, breaking his silence until this moment.

"I was returning from dinner and conversation with Síga, an old friend of mine. Hearing the cries and knowing that the enemies were near the walls of our city, Síga encouraged me to stay with her family that night and to return to the temple in the morning. But I saw no danger, not knowing that the enemy—some of them, at least—could pass right through the walls and appear in the city itself. I was on a small side street when one of the creatures stepped forth from the darkness before me. I was more than fortunate at this moment that it was only one and not more. For I was alone and unarmed."

"You...?" Elmáriyë begins to ask, but she falls silent, though the import of her question is clear: You fought and defeated it?

"The fear of their presence is terrible," Tilliána whispers, "suffocating

worse than a coil around the neck or water in the lungs. It is a suffocation, not of the flesh, but of the inner person. I turned to flee in the opposite direction but immediately saw similar shapes—though farther away—appearing at the other end of the street. My mind nearly ceased its working in that moment, paralyzed with terror, but I looked around and saw a hay cart only a few steps away with a pitchfork in it. Suffice it to say that their...their horror is worse than their threat...or that most of their threat lies in the fear that they induce. It is hard to explain."

"I think we understand," Cirien says encouragingly. "They are unarmed and slow, and if a person is able to overcome the fear that they experience as the vrû'ádach draw near, there is a chance even for the untrained to fell them."

"Exactly so. That is, unless they come in great numbers or one finds oneself unarmed," Tilliána says. "And by the favor of the gods I was spared both of these. I needed only face a single one to clear the path of my escape."

"And that you did," Elmáriyë finishes for her.

Tilliána nods, saying, "And then I ran all the way here with my arms and legs trembling so badly and my heart pounding so violently that I feared I would collapse in the street. Once I was safe within the walls of the temple, and as the night progressed, I became ever more keenly aware of my fortune that I had been in the street when what was soon to become a flood was but a trickle." She looks at her two confreres with both pain and gratitude in her eyes and then says, by way of conclusion, "Twice now has both the precariousness and the preciousness of my own existence been impressed upon my heart. And in the very face of death, life has been handed to me."

"And I am deeply grateful that it has been so on both occasions," says Elmáriyë.

"I do question why, though," adds Tilliána. "I mean...why is it that I have been spared not once but twice, while so many others have fallen at the hands of men and beast?"

"Do you speak of anyone in particular?" Elmáriyë asks with as much delicacy as she can, thinking of Tilliána's husband and children.

"I...I do not think the pain of that wound, those many wounds, shall ever fully heal," Tilliána says after a long moment for thought. Her face is grave and lined with care and sorrow. "But at the moment my thought is occupied with the many who have suffered at the hands of those who lay siege to our city, those whose anguish and death we have witnessed almost constantly since the battle began."

"Such pain and such loss, so apparently senseless, raise profound questions in the heart," Cirien says gently, returning to the question which Tilliána had voiced. "The paths marked out before each person are far beyond our foresight or control," he then continues, not by way of providing some answer or

solution, but rather simply as an act of empathy. "Sometimes all that we can do is trust in a wisdom and a sight greater than our own, even if what appears before our eyes seems to be naught but folly or failure."

"I understand your words," replies Tilliána, "but it is hard to find any reason to trust when so many have their aspirations, their loves, and their very lives crushed by forces of evil or even by apparent random chance. How can such things be the work of goodness?"

"I do not say that such things are the work of goodness," answers Cirien, running his hand slowly through his beard, speaking in a voice that indicates that he has thought deeply about this (and felt it deeply as well) for many years. "But I do believe that none of it happens outside of goodness or its great weaving."

After these words, the three of them fall silent. It is a few minutes before anyone speaks again. Elmáriyë is the one to break the silence as she says, "The great festival of Sun's Height is only two days from now. It is a grievous thought to realize that it shall be a time not of joy and celebration but of mourning."

"Even more: it may still be a time of battle," adds Tilliána. "Many of us on that day shall recall the bright banners that clothed the city, and the songs of celebration both in the temple and in the squares, and the evening service in which Ristfánd has been again placed in the hands of the Seven, through the littlest one. And yet I fear that none of that shall exist this year except in memory, and so few of us, probably even less than now live, shall still draw breath even to lament on that day."

"Despair not," whispers Elmáriyë. "Perhaps ceremonial in lament is the most fitting disposition we can offer in present circumstances. And the heart of the festival has always been the service of entrustment. Certainly that need not be omitted even this year."

"But Tilliána also speaks truth," Cirien adds. "Joy has long been strength for many, and lightness and glad celebration. Were it within my power, I would wish to give at least some measure of this to the hurting people of our city once again. But it may be many turns of the moon before even a small spark is again kindled from the ashes to which war has nearly reduced us."

"Do you think, Cirien," asks Tilliána, "that we shall live for so many months that such a thing becomes a possibility? Is it even possible that in that amount of time anything will have changed such that sparks can arise from the ashes?"

"I know not the future, but I suspect that this battle shall soon cease," Cirien answers, "though it may not at all be with the outcome that we wish. Those who fight to protect our city are not fools; they shall not allow us to be slaughtered to the last man or woman, and neither do I believe that is the

Empire's intent. Nonetheless, the sparks may find it necessary to fight suffocating winds for a long time to come, and the flowers of hope and gladness may struggle against a biting chill for many years hence."

As another moment of silence envelops them, Tilliána's thoughts carry her to her husband and children, to Alsenór, Beïta, and Annár. Or rather, their faces arise before her interior vision, vivid and clear and painful, but also so very beautiful. It is a beauty that tears the heart and causes it to bleed. In this moment in particular, the absence of her two children feels like a gaping wound, like a hole in her heart as well as in her womb. So vividly does this experience strike her that she feels a physical pain in her abdomen, as if their absence from the world of the living, from the space of her love and care, is reflected in the aching hollowness of her womb, from which they came and in which they were first sheltered and nourished in their life and growth.

Tilliána is stirred from her thoughts, not by any words from the other two, but by the sound of footsteps in the hallway, followed swiftly by a knock on the door of the rœdra. Cirien calls out in response, "You may open the door." When it swings open, they all turn and see the faces of Rórlain and Eldárien as they stand side by side in the entryway. Rórlain speaks without delay and says, "They are demanding unconditional surrender by the middle of the day, or all shall be slain. I have no doubt what the commander shall choose, but I seek your counsel, Cirien, about the right path moving forward. Hérsir awaits as well, in the outer courtyard. We are filthy and stained with blood, and he does not wish to enter the temple as he is."

"The temple is a home for the unclean, and it is here that all can be cleansed, not fear sharing their uncleannesses like a contagion," the grandmaster replies. "But I understand the gesture and will go out to him." Cirien then rises to his feet, walks quickly to the doorway, and steps out into the corridor, shutting the two women alone in his rœdra.

They turn to look at one another, and their eyes meet and interlock for a moment which seems both to pass swiftly and to linger for an immeasurably long time. In the depths of Elmáriyë's gaze Tilliána sees something that she cannot name but which both challenges her and comforts her deeply, as if she is looking into wells whose depths she cannot even begin to discern but which are revealed even by the play of light upon the surface. In response to this gaze, and to her own surprise, she bursts into tears, and the words come to her lips, "I am afraid, Elmáriyë. I am deathly afraid..."

In response, Elmáriyë does not speak but simply reaches forward and wraps Tilliána in her arms, allowing her to weep in her embrace.

Many moments pass before Tilliána sits back to look at Elmáriyë again. And eventually she continues speaking, in a frail and wavering voice, "It is not only fear but sadness. I am so raw, and I have been given so little space to

heal from the prior wounds inflicted upon me before being inflicted with further wounds on top of them. And whatever progress I may have made before has all been undone, or at least so it feels. I feel like a total wreckage, like a ruin of broken pieces with hardly any unified personality to hold them together."

Elmáriyë nods at these words and opens her mouth as if to say something. But after a moment of hesitation, she closes it again. Tilliána, seeing her silence and guessing at least some of its import, continues speaking, slowly and with hesitancy, but clearly, "But even more painful than all of this is the awareness that my pain is not the only pain, that the evil I have suffered in my own life is not the only evil in our world. No, for our city is on the verge of crumbling, and our culture is threatened with collapse or destruction. So many lives, so many families, so many things both good and beautiful, are as if spat upon and besmirched by the violence of forces that I can hardly begin to understand... And for what reason? I do not know what drives the Empire nor what could possibly give rise to creatures of such inexplicable wickedness, creatures whose only purpose seems to be to kill and to inflict pain. And why would men, human beings like you and me, make a pact with them and join them in warfare against a peaceful people?"

"I wish I had at least a glimpse of an answer to the many questions that torment you, Tilliána," Elmáriyë whispers at last, when the former has fallen silent. "But all I can do is join you in the questions. Perhaps sitting with the questions together is not a waste of time, and our longing and our pain shall become a vigil of expectation that, even if a long time from now, will find an answer."

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Meanwhile, the men hold counsel together, though their counsels concern not whether to capitulate to the demands of the Empire but rather how to continue their resistance even though surrender is inevitable.

"I fear for our people," Hérsir says, his voice heavy and rough, not only from grief and sorrow but from shouting orders through the length of two nights. "I wish now that our leader, Gléndas, had commanded our people to flee to the east or even to take refuge with other clans. It would have been better to give up the city than to give up our people. Or at least many of them could have been spared. Then only some of us would be facing this terrible fate."

"I wonder if that course of action would indeed have been wisest," Cirien replies gently. "Many in fact did flee and take refuge elsewhere, and we know not yet what fate awaits them in the coming months. But you are correct in lamenting the losses our people have suffered."

"The walls did nothing to restrain the creatures, Cirien," Hérsir says bit-

terly. "Those beasts weakened us beyond repair, and even if they came not again for a second night, the damage was done. What we experienced was a massacre, and the only way to avoid it would have been for the people to flee."

"If they can appear at will within the city itself," says Rórlain, "then I wonder what prevents them from appearing just as easily within other cities and settlements. We really do not know if fleeing would have saved life, or if it would only have weakened our people further. I wonder if fleeing from such creatures is even possible."

"Fleeing from an Imperial army certainly is," Hérsir retorts, "and the vrû'ádach have come as the vanguard of the Imperial forces. That much is obvious. I appreciate your effort to find light in the darkness, but do you not see that terrible things have happened that could have been prevented if only we had known how to prevent them?"

"But that is precisely the point, Hérsir," Cirien says. "Had we known how to prevent them, we could have done so. But there was no way we could know such a thing. In the future, yes, we shall be able to act upon this newfound knowledge. But the past is no longer within the domain of our action. The questions before us now all concern the present and the future. What are we to do now? Given our current situation, what paths lie open before us? First, how can we save lives and prevent further destruction of our people? And second, how can we prevent the Imperial presence from crushing both our spirit and our struggle?"

"Yes," Rórlain says, "for it is clear now that the Empire wishes not just for the reestablishment of order, for our acquiescence to the power and authority of the Emperor. There is something more at work, something that I fear threatens the existence of Telmérion as we know it."

"Our real enemy," Eldárien begins, breaking the silence that he has kept until now, "is not the Empire or its forces, however great. The real enemy is the creatures of darkness, the vrû'ádach, and whatever other abominations we may have the misfortune to encounter in the future. We cannot ignore the Empire and its aspirations. That is true. But I suspect that, despite the goals of those in authority, goals of domination and power, the Empire is ultimately but a pawn to powers greater than even the mightiest of men or the most supreme of civilizations."

"Even if what you say is true," Hérsir answers, "it is simple truth that we must fight the Empire or learn to negotiate with it. We cannot simply ignore those who seek to conquer and occupy us, as you would have us do, in the name of fighting the real threat."

"You are right," Cirien says. "But Eldárien is right as well, and his words do not imply ignoring anything: he means rather that we need far-seeing vision, or at least minds inclined to the deeper meaning of the events unfolding

before us and around us, if we are to walk with wisdom the path before us. And this means that we must discern our response, our resistance, both to the demands and aspirations of the Empire and to the more hidden but more insidious aims of whatever controls these unearthly creatures."

"Does this mysterious personage have aims?" asks Hérsir. "Do they seek anything but death and destruction?"

Cirien sighs and rests his head against his hands for a long moment before replying. When he at last speaks, he says, "Those creatures whom you witnessed—the vrû'ádach—it is true that they are mindless beasts, capable of nothing but destruction. They are but tools. Weapons. Yet we should not underestimate or ignore the force that lies behind them and that perhaps even fashioned them. I fear that whoever or whatever it is, it in fact possesses an intelligence greater than our own and powers far beyond our comprehension. Even beyond all the might of the Empire, this is what we should fear and the threat against which we must steel ourselves."

"I agree with Cirien," Eldárien says. "Through circumstances that are as painful as they are fortunate, I have spoken with the one who called himself their 'commander,' and he is a being with mind great but twisted, and a being of incredible evil and power. Yes, I fear that he is a being more akin to the gods than he is akin to humankind."

"Akin to the gods?" Hérsir cries. "What do you mean by this? Are we fighting celestial powers in the very domain of earth?"

"Long has every man done precisely that in the depths of his own heart," replies Cirien. "Our battle is never merely with ourselves or with other men, however blinded by the lust for power they may be. Men we must seek to save even as we resist them. But the horizontal battle—the battle across the face of Telmérion, between man and man, brother and brother—is never the only battle. Vertical lines intersect this horizontal plane at every step of the way, though they as a rule remain invisible, using the cloak of darkness and our own apathy as their primary tools. Little has changed now but that these forces choose to act visibly and to work not only in the shadows but to step forth and wage war against us openly."

"But why?" Rórlain asks, his voice strained. "My heart is burdened by the question. Why, if these beings you speak of are always seeking to besiege us, do they only now make themselves present in the way that they do?"

"That is a question to which I do not know the answer," says Cirien sadly. "But I suspect that precisely one of their main tactics is to preoccupy us with a thousand unanswered questions and thus to prevent us from asking the question that most truly matters. This is the question of our fidelity to the light in the face of darkness and of our resistance to the assaults of evil which threaten all that is beautiful and good in the world. I would also add, Rórlain,

that even if you have no memory of such creatures ever walking visibly in our world or openly interfering in the affairs of mortals, this does not mean that nothing like this has happened before. Much in the past has been clouded in the shadows of forgetfulness or has been twisted by memory, intentionally or unintentionally altered. And I shall study the past, shall contemplate what has come before, in the desire to find light for the present. But it remains true that the only thing that we can do is to try to discern the way of the present and the future, and to not allow ourselves to be distracted or disillusioned by the myriad questions that, while valid, either simply have no answer or lead us away from focus upon the true struggle that lies before us."

"You say the same thing again and yet again," Hérsir replies. "Has wisdom so forsaken you that you have no more to say than this? Give wisdom concerning the present rather than insisting again and again that the questions we ask concern the present. Of course our questions concern the present! But we need guidance and light, not the repeated insistence to ask the questions that we are already asking." The commander's voice betrays anger, a temper that is on the edge of breaking entirely, though under this anger is a thick strain of fear.

Cirien simply nods silently and says, "Then what is the question that you ask, commander?"

"How can we continue to care for our people when the Imperial forces occupy Ristfánd and indeed claim rule over the entire clan of Rhóvas?" Hérsir says, reigning in his temper. "Any open resistance shall be met with severe punishment. This much the enemy commander has made clear. But I myself cannot capitulate to such a demand. I cannot play the friend to the enemy. Should I depart now from the city, or should I remain? For either way, I am an enemy and a threat, and they shall know it; and therefore I shall remain also a target."

"The same is true for all the forces of resistance within the city," Rórlain adds. "We can either leave the city to its fate and seek to regroup with others who stand against the Empire, hoping someday to retake the city. Or we can hide our resistance in the shadows and seek to undermine the rule of the Empire from within."

"I fear that the only result of the second course of action would be death," says Cirien.

"But the only result of the first course of action, at least in the immediate future," Rórlain rejoins, "is abandoning the people of Ristfánd to the unhindered influence of the Empire and its goals."

"My path, then, is clear," Hérsir says. "At whatever threat to myself, I shall remain in Ristfánd. Little shall I be able to do openly, and perhaps my life shall be cut short even if I exercise caution. But I cannot simply abandon our

people to their fate."

Cirien looks deeply at the commander for a moment, as if gazing into his heart through the eyes of his body, and then says, "I see that you shall not be dissuaded from this path. And I know not whether it shall indeed prove to be best for you and for our people. But I caution you to remain hidden. It would indeed be to your benefit if the Empire thought that you had fled this very day. They shall then expect you to return with a rebel force to attempt to retake the city, while in truth and in secret you operate underneath their gaze. Their expectation shall be turned outward, whereas you can tend to the people and support their resistance from within."

"This path is true and wise," Hérsir sighs, his tension beginning to subside at last, even though he seems almost to begrudge his agreement with Cirien. "I am glad we have come to some sense of purpose regarding my path. But it is fraught with danger. Indeed, it appears to me impossible. It is more likely that I shall be discovered within the first fortnight and put to death than that my efforts shall bear any fruit."

"Patience shall be your weapon more than anything else," Eldárien says, "patience and trust in the goodness of the people...trust in their goodness and their desire for freedom. If anything, you are their custodian and the protector of their rights. But this means that your desire for rebellion, or for the immediate departure of the Empire, must be subject to the protection and well-being of the people. Like a seed planted deep in soil, we must set our hopes in the future by doing the little that is within our power now."

"You shall remain and aid me, will you not?" Hérsir asks, his question directed not to one man any more than another, but to all alike.

"I would like to do so," Eldárien answers, "but my path leads me elsewhere. There is a seed too that I would plant. But the seed that I wish to plant must first be found, if the future we hope for is to come to pass. I am of course aggrieved to leave at a moment such as this, when the men and women of Ristfánd are bleeding under the agony of so much loss and suffering. But the way before me is clear." He then proceeds to explain to all present both the light that has been entrusted to him and the significance of the previous conversation that he and Cirien had shared concerning the "lightborn" and the secret forest of Velási. He conceals many intimate details but gives enough information that they can grasp the situation.

"I have witnessed the power of this light with my own eyes," Rórlain says when Eldárien has finished speaking. "And what Eldárien says is true: it is the bane of the creatures of darkness. They dissolve at its touch. It may indeed, therefore, be the best hope that lies before us...and perhaps the only hope. I find great courage in this, as it shows that even though unearthly forces assail us, so too unearthly forces come to our aid. Let us be custodians of this light

and wield it rightly."

"You think it shall ever be wielded by more than one man?" Hérsir asks, immediately attaching himself to the most obvious question. "Is there a way to harness this power that we may all wield it against our common enemy?"

"That is one of the things that Eldárien goes to discover," Cirien replies. "He has no foreknowledge of what awaits him or even any certainty that he shall find what he seeks. But he must walk into the unknown nonetheless, in the blind hope that an answer awaits him there, an answer not only to the questions of his own heart but to the anguish of our people. But such blind hope is in fact anything but blind, even if it sees not a single step ahead. The earth may be shrouded in darkness, but this does not mean that the starry firmament ceases to shine and to mark out the way."

"This Velási Forest..." Rórlain begins, hesitantly. "Do you really believe that answers lie there, answers that justify leaving the people of our land alone in their desperate plight?"

"The people shall not be abandoned. Are there not enough good men still to remain and resist? Not all who care for the people of Ristfánd, for the people of Telmérion, shall depart," Cirien replies. "Eldárien goes, and a select few shall go with him. The rest shall continue as they did before he arrived, even if he hopes to return to bring light into the darkness of our time."

"But that is the problem," Rórlain sighs, "it *does not* continue as it did before we arrived. For now the Empire lays its heavy hand upon the people, a hand that, as far as I can see, is placed only to crush and subdue."

"Subdue, yes," Cirien says, "but as long as it does not crush us entirely, there is hope that we may yet throw it off, resisting the yoke the Empire would place upon us. And we must be aware, as Eldárien has said, that a threat greater than the Empire is at work here, and that it is this above all against which we must be prepared to fight."

"If you wish to remain, Rórlain," Eldárien says kindly, "I encourage you to do so. I see that your heart lies with the people and with the resistance that men like Hérsir shall give against the might of the Empire. I go into the unknown with only faith and hope as my guide, and I need few companions for such a journey. On this path, few are just as good as many, and friends of the heart shall do as well as or better than an army."

Hearing these words, Rórlain is visibly conflicted. "I..." he begins but then falls silent, needing to wrestle within himself before he can give voice without. When he does at last speak, he says, "But am I not a friend of your heart, and have I not made an oath to go where you go, to protect your life with my own?"

"You are indeed such, Rórlain," Eldárien replies. "But I free you from such an oath, my friend. Follow where your heart leads. Upon this I insist."

Rórlain presses his fingers against his brow as if is to rub out feelings of frustration or confusion and then says quietly, "I shall need some time to think about this before making a decision."

"That is only right," says Eldárien, "but know that you have my support, whichever path you may choose."

"I have given my counsel," Cirien says, "but now my own path also becomes clear. And it is not the one that I expected. I assumed that I would remain in the city, but now my heart speaks clearly in a way that I simply cannot doubt or ignore. My path lies with Eldárien. And Elmáriyë shall go as well. At least the three of us shall depart, and we shall do so with haste since our business is so pressing, and since we do not wish to alert the Empire to our movements, though I doubt that a handful of travelers shall awaken any suspicion."

Rórlain nods at Cirien's words, trying to gauge their import for his own decision, but he does not speak.

"Who shall take your place as grandmaster of the temple?" Hérsir asks, looking at Cirien.

"I shall remain grandmaster," he replies, "though there is another whom I trust wholeheartedly to act as vicar in my place. You know him: Ilmaël Herínthas. He shall support you as I have done until my return, if return the gods grant me."

"It causes me pain nonetheless," Hérsir says, "that our people shall be left without your support, to speak nothing of the others whose support has been forever taken from us. For our hæras is gone, and I, the rightful custodian of the people of this city in his absence, shall go into hiding and concealment."

"It is your part, Hérsir," Cirien replies calmly, "to find and counsel those who can continue to guide our people, to support them in their pain, and to encourage their firmness and wisdom in resisting the Empire. We alone are not the sole guides and leaders of our people. You do not walk alone, nor need you for a moment consider doing so. I shall speak with you privately about others on whom you may lean and whose assistance you can most certainly expect. But for now, it seems that our counsels have led us to a path —or rather paths—that promise some hope for the future, for the people of this clan and the people of Telmérion, though the hope is slim."

"It seems a fool's hope," Hérsir mutters under his breath with a tone of profound discouragement.

"Sometimes perhaps that is the only hope that remains," Cirien answers just as quietly, though in a far different tone.

Chapter Twelve
A Festival of Mourning

The festival of Sun's Height comes with tears and mourning and the painful experience of the beginnings of Imperial occupation. The palace of the hæras is converted into the dwelling of Erinéäs, second commander of the armies of the Empire in Telmérion, and from here he exercises his authority with an iron hand. The first thing he does is to forbid the evening service of dedication that concludes the festival, saying that Nirániel is a goddess solely of Telméric invention and nothing but a figment of the people's imagination. He says that while the Vælírian Empire recognizes the Six, the fashioners of the cosmic order and guardians of life, they reject any others, whether an equal and companion to the Six, such as Nirániel, or one who supposedly stands behind or is greater than the Six.

Pained by this ban and yet grateful to be allowed at least to offer a funeral and memorial service for the many who were lost in the battle, Cirien speaks to the people of fidelity and resistance, of patience and hope. He knows that Erinéäs, whose diplomatic advisor attends the service, will not be pleased with his words, but he hopes, if not for clemency, at least for the animosity to be directed only toward his own person and not toward any of those who listen to him. For Cirien shall soon depart from the city himself, and he cannot refrain from encouraging the grieving hearts of those who have been entrusted to him and who now find themselves facing an interminable occupation and fear of forces of evil deeper than they could have guessed even in their darkest nightmares.

"Over four thousand innocent civilians have died in the last four days," Cirien says at the end of his address, "and almost equal that amount of warriors have been slain in battle. How can we not grieve at this irreparable loss, at this violation of the dignity of life, of family, of city, and of clan? We have lost brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, sons and daughters, friends and neighbors. We have lost so many who are dear to us, and the wounds of this loss shall remain always as a reminder of our love, our love for them and their love for us—and of the love that has joined us together. And we have encountered terrifying darkness also, horrors unimaginable, and how can our hearts not be afflicted with fear? How indeed can our hearts not be angry and confused? But I urge and advise you: now is the time for peace and prayer, for patience and hope. The great battle that lies before you now is the one that occurs in the secret spaces of your own heart.

It is here that you must ask yourself: 'What do I believe? For what do I stand? What does the voice within me demand, the one that calls me higher, to nobility, justice, light, and good?' Only when these questions are asked and to some degree answered, can you begin to discern the path of hope and desire unfolding before you.

"Do not despair. Yes, by all means weep, lament, and mourn. Ask the questions of anguish and pain that your heart wishes to ask. Cry out to the gods in your confusion and anger, if you must. But recall that the rebellion asked of you is not toward the guardians of your life, who have only ever cared for your well-being and watched over every moment of your existence, as is their place and their delight. You must rather rebel against despair, against the seduction of hopelessness born of grief. I repeat: the battle is within. Fight this battle with all your heart, relying not on your own strength but turning to that which is greater than you and which shall sustain you. Fight this battle, the battle of hope against hopelessness, of longing over despair, of light over the darkness that lives within every one of us and seeks to overcome us and make us slaves to itself. Fight this battle, and every other battle shall, in a way, already be won. Prove victorious in this contest, and every other path, as arduous as it may be, shall be held in that great victory that precedes all, and, in preceding, also carries all else within itself."

After this his voice falls silent, and Cirien gestures for the service to continue. The crowds stand outside the city walls, looking to the southeast, upon an open field that is now filled with columns of the dead laid out upon burial pyres. Those who are not too horribly disfigured to be left uncovered face upward to the cloudy sky, through which the sun dimly shines as if veiling its light out of reverence for the dead. Others are covered in pale or white cloth from head to toe, and only the hint of their figure can be discerned, hands upon the breast and body arranged with dignity, awaiting the flames that will consume all as a burnt offering, turning the body to dust that shall be carried away upon the wind to faraway lands or shall sink into the soil to nourish the land of Telmérion.

The voice of a cleric from the temple of Meléngthar echoes throughout the plain, and the people hearken to his words as he offers the final prayers of departure for the deceased. And then many men of the city guard, with torches in their hands, go among the columns and ignite the burial pyres, one by one, until the whole plain is filled with the dancing of flames and torrents of smoke spiraling and twirling up into the sky, whence they mingle with the clouds and create a dense covering over Ristfánd and its surrounds. To Cirien's eyes the dense clouds of smoke look almost like thunderclouds, low-hanging and full-to-bursting, not however a gift of the heavens nourishing and fructifying the earth, but a gift of the earth to the heavens, a sorrowful

offering made with pain and lament, and yet with the spark of hope for the mystery that lies beyond death.

Tilliána, standing near the front of the crowd, feels the heat of the flames upon her face, and it dries her tears even as they fall; and the smoke burns her eyes and her nose as she sobs. She turns her face away, not only from the heat and smoke but from the whole ritual, from the flames, which she has come to despise, and from the death and loss, which have not only touched her life but have filled it to bursting with grief beyond measure. Fire once meant the warmth of the hearth of home, around which family would gather, and the gentle light that danced on walls and floor and face, illumining the night. But now fire means the threat of death; it means loss and destruction; it means the voracious appetite of evil to consume the living until there is nothing remaining. Overwhelmed by this feeling, Tilliána turns to leave, attempting to weave her way through the dense crowd of mourners and back to the city, or anywhere, anywhere far away from this place of death. But as she does so, she finds herself walking straight into Eldárien. Seeing the deep and rugged scars on his cheek and the sober glistening in his eyes as he looks at her, she simply collapses, unsure of whether it is exhaustion, despair, or surrender. He catches her to prevent her from falling to the earth, and, to her surprise, without any need for words, he leads her away, through the crowd, in the opposite direction of the burial pyres.

Soon they are walking through the trees around the south side of Ristfánd, the walls to the northwest, with thousands of voices echoing melodies of lament behind them. Tilliána is in too much pain to speak, and she simply walks at Eldárien's side, following wherever he leads. Their path winds through the woods, the trees gently stirring in the breeze, a welcome breath of air from the sea, though it mingles now with the pungent odor of smoke from the burning bodies of thousands of dead. Tilliána tries to turn her mind's eye away from the faces of those she has lost and from the nagging thought of the sheer number of people that have been slain in the last week. But she cannot do so. Is this what war is like? Is this what the future holds for her and for the people of Telmérion? It seems no more than a losing battle against the might of an Empire whose only care appears to be power and domination, the expansion of its rule over other nations, and a battle against forces far worse, and far more dangerous and more despicable.

Eventually they come to the ocean and find themselves standing on a wide shelf of stone three or four yards above the surf, which swells against the rock with a rhythmic crashing, sending salty spray into the air with every new surge of water against land. Silently they look out across the ocean as the waves roll in their ceaseless cycle, the breath of the sea churning up from its depths as it exhales to the furthest periphery until it meets the land, still and unyielding,

or its heartbeat sending forth the circulation from the hidden heart of the ocean to the surface of frothy sea-skin, where water and land kiss in the ceaseless rhythm of the two elements, ever set in opposition and ever set in complementarity. The sheer expanse of the ocean's surface, ever moving and never still as far as the eye can see, somehow eases Tilliána's sense of being trapped, of not having enough room to breathe. She finds herself exhaling deeply and then drawing in a breath of clean air from the sea breeze. Her tears have ceased to fall now, and her sobs have stopped racking her body, but she aches all over and feels almost too weak to stand.

Without words or even turning to look at Eldárien, she allows herself to sink to the ground and sit upon the shelf, letting her feet hang off its edge. He silently joins her, and she looks at him for a moment, enough to see him folding his hands across his lap and looking out over the ocean, the wind stirring his long hair and the sun glinting in his eyes. Then she turns away and closes her eyes, this time not to escape nor to hold back tears but simply to sink into the sound and feel of the ocean, whose ceaseless music reaches out to enfold and comfort her. A long while passes and she begins to sink into sleep, only to be stirred awake by Eldárien's soft voice.

"I would wipe away your tears, Tilliána, were it within my power. I would wipe away the tears of all the people of Telmérion, and all those in all the ages of the world who have ever wept in loss and grief. But all I can offer is my meager consolation and my humble promise: I shall do everything that I can to bring an end to the darkness that assails us and to prevent more tragedies like this from occurring. But even then...even then, there is something more. If the pain of loss cannot be avoided, and if the scars of grief come regardless, then I hope that I can be a vessel of healing light, an instrument of consolation, for those in pain, that hope may be found even in darkness." He pauses, and the silence between them is pregnant. "I depart soon, within a day or two, for the west. I pursue the truth of a promise or a hope of light that may yet have the capacity to dispel the darkness of our time. For reasons beyond my comprehending this light has been entrusted to me. It has...gripped me. And now my heart has become a meeting-place of light and darkness. I wish that I could stay, could bear the pain of these people, if such bearing could ease their burdens and bring them life. But I must depart, for only a light much greater than any of us now possess can dispel the shadows that descend upon us. It is perhaps indeed a path of folly...to leave the city now, to leave the war behind, and to walk paths untrod. But I must do this, and the voice of Hiliána draws me silently, who once spoke to me in a place of darkness and named me 'Lightborn,' entrusting me with her sacred fire with which to purge the creatures of darkness."

Though she cannot explain it to herself, Tilliána finds comfort and con-

solation in Eldárien's words, an encouragement deeper than she would have found in words spoken directly to her concerning her own loss and pain. It is as though at this moment she needs, beyond her own awareness, simply to be swept up in something greater than she is, to make contact again with the current of life flowing ever onward in its aspiration toward goodness and beauty beyond the destructive forces of evil and death. "Where are you going?" she asks, opening her eyes and turning to look at Eldárien.

"To an ancient forest, the only known place in which the title 'lightborn' has ever been used," he replies. "It is called Velási. None of this did I know until Cirien revealed it to me. I was as ignorant and out of my depth as you are. But I trust Cirien's words and his wisdom deeply, and I take solace in the knowledge that he shall be accompanying me on this journey. Elmáriyë shall as well." He looks at her with compassion in his eyes and says, "I tell you this because I know that you too take great solace in the care of Cirien and Elmáriyë, and I feel sorrow and regret that they shall be leaving now with my own departure."

Hiding her own feelings, all that she says in response is, "And your companion, Rórlain, does he go as well?"

"I know not yet what he shall decide, whether to accompany us or to stay and aid in the struggles that lie before the people of Ristfánd."

"Why do you tell me all of this?" she asks.

"It is as I said: I regret leaving and taking with me those who have become, as it were, a new family for you in the loss of the family that you have long known."

She is moved by his words, surprised that he speaks with such understanding of something that she has not even acknowledged to herself until this moment. But what he says is true: Elmáriyë and Cirien have become as her new family, and, in the hospital under the care of Elmáriyë and later in the temple of Nirániel, she has found a space of security and healing that has given her a sense of belonging that she feared she would never find again.

"I suppose...I just want to apologize," Eldárien says, looking at her. "I rejoice that life has been given to you again, but I mourn that you must suffer yet another loss, this time at my hands or at least due to my presence. If I could, I would never harm you or cause you suffering in any way, but only bring you peace and comfort and newness of life, as I was granted once, where the flames of death gave way to hope beyond hope."

A long moment of silence stretches between them now, the sound of the waves alone filling the air, before Tilliána speaks. She says, "But there is another way. Bring me from the fires again one more time and allow me to accompany my new family wherever they may go."

Concern fills Eldárien's eyes, and he replies, "The path is dangerous and

uncertain. I know not what awaits us. I fear to bring you along."

"Could it possibly be more dangerous than remaining here?" she asks.

"Easily so," he answers without hesitation, but then his face softens. "But of course, if that is your wish, I am in no place to prevent you. I leave the decision to you, to be resolved within your own heart. But if you come, then I shall be your guardian. And I know that they, too, shall care for you, as they have done until now."

"Then it is decided," Tilliána says after a moment of thought. There is no doubt within her, and she feels a thread of clarity, thin but strong, emerging in her darkness once again. "I know exactly what path I must walk, even if we see not where that path leads."

Eldárien simply looks at her and nods silently, as if accepting this resolve and giving in response the guardianship that he has promised.

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"I would greatly appreciate if you stayed with us," Hérsir says to Rórlain as they sit together in the former's house, his wife and two children in an adjacent room. "I need all the aid I can find in resisting the Imperial occupation and doing so with subtlety and tact rather than open force—at least until open force again becomes feasible. You have shown yourself willing to fight for the cause of Telmérion and her freedom even in the face of greatest conflict. I would be glad to have you at my side."

"That is why I have come to speak with you, commander," Rórlain replies.

"Then you shall be staying?"

"I came rather to ask for your advice and perspective, as my decision is not yet made."

"I see," says Hérsir, leaning back in his chair. "You still wish to follow the man Eldárien?"

"My journey was never ordained to stop here. I came to Ristfánd only out of necessity, in the hopes of lessening the blow that the Empire intended to inflict upon the people of the city and to save human life, were it possible. That goal has only in very small measure been accomplished. But despite that, other things bind me more than my desire to aid in the resistance that is now so clearly needed, given the Imperial occupation and the heavy clouds of danger and suffering that, with this, fall upon all of us who remain in the city or even in the land of Rhóvas in its entirety." Rórlain pauses and sighs, as if reaching deeply within himself in order to draw out the adequate words to express what he wishes to say. "You see," he continues, "the threat that falls upon us now endangers not only the clan of Rhóvas but the whole of Telmérion, and indeed perhaps the entire world."

"But how else can you better fight than here, where the Empire's arm reaches out to claim more control, more territory, and more power?" Hérsir

asks. "I understand that you could wish to travel west, across the mountains, in search of this 'light.' But is not the conflict here just as important, and perhaps even more dire, considering the crushing defeat that we have just suffered?"

"They are both important, only in different ways. But my destiny has been bound up with Eldárien Illómiel," Rórlain says quietly, "who saved my life in a place where it was all but lost. There is now a life-bond between us, which I have until now had every intention of repaying until the end of my days, whether that end be peaceful or violent, prematurely cut short or at the end of long decades of peace. But it is not only the bond of life that ties me to this man, but also the awareness that he too fights for the people of Telmérion and that he does so with a gift that may prove to be the last remaining hope of all of us."

"Is it really true that he slew the commander of the vrû'ádach, their inhuman leader, and prevented them from returning to besiege the city a second night?" asks Hérsir.

"It was not he but another, though he spent an entire night in conflict with this creature of darkness," says Rórlain.

"What then happened?"

"It was a young woman who slew the commander, or rather sent him away, for if we understand aright he was not slain, but only dismissed," says Rórlain. "But she did so using the sword that belongs by right to Eldárien and that was entrusted to him. Concerning this, he has already spoken to you."

"The sword of light?" Hérsir sighs. "It pains me that if such an artifact truly exists—and I understand that I have no reason to doubt it—it did not come to our aid when we needed it the most."

"But it did come to the aid of all the people, even if its light did not flash in the streets themselves. It felled the very leader of the beasts. What man is foolish who strikes for the head in order to stop the body?"

"But you said that Eldárien himself did not slay the creature?"

"No, he did not. But until this other person also harnessed the power of the light, I thought that he alone could do so," explains Rórlain. "In fact, I myself tried, and I was unable."

"You said a woman wielded the power of the sword?"

"Yes, one of the servants of the temple of Nirániel, a person by the name of Elmáriyë."

"I have never heard of her."

"She is little known, and to the eyes of most a person of little account or importance," says Rórlain. "But it seems...that there is some kind of bond between the two of them which allows them to draw on the same power. It is not the first time that such a thing has happened."

"And so now they depart together to seek the source of this light, in the hopes of carrying it back as a weapon for our aid," concludes Hérsir, as though summarizing the import of the conversation.

"That is basically true," replies Rórlain, "but their goal is not just to give victory to the rebels or the people against the Empire. They wish above all to purge the evil with which the Empire has joined itself and perhaps even, if it is possible, to purify the corruption that lies at the heart of the Empire as well."

"They do not wish for the freedom and independence of the people of Telmérion?" asks Hérsir.

"I believe that they do, but it is not the purpose that lies ahead of them, at least not at present. They walk with their eyes fixed on a different hope than we in the city rely upon, a different hope, placed in a different source than might of arms or strategic resistance. And their goals, though different, align with all that you would wish."

"And so you are divided between these two paths, am I correct?" Hérsir asks. "You shall either accompany Eldárien on this quest to find a weapon against our enemies, or you shall stay here and aid in the conflict that is already unfolding?"

"That is correct."

"In which direction do your mind and heart incline?"

"The trouble is that they seem to go in different directions," replies Rórlain. "Or perhaps better...they each seem to incline in both directions, though for different reasons. On the one hand, my heart wants to remain here and aid in whatever way I may, and yet my mind says that I owe it to Eldárien to follow through on my oath and to accompany him to the end. On the other hand, my heart yearns to remain with my friend and to not forsake him on his path, particularly in its danger and vulnerability, and yet my mind says that my services would be more useful here. So, as you see, I am conflicted."

"Then it seems clear to me," concludes Hérsir.

"What do you mean?"

"I myself wish that you would remain here and aid us in our resistance. But I must speak otherwise: I believe that you should remain faithful to your oath and to the promise that you have made. Nothing binds you here but the desire of your heart and your wish to aid the people. And yet you shall be doing that also with Eldárien. An oath should not be lightly broken and particularly one that is so upright and true. Rather, see it as a guiding light on your path, a thread that holds you to the true way. It is clear that you must walk that path and hold to that thread with creativity of heart and flexibility of spirit; but it nonetheless remains strong and unbroken, carrying you forward."

Rórlain receives these words and holds them in silence for a long moment before nodding and saying, "Your words carry wisdom. That, then, is what I shall do."

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I stand atop a high cliff, windswept and barren but for tufts of grass and the gnarled, hardened trunks of a few trees, looking out over the ocean which lies a hundred yards below me. But even at this distance I hear the waves crash against the dark stone that juts straight out of the surf, a face so smooth and so steep that it would be impossible to climb. Yet behind me the cliff descends gradually as a rugged slope dotted with vegetation and stone, difficult but not at all impossible to scale. I do not remember why I have come here or if there was even a conscious reason in my mind or heart. But here I stand, my gaze directed outward over the glistening waters of the immense sea, as they roil and swell in a strong wind, causing white cap after white cap to dance upon the crests of the waves until they are swept under the next wave as they roll in, ceaselessly moving from the heart of the sea to the ever-still face of the land.

My face too is set, unmoving in determination and resolve, and yet my heart is more like the sea, churning and swelling both with anxiety and with desire, looking for a rock of repose strong and sturdy enough to receive my crashing and yet to give me a place where I, too, may become still. For only in stillness can the heart learn to listen truly and to receive, hearing the voice that speaks so quietly that the crashing of waves and the whistling of wind drown it out. But this voice always speaks, does it not, whether I can hear or not? How then can I turn to the stillness in order to hear if I have not a rock on which to repose? How then can I find a rock of repose if I am bereft of stillness in the churning of my heart's thoughts, fears, and aspirations? To listen to the voice of rest, I must know rest, but if I do not know rest, how shall I ever hear such a voice?

These thoughts occupy me as I look out over the churning waves of the tumultuous ocean, and I reach out—with the arms of both my body and my spirit—as if to a figure that comes to me over the waves, still and serene even over the chaos of a stormy sea. But I see no figure, not with the eyes of my body nor with the eyes of my heart. But I feel it, as if impressed upon my soul like a seal upon wax. And then I realize that the rock upon which I stand, rugged and inhospitable at first glance, is in truth the rock of repose that I have sought, and that all this time that my heart reached out toward the sea, it has upheld me in its stillness and its rest. And because of this, I can begin to hear. And in learning to hear, I can learn to repose and to rejoice.

At this moment, Elmáriyë stirs awake and sits up, her forehead sore from resting against her hands and her back aching. As the sense of space returns

to her, she remembers that she has been kneeling prostrate on the floor of the temple, and she notices that the evening light that enveloped her before has now descended into almost complete darkness. The dream nonetheless lingers with her for a few more moments, and she tries to lay a hold of its threads in order to halt its escape. But it gradually slips away, like sand through a sieve or water through cloth. One awareness does remain with her, however, even as the vivid images and feelings of the dream fade away, taking up their hiding place somewhere deep in the recesses of her heart. She is aware of the fear that she feels on the eve of her departure from the city of Ristfánd, fear that reveals the disquiet within her, like the restless waves of the sea, deep and beautiful and yet treacherous. And she prays for fidelity and constancy in the face of whatever awaits her, even if it stirs up the waves of her heart to a storm of ferocious intensity and if it crashes against the still rock nearly to the point of splitting it asunder and dragging it into the depths of the ocean.

Chapter Thirteen
Into the Mountains

The day of departure comes much too quickly, or so it feels. It is as if the smoke from the burial fires has hardly settled before dawn breaks on the morning that they must leave Ristfánd for the unknown destiny that awaits them in the west. Eldárien takes comfort in the fact that he travels now not alone but with four companions, chosen not by him but rather, as it were, provided for him by the very destiny that enfolds him and carries him even as it unfolds before him, a destiny that has the motherly hands of the goddess Hiliána, who has made herself known to him and in doing so has changed every moment of his life henceforth. In this he finds consolation, though the comfort of his companions' presence also awakens in him a well-known fear: he feels responsible for each one and does not want a quest which is his own —for this journey would not be happening at all were it not for him—to endanger even a single one of them.

He recalls now the private service of dedication that they had offered on the evening of the festival, after the painful rites of departure for those who had died at the hands of the vrû'ádach and the Imperial forces. Since such a service was forbidden by the commander Erinéäs, Cirien refused to stir up unnecessary strife by holding it openly. After all, not all the services of the temple were forbidden, but only this one—a gesture, they supposed, by which Erinéäs wished to exert his authority over the city. But they would not forgo the re-dedication of Ristfánd to the goddess Nirániel, something done every year which yet this year was needed more deeply and more desperately.

In the sanctuary in the declining evening light, the members of the temple gathered together, bringing each one a token from the families, laborers, soldiers, and ordinary people of the city—a bouquet of flowers, a loaf of home-baked bread, a ring or other piece of jewelry, a picture scratched in chalk by a small child, and various other things—and placed them in a large woven basket at the foot of the altar. Then Cirien, as the grandmaster of the order, recited words from a large and ancient book, bound in faded leather with pages aged and yellowed by time, their binding all but coming apart. His words, solemn in tone and meaning, bore a mysterious joy deeper than all the empty words with which men tend to console one another. His voice was the same as it always is, humble and unassuming, simple and spontaneous, with no show of flattery or pretense or self-importance, as he recited: "To thee do we come again at the turning of the year, harbinger of dawn, everlight, stillspeaker, echo of the eternal, first of the first-fruits, mother of thy children who cry to thee now. Receive at mine hands this offering from thy people, who trust in thee, and lay over us once again for the coming year, and henceforth, the mantle of thy protection and thy love. In all afflictions, be our deliverance, and in all joys, our gratitude. Deliver us from whatever ills assail us and protect us as much as is in thy power, that we may be spared from harm and walk the path marked out for us in this life, with the eyes of the heart set upon the halls of Midalést, where awaits us in mystery that destiny which is promised, but which the heart knows not, for never has it been revealed."

When his voice fell silent, the members of the temple raised a song in words that found their origin in ages long past and spoke of hopes that, although kindled long ago, unto the present still burn:

The flower blooms in early dawn,
henna sera narië.
At eveningtide it fades away,
bánda mon toralë,
And in the dark of night and loss,
Niranyë vena noaë,
lamenting all that in day was bright,
illo obscur nirandë,
one remembers a lesson learned anew,
Septes menes endralë,
with the round of each day, once again,
illo mande illustrë,
that after the darkest night comes dawn,
henna sera narië.

The remembrance fades now and Eldárien's mind returns to the present;

he sits up in his bed and turns to the window. Looking out, he sees that there is no more than a slight hint of light on the horizon in the east, barely making the outlines of the buildings of Ristfánd visible as darker shapes against the dim sky, the last stars winking their goodbye for the night. He rises and dresses in his full attire, including his mail shirt and his heavy leather boots, though his fur cloak he does not wear but folds over his pack. This pack he slings over both of his shoulders and lets it rest comfortably on his back—containing dried rations, a change of clothes, a length of rope, some flint, and a few other things—with a bedroll and waterskin tied to it. But it is in fact anything but comfortable, for the scars from his torture at the hands of the creature called Maggot are still sensitive, and any significant pressure causes them to ache and burn. Gritting his teeth, he shifts the straps of the pack in the attempt to redistribute the weight, and, unsatisfied with the results but aware that little more is possible, he then pulls his bow and quiver of arrows over his shoulder and, finally, the baldric holding the lightbringer. Were it not for the mail hauberk which lessens the pressure of these many straps by distributing their weight, Eldárien wonders if he would be able to travel with the pain that these burdens would cause.

He shakes his head softly and whispers, "A little way to be close to those who have lost so much more than I and whose bodies are crippled for the rest of their days..." And then, reaching for the handle of the door, he adds, "Hiliána and Nirániel, grant me strength." The corridor is dimly lit and quiet when he steps out of his room, and as he does so, the feeling unique to departure washes over him: that awareness that causes the eyes to take in all of one's surroundings one last time before bidding them the heart's farewell.

Rórlain approaches from a shadowy end of the corridor and nods to Eldárien, saying, "We depart at last. I did not know what to expect when we made such haste to come to this city, but it was certainly not what happened."

"And we walk into even greater uncertainty now than we did then," replies Eldárien. "Thank you, my friend, for continuing to accompany me. Were you to have decided to remain in Ristfánd, I would have supported you, but now that we travel again together, I cherish your presence and companionship."

"And I yours," says Rórlain. "But now we travel in a group. That, too, is something I did not expect."

"Does it bother you?"

"Not at all. I just hope that no ill befalls us on the road, and that our destination—granted there be such a place—holds the answers we seek."

"It seems a fool's quest, I know," Eldárien whispers.

"Sometimes the only remaining wisdom looks like folly, or so says our wise Cirien," says Rórlain, shifting his pack on his shoulders, not in pain or even in anxiety, but as if to ready himself for the road ahead. "Worry not, Eldárien.

We are all with you. And I would be surprised if any of us carry resentment for the nature of our journey. I certainly do not. My decision has been made freely, and so I walk free."

"Do you hope to return?" asks Eldárien. "To Ristfánd, I mean?"

"If that is best," replies Rórlain. "No city is my home, and this one did not become so during our stay. I merely feel keenly the burden of leaving under such dire circumstances, though I realize there is little I can do either by staying or by going."

"Hopefully our destination shall turn that 'little' into 'much'," says Eldárien, "or at least into 'more'."

At this moment Elmáriyë appears, wearing a brown tunic and laden for travel similarly to the two men; her hair is braided back away from her face, and her eyes are keen. "Surely there shall be time for speaking on the road," she says with a smile. "We are in a race with the sun and must make haste, for darkness alone gives hope of cloaking our departure."

"And so the cleric instructs the weathered travelers," Rórlain replies good-naturedly, and the three of them set off. Tilliána and Cirien stand by the entrance to the temple, the great doors at their back. They, too, are in quiet conversation as they wait. When the other three approach, Cirien nods to them and says, "Let us go. We have not much time." And so they pass through the streets of the city like shadows in the night ere the break of dawn and come to the western gate. Here the greatest difficulty to their concealment lies, as the gate is watched, not so much to keep people in as to keep them out. But it is still desirable that their departure goes unnoticed, so as not to raise questions concerning their motivations for travel and to stir up the possibility of pursuit.

Rórlain, who now knows the perimeter of the city well, directs them to a stone staircase leading up to the top of the battlements, a good twenty yards from the gate. This section of the wall is dark and deserted, and they pass with ease across it and descend the other side with the help of a rope. And thus they are free, trying to remain as quiet as whispers on the grass as they pass to the northwest, before the first rays of dawn's light break over the horizon at their back. It is an odd thing to "escape" from a city that only a matter of months earlier one came to save and entered without thought of whether or not one was welcome within its walls. But a city under occupation is not what it once was; it is more akin to returning to one's family home only to find it inhabited by robbers and one's own family held in custody, unable to welcome you or to warn you. Now, of course, they do not return but flee, and this is perhaps an even more painful experience: for it cannot but feel like abandoning those under the yoke of servitude to their grim fate.

Eldárien is the first to give voice to this feeling, which in some way is com-

mon to them all. He says, "I would wish to see Ristfánd different than it is now and to help in its deliverance, rather than disappearing in the night when it is in such desperate need." After these words, he falls silent, and the company continues to walk for a few minutes in this silence. Then he speaks again, now under his breath such that only those nearest to him, Elmáriyë and Cirien, can hear, "I would wish to bear the pain of all of them, were it possible, and if only such a thing would ease the burdens that they bear."

"Their pain, and the pain of many, you will bear," Cirien replies softly, "but there is little that our presence in the city can do to aid the people. What feels like flight may prove to be the most important action of all...coming to the very center and source of our only hope of victory over the forces that assail our people."

"And do not thirst blindly to carry the pain of others," adds Elmáriyë in a whisper. "The one who gave you this gift knows your capacity and what you are meant to bear. It is true that the compassion of the heart is boundless and must be so, but no man or woman can carry the weight of the entire world. Ours is only a small part in a much greater work."

"Even so, I feel as though something within me is summoning me to so much more...like my very heart is dilating to receive and carry what it has never carried before," says Eldárien.

"And it shall be so," replies Cirien. "But Elmáriyë speaks the truth, a lesson hard-learned that you would do well to heed."

"Very well," answers Eldárien. "I shall take these words to heart."

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By the time the sun is high in the sky the company is leagues from the city, immersed in the dense forest that spreads before them to the foot of the Yjind Mountains. Because they steer their course to the northwest, they come to the dry river bed that Eldárien and Rórlain had crossed previously on their way to the city. Here Cirien gestures for them to halt, and he turns to speak to the company. "This river used to flow strong and free, and I wonder now the reason that its water has run dry."

"I wondered the same when I passed this way on my journey hence," Eldárien remarks.

"Perhaps someone built a dam higher up, in the mountains whence it flows," Elmáriyë suggests. "It must lie not far to the north of Telónis, though I have never been far enough to see it."

"You are right, to a degree, regarding its location," answers Cirien, "though it is further north than you imagine, if the old maps are to be trusted. For it cuts its way to the southeast from high in the Yjind peaks, a lake at the knees of the great Hûrias, until it meets the ocean. In fact, I wanted to speak with all of you here about the course of our journey. And this puzzles me and stirs

my curiosity and my desire to walk this path still more."

"What do you mean when you speak of 'this path'?" asks Eldárien.

"I believe that there is a shortcut through the mountains which I suspect shall be both safer and swifter than traveling through the Moradóch Steppe. The path is more arduous, certainly, but also, barring any unexpected delay, shall save us a couple weeks of travel and bring us near to our destination at the very time we again leave the mountains."

"Why would we object to such a course of action?" Tilliána asks. "Is there something that would indicate the other, longer road preferable?"

"I myself have not walked this path, nor do I have any recent accounts of its traversal. My sources are rather...old," answers Cirien with a subtle smile. "Otherwise, the only other question is whether we are fit for the climb. If anyone might struggle with the effort, I imagine it would be me alone."

"And the dry riverbed...you do not think it is a harbinger of any misfortune?" Elmáriyë asks.

"It is probably due to no more than a young settlement which has imprudently harnessed the river for their own purposes," replies Cirien. "If we come across them, which if we follow the riverbed it is likely we shall, then perhaps I can have a word or two with them about communal responsibility." With these words Cirien shakes his head softly. "But then again, maybe the authorities in Ristfánd have long known about this and have even cooperated in it. That would explain much, though it puzzles me."

"I assume we shall see soon enough," says Rórlain, as if indicating that the conversation has reached its conclusion. And so it has. The company turns their faces to the northwest and begins to follow along the ridge of the riverbed, which is still too steep to descend with ease.

A few more hours pass before they stop for lunch, sitting on the grass or upon fallen logs and pulling some food from their packs: bread and cheese and a bit of salted meat. Most sit silently, lost in thought as they slowly eat, though Elmáriyë and Tilliána sit a bit apart and speak quietly to one another. Eldárien absentmindedly watches them, feeling grateful for their presence on the journey even though due to it he experiences quite a bit of trepidation. Having women in his care and under his custodianship is a new experience for him, as until this time, in all the dramatic circumstances of his life, he has led only men. Women are not accepted into the ranks of the Imperial army, as their bodies are not built for war and bloodshed. And Eldárien can only hope that these women are never again caught in the midst of such things but rather find their path sheltered on either side from the threat of death or from the need to kill. He also realizes what a "painful fortune" it was that, during the siege of Ristfánd, he himself did not need to confront the question of whether to kill and in what circumstances. His hands and heart recoil from

spilling human blood, whether in battle or not, but he also knows that war is upon the land of Telmérion, and so he tries to steel himself for what may come. The slaying of the beasts of darkness concerns him less than the slaying of living men. And though the former pose a much greater threat, taking countless forms like shadows made tangible to sow terror and death among the living, Eldárien is keenly aware that he fears being forced to slay his fellow men immeasurably more than he fears dying at the hands of the creatures of darkness or, for that matter, at the hands of men.

He has tasted the proximity of his own death too many times to recall, and though he has not yet come to welcome it—as, he suspects, both Cirien and Elmáriyë have because of their faith in Nirániel—he fears many things more than he fears the end of his own life. Nonetheless, in the heart of every man and woman resides fear of death, for in this heart lies the desire for boundless and enduring life, and thus a recoiling from its opposite, from loss and dissolution and a descent into nothingness. The only possible way to surmount the fear of death, rather than through apathy and despair, is through the hope for life beyond death, for a weaving together of strands of existence, belonging, and communion beyond the dissolution that death represents. The fear of death is therefore a primal act of affirmation of life, and a hesitancy before the mysterious unknown that lies beyond the boundary of death, and only a bridge of hope can turn this affirmation through fear into an affirmation through faith and through love.

Such fear is like trying to take a deep breath before a plunge into the ocean's abyss from a lofty height, only to find that there is not enough air to draw in. For a moment the heart stops in fright, in uncertainty. And what then? Having heard Hiliána's voice and felt her consolation, Eldárien for the first time can begin to glimpse an answer, though it feels as though it is concealed behind a veil just beyond his reach. But the answer is there: the light that met him in the darkest place, and that alone, can be a bridge to carry him even where all other paths fail. Such a thought gives him a glimmer of comfort, though his heart still remains uncertain and restless, and as he looks upon the faces of his companions, he feels viscerally how weak is his faith and how frail his heart. How can he be a rock on which they can lean when his own heart is so unstable and so afraid?

At this moment, Eldárien is stirred from his thoughts by Cirien's gentle voice, "It is probably time we begin to move again." The old man's hand is then placed upon his shoulder, and he looks up to see those gray eyes gazing down upon him as if concealing profound depths just under their glassy surface.

"Aye, you are right," replies Eldárien, and he rises to his feet.

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Two days pass before the land beneath their feet begins to slope steadily upward, beginning to ascend the feet of the mountains, which are buried just under the earth and cause it to wrinkle and rise like draped cloth. The trees lessen now as well, though those that remain are both taller and older, towering pine or spruce as well as aspen with bare white trunks reaching up fifty feet into the air before blooming out in branch and leaf. The path has already become rough, but they expect it to grow even rougher. The dry riverbed has become a series of rocky ravines cut deep into the earth, at places falling ten or twenty feet in what—when there had been water—must have been splendid cascades. But now there is nothing but stillness, where before there was the song of water. The song of the wind in the trees, however, continues, and as they ascend even higher, the force of the winds increases, blowing at times from the mountains before them down upon the plains that are visible stretched out for miles behind them and at times sweeping up from the plains back to the peaks. And in all the variations of the wind, the trees whisper their mysterious language, the rustle of leaf or needle upon the branch, and when many trees join together the song becomes a chorus loud enough that it sets the whole slope singing with the sighing of the wind in the trees and the song of the trees echoing in response.

The journey continues like this for another week, and they still do not reach the fountainhead of the riverbed and thus the cause of its dryness. But now they walk into the very heart of the Yjind Mountains, with rugged peaks snow-capped to their left and their right. The air is cold now throughout the day, and at night the temperature drops to freezing, as witnessed by the crystalline frost that covers the grass and trees all about them and shimmers in the rising morning sun. At the end of this week of travel, heavy rains sweep up from the plains far below them in the southeast and fall intermittently for another three days, alternating back and forth between torrential downpours and a drizzle so light that it is hardly more than a fog. During the downpours, the riverbed runs again with water—no more than a couple inches, but a drastic change to its earlier dryness. Even the rocky slopes flow again with small waterfalls, and, seeing this, Cirien remarks, "It is good to witness some small semblance of its former glory."

But at night the cold rain turns to sheets of blowing ice or a dense wall of sleet, and the companions find it all but impossible to remain warm and dry against the weather's onslaught. Because of the distance of their journey, it has not been feasible to carry a tent with them, though Rórlain thought to bring a length of stretched leather wide enough to function as such in case of need. And now his foresight proves invaluable, as the five of them huddle together each night under a makeshift shelter tied between the branches of trees and fastened with rocks or fallen logs. Due to the rain, there is no dry

wood to start a fire, and so they can neither prepare hot food nor provide warmth to their bodies aching in the cold. Instead, once darkness begins to fall and the temperature drops, they hurriedly set up camp and gather close together, wrapped tightly in furs. In this position, they eat their simple supper of dry rations, and then, after perhaps a bit of quiet conversation or a few shared songs, both to stir their hope and to enkindle their spirits, they drift off, one by one, to sleep.

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Now it is Tilliána who dreams, and the dream is not her own, or at least not hers alone. Fashioned out of her own fears and desires, her own imaginings, and indeed the concrete circumstances of her life, she nonetheless has the tangible sensation—even in the haze of unconsciousness—that a presence is with her in her sleep. And this presence is an unwelcome one.

In her dream, waking is almost indistinguishable from slumber, as she dreams herself to wake from sleep in the very place she sleeps in truth, and throws off her furs, and rises to her feet. The blowing sheet of ice has pulled back momentarily like a receding wall of fog, gray-white in the cold night illumined by a large moon, waning but still past half-full. She takes a few steps away from her slumbering companions, and she feels no cold. She looks up toward the mountain peaks ahead of her and reaching out like arms to enfold her on either side. They tower above her and make her feel so small, so infinitesimally insignificant, that despite the beauty of nature and its special word of welcoming, these mountains instead feel to her in this moment both threatening and dangerous, like they reach out not to welcome but to grasp, to entrap, and to suffocate.

She turns back and looks toward the Plains of Mélroc and the city of Ristfánd, and the fog and darkness recede before her gaze, and she can see farther than human eyes can see, down the rugged path they have traveled, down from the mountain pass, across the tree-laden plains, to the city as it slumbers, and beyond that, to the numerous settlements of the clan of Rhóvas dotting the landscape. And she sees even to the ocean beyond, its pale face reflecting the glistening light of the moon, an orb of light that twists and contorts on the always-moving face of the water, elongated, contracted, misshapen in the never-still cascading of the waves as they press forward toward the land.

As she looks out with eyes more far-seeing than human eyes can be, she feels the stirring of grief within her and the hopelessness born of grief. And she finds herself wanting to yield to it, to find rest and consolation in the arms of sadness as though in the care of a welcome friend. She wishes to fight no longer for the spark of hope that flickers so weakly against the bitter winds of life, or at least to hope for something more realistic. After all, why can she not

simply go where all those whom she loves have already gone? And with this thought, in an instant, she finds herself standing atop a lofty mountainous ridge that looks straight down, at a height of several hundred yards, to the crashing sea. The moon's twisted light now looks inviting, and if she cannot attain to it in the pure and undimmed light of the sky, dark and serene but infinitely distant, she can reach it simply by plunging into the ocean's depths, which draw her now like a magnet.

And at this moment the subtle presence that has accompanied her, almost intangible, almost unnoticed, grows in intensity, and she feels it at her side, as though looking over her shoulder. It is unwelcome, and yet it pulls her strongly, to the point that without a thought she almost yields. She opens her mouth to address the presence, to demand that it reveal itself, but in this instant the faces of those she has loved—of Alsenór, Beïta, and Annár—form upon the face of the water, and the water grows perfectly still. The entire ocean ceases to move and becomes like a placid lake, reflecting as a consummate image the countless stars of the sky, with the moon at its center. She leans forward, and she is there—only a few feet from the water's surface, looking into the eyes of her beloved, with the mournful faces and gentle smiles of her children on either side of him.

As if speaking into the back of her mind, insinuating itself into her own thoughts, not in their secret inner wellspring in the sanctuary of her heart, but in their external formulation as they come to the surface, the presence says to her: *You need only throw yourself in, and you shall be with them forever.* And yet the presence does not speak. It is silent, though its voice is raucous, so loud and so pressing that it takes her own thoughts and makes them its own and then forces them upon her to the point that she nearly accepts them as if they originated from her. Are they not, after all, her true self? Her true intentions and desires and the right path—the only path that can remain true to herself, whereas everything else is but a show and a mockery of life. Maybe only in death can life be found, and this play at life is nothing but a sham, a lie that she says both to herself and to others. And if that is the case, what is the point in pretending anymore?

And now she voices her response to the presence, intending to welcome the unwelcome since it gives her the one thing she truly seeks: *I will do it. But how?* And yet at this moment, another voice intrudes upon her thoughts and breaks off her discourse with the other, mysterious presence. She is wrenched from sleep to find someone gently shaking her shoulders and calling her name. She opens her eyes and finds the face of Cirien, lined with concern and compassion, looking down upon her. The night is dark, but the light of the moon allows her to make out his features, and his voice too would identify him still more clearly if there were any doubt. "Tilliána, I am sorry to wake

you, but you were moaning in your sleep."

"I was..." she replies, but her words falter as the vivid feelings of the dream slip away from her. "I was having a nightmare," she concludes. "I am sorry if I startled you."

"Oh no, my concern is only for you," answers Cirien, and she can feel the piercing gaze of his eyes even in the darkness.

"I...I am alright. It is only grief combined with fear of the unknown."

"I understand, as much as I can. And know that I am here, if you ever wish to speak about it or about anything else."

"Yes, of course, thank you," says Tilliána, and she watches as Cirien leans back and returns to his place of rest. Then she pulls the furs closer around her body and buries her face against them, trying to fight off the bitter cold that bites at her flesh and the anguishing sorrow that even more keenly bites at her heart.

Chapter Fourteen
Against the Mæres of Night

In the morning they set off early, as soon as it is light, for there is no reason to linger in the damp and the cold, and they shall find it easier to stay warm by moving than by staying still. The precipitation has ceased now, though the sky remains heavily overcast, dark with clouds that only dimly allow the light of the sun to filter through and illumine the earth. They are grateful that they no longer need endure the falling moisture that soaks their clothing and allows the cold air and wind to pierce through to their skin and to permeate as if to the bone. Even so, the path up the mountainside is both steep and slippery, and the going is so difficult that they must pause frequently to catch their breath.

During one of these stops, Tilliána speaks, saying, "Does anyone else feel a sense of foreboding...as though we are walking toward a place of great danger?" It takes her great courage to voice this question, since it comes from the deep vulnerable space of the dream that she had the night before, the semblance and the feeling of which have continued to cling to her in waking consciousness, almost as if the sense of "presence" she had during sleep has remained to haunt her in the daylight as well as at night. But to her relief (though also her concern), there is little or no surprise on the faces of the others. Eldárien simply nods as if he was expecting the question, and

Elmáriyë's face for a moment expresses great pain before she conceals it.

Cirien is the first to speak in response, and he says, "Nightmares come unbidden and with greater vehemence the higher we ascend into the mountains. I have dreamed little, very little, for over two decades. And yet every night for the past three days, I have been dreaming, and the dreams have not been pleasant. I know not what force is at work, nor how it has access to the imaginations of our minds, but it disturbs me greatly."

"Why did you not speak of this before?" asks Tilliána.

"I did not want to startle you, since I had not yet come to any understanding about what this meant or its import for our journey," Cirien answers. "I did speak with Eldárien, and we took counsel together. We do not know if these...feelings come from some trait of our location or from another source that seeks to assail us. After all, there are many powers in this world that are bound by neither space nor time. It would matter little where we are if such is the nature of this threat. If things were to continue, or to grow in intensity, we intended to speak with all of you in a couple days."

"I wish you would have told me immediately," retorts Tilliána. "If we travel together, should we not discuss all things together? It is not proper for some to discuss plans to which others are not privy. For if we walk into danger, should we not each have a say in whether or not we turn around? All of us have a right to know such things and to be a part of such counsels."

"There is...truth in what you say," Cirien replies softly. "Please accept my apologies." He pauses as if making a resolution within himself, and then he continues speaking, "I will make no further explanation of my actions, since you are in the right. Well, since this matter is in the open now, let us take this moment to speak freely and to discuss our knowledge and our course of action."

"Very well," says Tilliána, and then she adds, "I...too, had a dream last night. And I would not have considered anything about it abnormal but for the sense of an evil presence assailing me and..." She falls silent, unable to bring herself to speak the following words.

Thankfully Cirien offers the words for her, and all she needs to do is nod in agreement, "Pushing you to the edge of despair?"

"I have had no dreams," says Eldárien.

"Neither have I," adds Elmáriyë, "or at least not since Ristfánd. But the sense of an unwelcome presence has grown with every waking hour."

Both Cirien and Eldárien turn to Elmáriyë in such a way that it is clear that she has not mentioned this to either of them. In response, she says quietly, as if abashed, "I often feel things that are...not normal. I did not think this was anything different, if only a little more intense."

"Well, I too have felt it," says Eldárien. "I am still growing into the 'feeling

of the heart,' and I think this is why I have felt it much less than you, Elmáriyë. But it is certainly abnormal, even for the reality that you speak of as 'bearing'."

"That would make sense of much," Cirien begins, running his hands through his hair as he thinks. When the others turn to look at him as if awaiting an explanation, he continues. "It would make sense, I mean, of why neither of you have been troubled by dreams, and also why you feel in waking consciousness what Tilliána and I feel only as a residue from sleep."

"What do you mean, exactly?" asks Eldárien.

"I mean that you each have a sensitivity of the heart that allows you to feel the waves of both good and evil with a particular clarity and intensity," replies Cirien. "You know what a gift this is but also what a burden. Yet it is likely that whatever force you feel afflicting you now can also assail the rest of us—and indeed seeks to do so—when we are most susceptible to outside influence and can offer least resistance. In other words, when we sleep."

"And what about you, Rórlain?" asks Tilliána, turning to the man who has remained silent throughout the conversation.

He does not answer at first but shrugs his shoulders as if uncertain of what to say.

"Nothing?" offers Tilliána by way of suggestion.

"Not nothing..." Rórlain says in reply. "But I have not been pushed to despair. Rather, last night I had a dream that viscerally impressed upon me the feeling that I made the wrong decision in joining your company and should have remained in Ristfánd. But I had little or no sense of an 'unwelcome' or 'evil' presence, as you called it. It was an unpleasant dream, but I was not aware of anything extraordinary about it except perhaps its intensity."

"There could be many reasons for that," says Cirien. "For one, you alone have not had direct experience of the bearing of the heart that lives within Eldárien and Elmáriyë. Tilliána was a direct recipient of a very intense act of compassionate love that saved her from the brink of death. That could not have but changed her down to the very foundations of her spirit and her heart's awareness. And I, too, have lived in proximity with Elmáriyë for a number of years, and even if she does not know it, I have been aware many times of her bearing my pain and my burdens with me and for me. My devotion to the goddess Nirániel has also changed many things within me, or at least I hope that it has. And if this gift has its source in her, then that explains much also in my case."

"Well, that makes me feel as though I do indeed belong elsewhere than here," answers Rórlain, grudging the words as they emerge but unable to restrain them.

"Oh, we do not think that at all!" cries Elmáriyë. "Really, we see you

completely and entirely as one of us."

"I confirm Elmáriyë's words," adds Eldárien. "And we know not what the future yet holds, or if what Cirien says is even the cause. Be grateful that you have not had to taste darkness or the proximity of death in such a way that what happened to Tilliána would be necessary also for you. But I also want to say," he concludes, "that were I able to include you more in the affairs of my heart and of our company than I already am, I would not hesitate to do so."

"Thank you...for your words," Rórlain begins, uncertainly at first, "but I suppose I just do not know how to make sense of—or feel comfortable with—this so-called gift and what it means. Why should few be chosen when all wish to fight? Why should the light be given only to some when others would also wish to wield it? And why would this capacity of bearing be the prerogative of some when others have just as much compassion?"

"I think the answers to your questions are precisely what we seek," Cirien replies, "in the journey that we now undertake."

"And your questions are valid and true," says Eldárien, his voice pained for the sake of his friend, but gentle also for his sake. "I ask them as well. For it is true that compassion is the calling of all of us, of each man or woman who draws breath from the same air and lives in the same world. We are all one, in ways deeper even than we realize. Thus we must care for one another and carry one another. And this carrying is not only an affection of the heart nor only an action manifested in practice; it is something profoundly real, though hidden, that lives in the recesses of the spirit. The very experience of compassion deep within, though it remains hidden, *affects* things externally, just as hidden roots support and nourish a plant. This, at least, is what I am coming to understand." He pauses and looks into the faces of those around him, all of whom are looking at him, listening to his words.

"We all suffer together, and we all fight together, and we all rejoice together," he continues. "Our calling and vocation is one, for we are all born of the same life and drink of the same mystery of existence. And I think that the goddess, indeed all the gods, watch over us with tender care as if we were little children under their custodianship. And if they relate to us in some way as children, and we address them as guardian, as protector, even perhaps as mother, as father, then there must be some truth to the love that their care manifests. In other words...perhaps...perhaps we are all children born of a single love, and this is the source of our unity, our fellowship, and our shared life. For the same blood, as it were, runs in our veins, hearkening back to its source."

"I...I will reflect and pray upon your words, and seek to understand them," replies Rórlain after a moment, "and try find my place in this journey that we

share. But please be patient with me. For at present I feel excluded where I wish to belong, and I feel impotent where I wish to be of assistance."

"I receive your pain, my friend," says Eldárien. "I wish that I could say something to communicate to you my compassion, even whatever understanding of your pain that I possess, but I know that anything I say will be less than you need to hear. Only know that I too have felt powerless for many years and still do—utterly weak before the mystery of reality that stands before me. How could I ever measure up to it, ever respond to it as deeply as it deserves? When I anxiously tried to keep my company alive in the blood-drenched forests of Tel-Velfána, I felt powerless; when the ship that bore me back to Telmérion sank and I found myself in icy water, I felt powerless; when I walked into the cave of the eöten to find you at the behest of your father, I felt powerless. To this very day I feel powerless." He falls silent for a moment and looks at Rórlain with a gentle intensity, and then he continues, "But in all of that impotence and fear, I realize that I have been held. I can only wish for the same awareness for you, Rórlain. And I *do* wish for it, with all of my heart. And as for your belonging among us, I can do no more than say: my heart does not doubt that you are meant to be here with us, and your presence is dear to me. Neither do I doubt that you can be of assistance, though I am glad of your company not for any benefit we may derive from it, but because it is precious in itself. I hope, above all, that you come to understand that."

In response, Rórlain simply bows his head and remains silent, at a loss for words with which to reply. After a few moments, Cirien speaks, picking up the thread of the previous conversation, "We still have not spoken of the import of these nightmares and these feelings for our journey. It is impossible at present to tell whether what we are experiencing is rooted in our proximity to a place of danger or whether it is a force that assails us without regard for space, seeking perhaps to hinder us in our journey. I, for one, believe that we should continue upon our current course. For to backtrack our steps and to go another way would cost us weeks. Not only should we not expend any more time than necessary, considering the fact that our journey is so pressing, but that would also raise other problems such as rations. Another consideration is that, if there is indeed a force of evil ahead of us, it would behoove us to learn more about it. We may not be able to confront it directly, but clearly it is already aware of our presence. Perhaps all we have to gain by moving forward is important insight regarding our enemy, and the danger is already with us whether we move forward or back. And indeed it is more likely that it seeks to turn us away from this path than to draw us along it. If anything, this force seeks to dissuade us from moving forward, not to draw us in like insects into a trap."

"You have a very good point," says Tilliána. "Such thoughts did not cross my mind. If it were like a spider seeking prey, it would not aim to push us away through doubt or discouragement but to draw us into its web as helpless victims."

"Does anyone wish to voice an objection against Cirien's suggestion, or to pose a question?" asks Eldárien. "I myself agree with him, both as this is the shortest path to our goal and also because I believe that wherever we go, we shall pass through danger."

For a while no one speaks, as all consider within themselves. Then Rórlain says, "I think we should move forward."

"As do I," adds Elmáriyë.

"Then all of us are in agreement," confirms Tilliána timorously, wrapping her arms around her body as if hugging herself and closing herself off to the danger that she feels but cannot prevent or escape. Then she gives voice to this fear also in words, "Though I must admit that I am afraid."

"We are all afraid," Eldárien gently says to her, "but precisely so we are not alone in that fear."

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Thus they continue deeper into the embrace of the mountains, with the peaks of the Yjind range rising to all sides except directly behind them, where the land slopes down toward the plains far below, from whence they have come. But as the afternoon wears on even this disappears from their sight, for the trail turns northward and leads them into the folds between the mountains. By the time darkness begins to fall on the land and the sun bids its farewell for the day, the company finds itself, as it were, cradled by mountains on all sides, hidden in a wide valley where the rugged arms of the mountains meet as they descend toward one another. And though they cannot see it, they expect that the dammed lake—or at least the original source of the river—is somewhere nearby, perhaps a day or two further into the mountains at the other side of the basin.

But at present they stop and prepare to retire for the night. All hint or threat of precipitation has now fled away to the west and left a mostly clear sky above them, already dancing with the glimmer of early stars, and they look forward to a dry night with hope of warmth, or at least warmth enough for comfortable and uninterrupted sleep. That is, if the nightmares do not wake them. They situate themselves in the tent that Rórlain and Eldárien set up between two trees and wrap themselves in their fur blankets and cloaks—using the tent not now to avoid the rain or ice but to shield from the cold winds that sweep through the mountains. And as they do this, each person sinks into silent thought, exhausted from the day's journey but also simply wishing for time to reflect upon the situation in which they find themselves.

And their responses are as diverse as their personalities, even if unified by their common purpose, vision, and hope, which cradles and carries their uniqueness as it matures it toward the fullness found only in communion and shared belonging.

Rórlain feels discouraged by what he perceives to be his lack of usefulness in the company, though the words of Eldárien and Elmáriyë have helped to dispel the doubts that he bore about his welcome and belonging with the other members of the group. After all, he was the first companion of Eldárien, and their paths crossed—or rather their lives were brought together—for a reason that, though Rórlain cannot name it, he feels very vividly and cannot bring himself to doubt. And so he reflects upon Eldárien's words, turning them over in his mind as one would turn over in one's hands an object one wished to inspect. For most of the years of his life, Rórlain has walked alone and had few friends or confidants. His family home was warm and intimate and never ceased to be so even into his adulthood and his parents' old age; indeed, it remained so even after the death of his mother, though something was lost with her passing which he wishes could be regained, though he knows it can never be fully so in this life. But outside of his family he has never given himself to another, whether in heart or in concrete existence, more than was necessitated by the journey that he walked at a given time. Even in the rebellion he walked on his own, and he realizes only now that this solitude was born of a fear. But a fear of what? He does not know and cannot name it to himself, but he feels the fear nonetheless, present in memory as clearly as if he dwelt in it still.

And this fear has been present with him throughout his life until this very day. Why then was his heart so powerfully and spontaneously drawn to entrust his life to the journey that Eldárien walks and to commit himself to be his companion and protector? For this act went deeply against many of his tendencies to self-isolation and protection, as well as against his uncertainty concerning the state of Telmérion and the right approach to the war. Yet when he looks back on the events leading to the present, even with the tragedy of the battle of Ristfánd, he does not regret his decision nor wish that he could take it back. It is as though the inertia which has clung to him throughout his life, and which only for brief spells of a few months or a few years has he been able to throw off, is now definitively cast aside. He only hopes that it is indeed cast aside and that he does not go back on what he has chosen. All of these thoughts lead him again to the question that he bore at the beginning—the question concerning his belonging with and usefulness for the company—and suddenly things appear clearer to his interior vision. Eldárien is right: it is not a matter of being useful. It is a matter of being, as it were, called and chosen. He was led to this point beyond his own volition,

though whatever drew him awakened and carried his own will and choice such that he was able to accept and do what until this moment he had his entire life failed to do. And so the question now is not whether he can be useful but whether he will be faithful.

Tilliána, for her part, is too tired to think about much of anything and instead finds herself sinking into a state of exhausted half-consciousness that feels more restless than restful. She is afraid to drift off to sleep in the expectation of another nightmare, and one more visceral and more irresistible than the last. And so without any deliberation she shakes herself awake even as she is about to fall into sleep. The sleep departs but the exhaustion remains, and she sits up and buries her head between her knees, allowing the back of her head and neck to peek out from the blanket and to be brushed by the cold breeze of early night. She feels her hair stir in this breeze, and it almost tickles and would be pleasant were it not so cold. And then, unbidden, thoughts and feelings come flooding into her mind and heart; and she is too tired to do anything but allow them to wash over her. She feels a gaping hole beside her and within her where Alsenór should be, and where he was until only a short time ago. The longing for him is so strong and so painful that she almost reaches out to see if he is there or to grasp for his presence in that place where neither sight nor touch can reach. And when this longing turns back upon itself in the certainty that he is gone, gone forever beyond the boundary of death, and her only hope of seeing him is that she too pass into and through death, her heart collapses. Tears spring to her eyes and roll freely down her cheeks, and she is only barely able to keep herself from sobbing.

At this moment she feels a hand upon her back, laid so softly that she barely notices its impress. But she knows clearly what it speaks. She does not move but continues to sit with her head buried between her knees and tears springing from her eyes. The hand gently rubs her back in a consoling and tender gesture. And as this caress of kindness and compassion mingles together with her own painful sense of loss and absence—the gaping hole where Alsenór and her children ought to be—she knows without looking whose hand is laid upon her back. After what has happened between them, there is another sight, another vision—that of the heart—which in certain respects sees more deeply than the eyes of the body and feels more deeply than the touch of the flesh.

Elmáriyë leans back and looks up into the sky, watching as the firmament gradually populates with stars. She traces in her mind the constellations of the Seven—and sends a plea for aid and a sigh of gratitude to each of them. And then the aurora appears, purple and green, streaking across the sky like a length of cloth being drawn through water or a banner unfurled and stretching across the heavens. She recalls that ancient words have said that the

aurora is the garment of the one called Dawnbringer, a seamless cloth woven of one piece out of living light itself, and that until he needs to don this garment himself, he weaves it about the earth as a sign of his protection. And in this moment Elmáriyë imagines herself as the earth, bare in her essential humanity, clothed about with pure light like a robe of finest silk and warmest wool, the ornament of beauty that does not bedeck with jewels and add rings or fine colors in order to enhance the beauty of the wearer, but rather simply reveals the beauty that is already present, unsealed by light and in light fully revealed. It is with these thoughts that she sinks into profound rest.

Cirien sits up with Eldárien at his right, and the others, Tilliána, Elmáriyë, and Rórlain, in a line beyond him; and like this, the two men together keep watch. One night guard would be sufficient, but neither man at present feels the need or capacity for sleep. As age has overtaken him—or rather as he has grown into age and eventually freely donned it as a fitting garb—Cirien has come to need less and less sleep. Now he rests no more than five hours a night, and often closer to three, and he feels energized and alert regardless. Indeed, in the rare circumstance where he sleeps more than his usual amount, he feels more fatigued rather than less. As he thinks of this, he is moved by the realization that living is what gives him the energy for life, and that the flowing current of his existence carrying him forward, with all the desires, struggles, responsibilities, and joys that it bears within it, is now cascading so fast and so freely that it requires little effort for him to continue in the direction that he is being carried. And he offers up thanks that the current that carries him is that of goodness, of virtue acquired after years of humble fidelity to the voice of reality as it issues its invitation, and not any other force, whether of self-interest, sloth, or evil. It is gift and grace, which have harnessed his being gradually over a long period of time, until by this grace he is permeated and held. He allows himself to feel consolation for this grace that he has received —far beyond his own deserving or capacity—and in this consolation he leans into the flowing current of life in the desire, hope, and resolve to remain faithful to it unto the end of his life.

After a few minutes pass—or perhaps many more than a few, as he is not aware of the precise passage of time—his mind and heart carry him now to more painful thoughts. He reflects upon the horrific events that unfolded in the city of Ristfánd and its surroundings, on the thousands of people who lost their lives at the hands of a force so far beyond their reckoning. He thinks of the temple and its members and of all that shall be called forth from within them in the coming months and years; and for the first time he keenly feels the sorrow of his absence. He hopes that he has made the right decision to leave the temple in the charge of Ilmaël, and he hopes also that the resistance in the city, and wherever else it shall stir in the lands of Rhóvas, will look first

of all to the protection and safety of the people before any thoughts of rebellion against the Empire. Hérsir appears to Cirien as a discerning and prudent man, but he also sensed, when in his presence, his anger and impatience, born of fear and a feeling of incapacity. And both of these oft lead a man to do rash and undiscerning things. Or rather, it is the fear of incapacity, the fear of failure, which oft leads a man to grasp out beyond what he is given, to claim control where he is asked instead to trust, and in the process to harm both himself and others, whereas the path of patience and of faith brings both more peace and more benefit than the path of rash action.

From these thoughts, however, Cirien's mind carries him back to their current situation, and he reflects upon the mysterious "presence" that has been disturbing his sleep and has been oppressing the other members of the company. Of all the things that have crossed his mind or been laid upon his heart this evening, this causes him deep disturbance, and he finds his spirit troubled. He tries to open himself to clarity concerning the nature of this presence—while turning away from thoughts about the presence itself and certainly turning away from the presence—and instead seeking to commune with the benevolent presence of the goddess that is always with him, even if intangible. *Is this...force of evil nearby and awaiting us, or is it far away and reaching out to us across a distance? How could I even know such an answer unless it were revealed to me? But is it prudent to move forward as we are without knowing the answer? Ah...it is actually more prudent to move forward, as we have no indication either way regarding the location of the presence. All we know is that it has sought to discourage and dissuade us, to break our spirits and weaken our hearts. And if I have learned anything in the years of my life, it is that the voices of evil should be resisted or ignored, even if they seek to appear wise, for they always lead astray. There is only one way of truth, and the voice that marks out that way alone is worthy of our heeding and our obedience.*

Finally, Eldárien, as he sits beside Cirien, gently rests his hand upon Tilliána's back, feeling her anguish and sorrow flow into him as if the pulsing of the heart sending blood through the veins. He welcomes this pain and does not find it difficult to do so. For him it is not difficult in the least. For with the pain comes beauty; or rather, the pain pulses into him as if carried in the arms of beauty, the beauty of Tilliána's own heart, gentle and kind and humble in itself and ennobled even further by her suffering and loss.

He knows that someday he will need to welcome also the pain and suffering of hearts that are not beautiful but scarred and disfigured by ugliness and evil. How he knows this he cannot say, but it is a deep awareness in his heart, coming to him, or rather awakening within him, as simply part of the gift that allows him to welcome and bear in the first place. But in this moment he

simply rejoices that he is able to welcome a heart as beautiful as Tilliána's and to hurt for her with whom it is so easy to hurt, hoping that the little compassion that he can offer will facilitate the healing of her heart, so that the beauty that is now heavily oppressed will be set free to be, perhaps even more deeply than it has ever been before, what it has always been meant to be.

Chapter Fifteen
Descent

At the coming of morning light, the company rises and prepares to depart. The night was dry and thus more pleasant than the preceding nights with their drenching precipitation; even the wind blew in no more than a gentle breeze throughout the nocturnal hours. And though the wind picks up now, as if stirred into movement by the arrival of the sun, whistling in the trees and flapping against the cloth of the tent as they try to roll it up again, the companions are simply grateful that the quiet of the night has allowed all of them an adequate rest to dispel the exhaustion of the previous days. And no one had a single nightmare. Cirien and Eldárien both slept between three and four hours, taking turns such that someone was awake for the entirety of the night. But that amount is more than adequate for both of them, though for different reasons.

"I find it puzzling that the nightmares stopped suddenly for all of us," says Cirien, "puzzling but not unwelcome. I simply do not know what it means or whether it portends good, or ill, or neither."

"At least one answer may await us soon, today or tomorrow," Eldárien responds. "We shall soon know the cause of the river's dryness, not that such an answer is particularly relevant to our journey."

"I hope that it is not relevant at all," Rórlain says. "Whether a particular river is dry or not, and why, should have no bearing on our path across the mountains to the west. If it does have bearing, I do not see how it could be anything but ill."

"Neither can I," adds Cirien, "but we do not see all factors. Let us wait and see."

"Or rather let us *move* and see," emphasizes Elmáriyë with a smile. "We shall all get cold and stiff if we stand around in this temperature much longer without moving our bodies."

"Wisely spoken, little one," says Cirien. "Many a man stands around freezing when he could be walking. Let us not be of their kind."

And so they depart, following still the dry riverbed as it winds its way

through the valley between the mountains, now a deep ravine of loose rock worn by the flowing of water over many years. And considering its size and the stone polished almost to a gloss, this river must indeed have flowed swift and free for centuries. Massive trees clothe the knees of the mountains to their right and their left, but the center of the valley has no more than a scattering of trees standing alone and solitary or perhaps grouped in small groves, evergreens and aspens and alders swaying in the strong morning wind. But despite the small number of trees directly ahead of them, they cannot see to the other side of the valley, for the land rises gradually ahead of them with a narrow ravine through which the riverbed flows cutting through its center. Because of this, only as they come to the far end of the ravine, or to the apex of the hill if they decide instead to climb the rise of land rather than going through its heart, will they begin to see what lies on the other side of the valley.

By the early afternoon they come to the moment when precisely this decision must be made: to follow the narrow and rocky path between the walls of the ravine, which would mean more or less walking in the riverbed itself, or to climb the rough mounds of earth that rise up perhaps two-hundred feet on either side. They deliberate for a few minutes together, and, after inspecting their surroundings, they decide to climb the hill. The ascent is rough and steep but far from vertical, and they are able to attain the top without needing to rely on their hands, though it takes the better part of two hours. And now they find themselves on a broad shelf of land that looks almost as if it had cascaded down from high on the sides of the mountains, as though an avalanche had filled up the entire middle section of the valley and, over many years, had been covered in soil and garmented in plants and trees. There seems to be no other natural explanation than this. It does not, however, explain the river that flowed through the heart of the mound as if cut with a sword wielded by some creature a thousand times larger than a human being.

"Do you think that the river itself was unnatural, rather than its damming?" asks Eldárien, his question directed to all alike. "It does not appear as if it flowed by any natural process through the heart of this...well, I am not quite sure what to call it. It appears to be a hill, and yet its shape feels somehow unnatural as well."

It is Rórlain who first answers, "What does it appear to be to your eyes? What seems to be its purpose?"

"What do you mean? You think it has a purpose?"

"If it is not born of nature, then it is born of artifice. And the artificer must have had a purpose in doing what it did."

"You are right," says Eldárien, "though I suppose even the artificer of nature always works with a reason, even if that reason is simply the beauty of

what exists and its form. But this follows not the form of the rest of nature; it is different: less beautiful, less harmonious, more, as it were, utilitarian."

"I suspect the same," Cirien says. "It seems to me that this structure, even if it poses as a natural feature of the landscape, is rather a tool in service of a master. And whatever the master may be, it is frightening to think that he has power even over the earth itself, or at least enough power to harness its shape for his purposes."

"And we still plan to move forward?" asks Tilliána. "Here is another sign that we walk into danger, into the realm of a force of immense power—power greater even than our imagining."

"It is only a circumstantial sign," replies Cirien, "as this looks to have been fashioned centuries, perhaps millennia, in the past. But you are right in this: the unnatural nature of the river combined with its present dryness raises questions. However, I loathe the thought of traveling back to the mouth of the mountain pass and heading north from there. It is a great loss of time that, if it is possible, I wish to spare us."

"And it would be unfortunate to turn around if there was in fact no cause for concern," adds Eldárien. "However, we are already at the highest point in the valley. If we only continue a mile or so further, perhaps we shall be able to see the other side laid out before us. I feel that answers may await us there."

"I do not know whether that causes me to feel more consoled or less," says Tilliána. "But if we see something—whatever that might be—that could be a danger to us, I offer my vote that we turn around."

"That may likely be wise," says Cirien. "But I agree that we should at least take a look from our vantage point, if it indeed proves as near as Eldárien hopes. Yet I give you my word, Tilliána," he adds, looking at her tenderly, "that if we see anything that might endanger us, we shall turn around without hesitation."

Tilliána nods, and as the company begins to move again, Elmáriyë places her hand upon her shoulder. "Worry not," she says softly. "Both Eldárien and Cirien will do nothing to endanger us."

"It is not their benevolence that I doubt," replies Tilliána. "It is their weakness—weakness of mind to see dangers ahead of us soon enough to avoid them, and weakness of body to resist such dangers when they come."

"Why are you so afraid?" Elmáriyë asks her, now walking side by side with Tilliána a short distance behind the rest of the company. "I...I feel," she continues, but hesitates.

"What is it?" Tilliána asks.

"It is hard to say, and I tend not to speak of these things," replies Elmáriyë.

"What things?"

"What I feel in the deep spaces of my heart. I trust Eldárien's judgment

here because I feel the same as he. I feel a force of great evil, that is true. But I also feel another, greater presence inviting us to move forward into the unknown. It is...it is important that we move forward precisely here. I do not know the reason, for I do not know what we shall find. But there is *something* that awaits us. This much, I am certain, both Eldárien and I now know. And Cirien, I imagine, has discerned it as well."

"Oh, Elmáriyë, it is just so hard to lean on the seeing of others when I myself do not see!" Tilliána exclaims, though in a soft voice.

"It is certainly not easy, but neither is it meant to be the end," replies Elmáriyë tenderly. "Even obedience is not meant to end in mere trust in the wisdom and direction of another. Rather, trust is meant to give way to vision, to open the eyes to see what before they could not see. And I am confident that this shall soon be so in your case. Your eyes are already alert and sensitive, and it shall only take a small amount of time until they adjust to the new atmosphere—like pupils dilating in the darkness to see what before was hidden in shadows."

"But do I truly want to see what is hidden in shadows?" asks Tilliána.

"You must answer that question for yourself," says Elmáriyë, "just as you must choose your own path and stand within your own conviction, even if the aid and guidance of others is invaluable in helping you to discover and to remain faithful within that place."

"Yes..." Tilliána sighs. "And the answer is obvious. I desperately desire to see. We were *made* to see, weren't we? Of course...not the darkness but the light...the light that shines in the darkness and beyond it. That is the reality for which my heart thirsts. And I will go anywhere in order to attain it, even through the blackest night. I only wish it were not necessary to do so."

To Tilliána's surprise, in response to these words Elmáriyë does not speak, but instead her face lights up with enthusiasm and her eyes glisten both with passion and with tears, and then she draws Tilliána into a full embrace.

"W-what is it?" Tilliána asks after her speechless surprise has lessened.

"Your words, they just..." replies Elmáriyë, whispering with her mouth beside Tilliána's ear. "Your words moved me deeply. For the reality of which you spoke...that too is my sole desire. For myself, but also for others. I seek it for myself for it draws me as a current of longing that carries me with impetuous force; and I seek it for others because I know that in it alone can they too find peace, security, and rest."

Then Elmáriyë steps back and looks deeply into Tilliána's eyes. She smiles softly and her eyes are indeed aflame. "Wherever we walk and whatever lies before us," she says, "forget not the light that you seek, and then the darkness cannot overcome you."

"Will you...will you pray for me and assist me? For I am afraid to walk

alone," asks Tilliána.

"With all of my heart," Elmáriyë replies. And with that, they turn and continue on their way, joining the others who, noticing their pause, have stopped thirty or so yards ahead to wait for them.

† † †

They walk for a little over two miles until they come to the place at which the mound begins to descend before them, sloping down until it rejoins with the floor of the valley far below. And what they behold as they come to this place raises as many questions as it answers. In the distance, at the far end of the valley in the fold of the mountains, stands an ancient castle fortress, made of stone as black as the darkest night and as dull as ash, not accepting or reflecting the light of the sun that shines full upon it as do all things of this world but rather as it were absorbing or devouring it. Even from this distance they can see that spikes rise from its parapets and its spires like claws reaching up to the sky, not in obeisance but in rebellion.

"It is an ill place," says Eldárien. "That much is clear for all to see."

"Then we have found our answer," adds Cirien, looking pensively at the castle for a moment and then turning to his companions. "We shall follow your request, Tilliána. Let us linger here no longer, despite the many unanswered questions that remain with us. I gave you my word, and I intend to keep it. An evil presence lives within the walls of that castle, or at least it did in years long past. And either way, the shadow of its presence remains. I feel the weight of it upon my heart already."

"As do we all," says Rórlain, gritting his teeth. "Let us make haste away."

After this they turn back, and, without a single glance over their shoulders toward the castle, they trace their steps to the opposite slope that they had ascended shortly before. By the time that they have climbed down to the level of the valley once again, the day is beginning to decline toward evening. Yet they resolve to continue on for at least a little longer, in order to put some distance between themselves and the mysterious castle. As the land begins to sink into darkness, they stop and find a small grove of trees not far from the path in the shelter of which to spend the night.

"Cirien," begins Rórlain, "did you not say that the river once took its origin from a lake high in the mountains?"

"I did say that."

"Where is it now?"

"My apologies," says Cirien, "but I did not mean to imply that I myself have ever been this way. I knew about the lake from ancient writings and old maps. I think I mentioned something to that effect at the time, though it appears much has changed since such accounts, or much has been obscured."

"Then how did you know about the shortcut through the mountains?"

asks Elmáriyë. "I just assumed that it has been taken by others. Yet I suspect now that no man has come this way in many years."

"I know not how to explain it," sighs Cirien. "For the castle we recently beheld looked to have been ancient. It puzzles me, therefore, that I have never heard of it, and that all the accounts of the mountain pass seem to be directly contradicted by what our eyes have seen today."

"Could it be some kind of...trickery? First there are nightmares and now there is...oh, I do not even know what to call it," Tilliána says.

"If anything has been trickery," replies Cirien, "I would think it was the lake rather than the castle. Maybe its owner has long concealed it from mortal eyes."

"Perhaps it was no lake but only a spring," suggests Rórlain, "or some divergence of the water either from the earth or the sky."

"That is possible," Cirien agrees.

"I do not care to know," says Tilliána. "My wish now is to get as far away from this haunted place as possible. For something strange is occurring, and a great evil seemed to emanate from the walls of the castle, sweeping across the valley like a bitter wind and blowing upon my face as I looked out upon it."

"We all felt it," Eldárien says, "and we shall therefore leave at first light. I regret the expense of time that this path has cost us, but I also do not regret our discovery. For perhaps we have indeed found a stronghold of the enemy that would have lain hidden for many years had we not discovered it this day."

"You tend to see the positive in every situation," says Tilliána. "Where I see only fear, or even absurdity, you find a hidden meaning."

Eldárien looks at her for a moment, softly shaking his head, and then he replies quietly, "I do not know that I agree with you, but I walked for many years in what appeared to be absurdity, face to face with the horror of war and death, and found that even there meaning can be found. It seems to me that nothing in this world, unless it be evil itself, is absurd, even if its meaning surpasses our understanding. Only we are so small and our sight so dim that the threads of meaning often escape our notice, and we do not realize the tapestry of beauty in which we are being woven." Then his voice falls silent and he smiles awkwardly, as if the expression comes to him unnaturally. "I do not know why I say such things. I was not even aware of it myself until I put it into words."

"I think I am beginning to understand," says Elmáriyë, a glint in her eyes as she looks at Eldárien.

"Well, I hope that I can find some meaning in all of this...and in all that has..." Tilliána begins, but her voice falls silent before the thought is finished.

"Some meaning in all that you have suffered and all that you have lost,"

Eldárien finishes for her. "Yes, I am aware that my words sound insensitive, and I plead only that I did not know what I said before I said it. Forgive me."

"I-I..." Tilliána stutters. "I mean... You do not need to ask for forgiveness. None of your words were ill spoken. They are just hard to hear."

Eldárien opens his mouth to reply but then simply nods in silence.

"Why do we not all try now to get some rest?" asks Cirien. "I shall keep the first watch."

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You do not understand, the voice says, echoing in Tilliána's mind. *You claim to cling to a meaning and purpose beyond yourselves, but all things are empty, naught but a hollow vessel waiting to be filled. And there is one thing alone can that fill it: power. This is your condemnation and this is your debt; this is your undeserved privilege and this is your doom: you are condemned to create meaning from the absurdity by the freedom of your will alone.*

She sits up with a start, breathing heavily. It is deep in the night, a sky bursting with countless stars above her head, and in its light she looks around, seeing that all of her companions are fast asleep.

I have the power to give back to you what you have lost, if you join your will to mine and create from the nothingness, the voice continues, speaking directly into her mind. *Is that not what you wish?*

I am not going to speak with you...creature, she replies in the same mind-speech. *Leave me alone.*

You need not speak. Only listen. In the world there is no meaning but that which you put into it. Is not everything but a facade that conceals emptiness? At one moment, something appears beautiful and precious to you, only in the next moment to appear vain and empty. At one moment you are satisfied, only in another moment to be dissatisfied. Do you value your family? Then you place meaning in it. Do you value victory in war? Then that becomes meaningful for you. But your weak mind thinks that it is "discovering" meaning rather than inventing it. Oh no, but such a thought is due only to your weakness. Become strong, and then you shall see: you shall gaze into the abyss that lies just below the surface of every thing...the pretty little surface of this petty little world. But worry not, I can show you how to stand strong against the vortex of emptiness and to bring forth from within you that meaning that you seek. But it shall be yours and yours alone, such that none can take it from you. Only then shall you find constancy and stability in that which is born of your own will. For what you yourself have created, none can take away. Why rely on the fading things that today are here and tomorrow are gone? Why rely on receiving, whether the light of the sun or the seed of man? No. Everything you need already lies within you...and nowhere else.

But what of my husband and my children? her mind asks before she can

prevent it.

I can give them back to you forevermore, replies the voice, *or rather you can give them back to yourself, to have and to hold as your own. And not even death can then take them away.*

While the voice speaks, Tilliána rises to her feet and places her hands over her ears, pacing back and forth and shaking her head as if to dispel the words or at least to keep herself from hearing them. But the voice only echoes more loudly and clearly within her. And only through what happens next does she realize that she is still dreaming. Until this moment, the nightmare has appeared so real and so vivid that she did not realize that she slept. But now she knows, and she feels an anguishing division in which a part of her is aware of her dreaming and is trying to wake up, and yet the other part of her is sunk in unconsciousness and follows the trajectory of the dream without thought or resistance.

Come to me, the voice says firmly. The command is strong and unbending, and in response she finds herself saying, *Yes, master.*

And then she begins to walk away from the camp and toward the narrow cleft between the hills...toward the castle.

No... No, Tilliána! What are you doing? Turn around. Go the other way!

But she cannot stop her body. It no longer obeys her but rather another force entirely.

Wake up! Wake up! He is toying with you! Only if you wake up can you resist him. He has power over you only because you sleep!

Yet what follows is not wakefulness but further dreaming. Her surroundings shift, and she finds herself no longer walking in the narrow space between towering walls of stone. Rather, she is in a broad meadow glistening in the sun, wildflowers dancing in the breeze all around her. And as she looks she sees, in the distance, the figures of her family walking toward her: Alsenór, Annár, and Beïta. They move together, their hands interlaced with one another, approaching her with steady step and unerring intent. But she cannot simply stand and wait for them. She sprints toward them, quickly crossing the distance between herself and her family.

Alsenór smiles at her gently while he releases the hands of their children. Both of them, laughing and crying, come running toward her. She opens wide her arms to receive them. And then, carrying them both as if they were again but infants, she rushes into the welcoming arms of Alsenór, only to pass through him as through a ghost or shadow. She turns back again, and he is gone. In that moment, her children too dissolve within her arms, and she finds herself alone, looking around frantically. And as she does so, the clear sky turns to dense and threatening clouds, and lightning strikes near her, causing an instantaneous clap of thunder that shakes the very foundations of

the earth. Terrified, she runs. It does not matter in which direction. She must simply get away, away from this terrible place, from these shadows of loss that promise presence and give only absence. She must escape. And as she runs, her head strikes against a hard surface, a surface unseen, and she falls to the ground.

At the impact of the blow she is jarred into wakefulness, and the visage of the dream blows away in an instant. She awakens lying on her back looking up at a narrow strip of sky between two columns of rock. And then the throbbing pain in her head overtakes her and she slips into another kind of unconsciousness than sleep.

† † †

Eldárien is jarred into wakefulness and he realizes immediately that he has fallen asleep while it is his turn to keep watch. He looks around anxiously but sees nothing. The night is dark and still, with no more than a whisper of wind in the trees and a partial moon shining in a sky whose light is veiled by a fabric of clouds that moves slowly across the firmament. He rubs his eyes and runs his hands through his hair, frustrated with himself for falling asleep on watch. He reaches out in his memory for some cause for his sudden awakening—an awakening permeated by anxiety, even fear—but he finds nothing. Perhaps it was no more than the subconscious awareness that he was meant to be awake, keeping guard over the camp, which stirred him awake again. Preoccupied as he is with these thoughts, it is a good ten or fifteen minutes before he looks back over his sleeping companions and realizes that Tilliána is gone.

He hurriedly awakes the others, saying to them, "Forgive me, but I fell asleep while keeping watch, and now I see that Tilliána is not here. Did she say anything to you?"

But they all respond in the negative.

"That is...unsettling," sighs Rórlain, rising to his feet and shaking off the sleep that clings to him.

"This makes some sense of my dream," Cirien says hesitantly. "Or at least I think it does."

"What do you mean?" Eldárien asks.

"It was more a nightmare, in truth."

"So they are back?"

"Most certainly. You see, I dreamed this time of a shadow in the darkness hunting us like a wolf hunts its prey. As the wolf steals away a sheep from the herd in the dark of night, so I dreamed of the shadow—or rather whatever creature concealed itself in shadow—stealing away the members of our company one by one, until only I was left."

"I fear that this was more real that just a nightmare," says Rórlain, arming

himself by pulling his bow and quiver over his shoulder and then slipping the handle of his axe into his belt. "I suppose we should hurry if we are to have any chance of saving her."

"I agree. I see no other reason for her disappearance but this," Eldárien says, grabbing his weapons as well. "But how was she taken without any of us noticing? That perhaps unsettles me most of all. And I regret that the fault with that lies primarily with me."

Then Elmáriyë, who has stood in silence at the edge of the grove since awakening, turns back and says, "I sense her in the direction of the castle. I know not how far or near. Let us grab what we need and go."

And so they proceed through the night, with only a single torch and the pale light of the moon to light their way through the darkness. And as they pass into the narrow gorge, following the dry riverbed, the light from the sky is all but blotted out, and they must pick their way among rocks in the orange light of the flame that dances against the floor and the walls and casts their shadows behind them like massive shapes morphing and changing with every movement. Rórlain walks in the lead, the torch in his hand, followed directly by Eldárien, for they both have experience hunting (or being hunted) in the night, and their senses are keen. Cirien and Elmáriyë are a few feet behind, their hands interlocked both for balance and for security, in order to prevent one or the other disappearing without notice, whether through an accident in the darkness or through the malice of the shadow that hunts them.

In such a manner they continue, and their progress is slow due both to the rough narrowness of the path that more or less forces them to walk in the riverbed itself and to their care in searching the ground for signs of Tilliána or of the creature that has taken her. "I feel both fear and grief," says Elmáriyë, "*her* fear and grief. I do believe that she came this way."

"She is probably already in the castle, or wherever else that shadow-creature dwells," says Rórlain, "if Cirien's dream was in any measure true."

"Yet I would be happy to find that it was wrong," Eldárien says, "even if I can currently think of no alternative."

They come to the far end of the gorge and find the land and sky opening out before them, the mountains' black shapes against a dark firmament, their forms visible only by their subtly darker hue and their lack of stars against the millions upon millions of stars that burn in the heavens above them. Little more is visible than this, and they continue forward only with trust and desire, seeing clearly no more than a few yards ahead of them, illumined by the torch in Rórlain's hand. As they pass another grove of trees, Eldárien for a moment sprints away into the darkness, only to return just as quickly, carrying a fallen branch, which he prepares and then holds to Rórlain's torch until it too catches fire.

Despite the lack of information given to them by the sense of sight, their other senses are alert, and they feel keenly that they walk through the center of the valley with wide stretches of land rising to either side of them, before they jut upwards, perhaps a half mile away in either direction, to the high mountain peaks that enfold them. Eventually another shape begins to loom ahead of them, a black blacker even than the darkness of the mountains: a black unimaginable in its blackness, not just an absence of light or color but a gaping hole in the darkness, causing the feeling that if one were to touch it, one would fall straight through into nothingness. It must, they know, be the mysterious stone of the castle, to which their steps carry them ever nearer.

"It is as we feared," mutters Eldárien under his breath, when they are close enough to the castle to make out its silhouette in the night and to feel its shadow cast upon them—or rather, to feel its magnetism eating up all the darkness around them, a vortex that feeds upon shadow in order to intensify, ingratiate, and satisfy its own darkness. "She is inside. I feel her heart calling."

"But that means that she yet lives, does it not?" asks Rórlain. "And there is still a chance to save her?"

"Indeed," Eldárien replies in a quiet voice, raising his torch in the air to cast its light upon the stone wall ahead of them. But the stone ignores the touch of the light, as if they exist in two separate realms with no communication between them. This only intensifies the feeling of staring into nothingness. "I fear that getting her out of such a place shall prove...ah, it matters not. I shall do what I can." He then turns to his companions and is almost startled by the vividness of their presence—in comparison with the profound "absence" of the black stone—faces looking back at him in the flickering light of the torches, anxiety lining their faces. "We need not all go into this terrible place, however. For there is no telling what dangers await."

"The shadows may drag us all in soon enough," says Rórlain. "But you are right, though I wish it were not so. For I do not want us to be separated." Then he shakes his head. "Though I suppose we already are."

"Perhaps I should go in," Elmáriyë offers, her voice firm despite her fear. "For I feel her probably most keenly, and the dreams have not effected me."

"That is true, and yet if there are any threats of a martial nature, you have little skill to defend yourself," answers Eldárien. "I think that I shall be able to walk by feeling nearly as much as you, and I have..." he raises a hand absentmindedly and places it upon the hilt of the lightbringer, "I have *this.*"

"But I do not wish for you to go alone," says Elmáriyë.

"It would not be wise for both of us to go," Eldárien replies.

"I will accompany you, Eldárien," Rórlain offers.

Eldárien nods at the same moment that Cirien says, "And I shall remain here with Elmáriyë at my side. Or rather we shall find some spot to hide at a

safe distance...as safe as we can be in proximity to such a place."

"Then it is settled," says Eldárien, looking first to Cirien and then to Elmáriyë, his eyes almost saying an involuntary goodbye. "If we do not return by..."

"Hush," Cirien says, with a wave of his hand. "We shall do what we discern to be best. Trust in our judgment."

"I...I do," replies Eldárien. "But here, take this torch, so that at least you do not walk in the dark."

Cirien silently takes it and nods his head, and then he and Elmáriyë draw away again to the east, until nothing of them is visible but a tiny point of light bobbing in the darkness.

"Well then," Rórlain says, waving his own torch in the air and looking around. "Do you suppose there is a door somewhere?"

"I do not know how there could not be," replies Eldárien, "though it shall be difficult to find in the darkness."

"How long until sunrise?" Rórlain asks, looking up at the sky and trying to gauge the time through the location of the moon. After a moment, he adds, "Too long."

"Knowing that Tilliána is missing and probably in grave danger," says Eldárien, "I am not willing to wait even a single moment when anything is in my power to do."

"Of course," nods Rórlain, "then let us try to find an entrance." With this, he steps up to the wall and begins to scan its surface with his eyes, holding the torch close to the stone. But to both men the wall appears completely uniform, a featureless, abysmal black. After a few moments, Rórlain begins to walk along the edge of the wall, following its trajectory, and Eldárien silently follows him, looking and thinking. For a good ten minutes they circle the castle fortress until they find themselves on the opposite side, northeast of the structure, with a swiftly rising mass of mountain behind them and the sheer wall of the castle before them. But still they see nothing.

As they make their way back around the castle again to the place where they first stood, Eldárien throws about in his mind looking for an answer, frustration and anger growing within him to the point of bursting—emotions, he knows, born of profound fear. He is afraid that they shall be too late to save Tilliána, and the thought hurts him so deeply that he wants to cry out audibly, to let the pain loose rather than concealing it silently within. Even as they walk, he buries his face in his hands and tries to draw in a breath, gritting his teeth. And then suddenly a thought comes to him.

"Could you put out the torch?" he says suddenly.

"What did you say?"

"Could you extinguish the torch?"

"Why?" asks Rórlain. "It is dark out here. We will see next to nothing if I do so."

"We already see next to nothing," says Eldárien, "but I have a thought. A thought that just perhaps..."

"Very well," Rórlain agrees, and he stamps out the flames of the torch under his foot. As soon as the last bit of the fire sputters out into smoke, all goes dark around them, and the only thing at all visible to their eyes are the stars and the moon far above them. And indeed the firmament feels immeasurably farther than it ought to be, as if they are looking up at it from an entirely different level of the world, thousands and thousands of miles lower than they actually stand, out of the depths of a narrow pit. But they know that this is not a matter of physical location, some trick of space, but rather a spiritual reality and a trick of the spirit. But when they turn from looking at their surroundings and at the sky above them and direct their gaze again to the castle, they see that the black wall has changed in appearance. The change is so slight that it almost goes unnoticed. But now the surface, which before showed nothing but blackness, looks almost like a pool of black water, soft and viscous. Rórlain unconsciously reaches out to touch it.

"Wait!" cries Eldárien, staying Rórlain's hand. "Let us do so together." And he then lays one hand upon Rórlain's shoulder. Together they place their palms upon the black surface that now appears almost to move before them, a wall of liquid stone like melted obsidian. And once their hands touch the wall, they find it giving way before them. Or rather, they find it pulling them in. It takes only a moment, and they, as it were, fall into the surface of the black water—they fall horizontally into the darkness, only immediately to emerge, still standing, on the other side. They now find themselves in a wide courtyard of pure black stone, floor and wall, and indistinguishable shapes can be made out before them, perhaps buildings of some kind, though it is too dark to see. Now that the torch light has been extinguished, the stone looks different, and yet its viscous, ever moving appearance has passed; the best way to describe its appearance now is perhaps to say that it looks like opaque glass.

"What in the world is...?" Rórlain begins to ask, but his voice fails in his throat as the stone changes again before their gaze and now becomes reflective like a mirror. The two men feel as though they are standing in a courtyard of mirrors, all reflecting both the sky and one another—as well as the two men who stand in their midst. But the reflections are not like ordinary reflections—a placid lake reflecting the nocturnal sky and magnifying its beauty, nor a mirror imaging a human face as it appears in life—but rather twisted, distorted images that change both shape and hue.

"What trickery is this?" Rórlain sighs, and he unconsciously takes a step

away from the nearest wall, bumping into Eldárien.

"It goes from rejecting light," Eldárien observes, "to twisting light."

Suddenly there is a burst of flame ahead of them and above them, at the center of the courtyard, as a tower-beacon of some kind is lit and begins burning brightly, its light reflecting in distorted visage in the myriad faces of the walls and floors and buildings of glassy stone.

"It seems that someone knows we are here," Rórlain says with a mirthless laugh, "and welcomes our visit."

"Of course he awaits us," Eldárien responds, "for he has long foreseen our arrival. Why else did he take only one of us and not all of us together?"

"I do not know why," replies Rórlain. "It would seem easier to take us all —to imprison and destroy us all at once—unless this creature, whatever it may be, prefers a game of cat and mouse. But I admit that I know nothing of its purpose."

"I think it is exactly as you said," Eldárien breathes, his voice a hoarse whisper. "The being that dwells here prefers a game, and we have just stepped into its trap. I too could be wrong, but I have the sense that it is his greatest pleasure—though joy he knows not, nor true rejoicing—to trap the living in the prison of their own fears, in the corridors of their own minds. And this fortress of his serves such an end...though if it also has other ends, I know not."

"How do you...know this?" asks Rórlain.

"I feel it...his intent," answers Eldárien. "His presence surrounds us, oppressive and unwelcome, like eyes watching in the darkness preparing to strike."

"We should—"

"We cannot get out," Eldárien interrupts suddenly, his voice intense. "Not at present, anyway. All possibility of escape has been taken from us. The walls are impassible." But then he turns and looks deeply at Rórlain, pain and compassion in his eyes. "But do not despair. There may yet be hope. I only wish that you were not here with me."

"I would not be anywhere else, Eldárien," Rórlain says, even as he reaches out one of his hands and tests the stone of the nearest wall. It indeed refuses to give way and remains solid. "Whatever shall be shall be."

"You are right," Eldárien agrees. "I am sorry for what I said. I am grateful that you are here, though I wish that the danger would threaten me alone. I do not wish to drag you into peril once again."

"If that were the case, then even if I was physically present, I would not truly be here at your side, would I? Not as deeply *with* you as I am now."

Eldárien turns and looks at Rórlain for a long moment, his expression inscrutable. Then he says simply, "That is exactly right."

And so they turn toward the center of the courtyard illumined by the beacon and now make out what appears to be a door at the base of the tower: a silhouette of greater darkness ridged with a silvery strand of metal. As they draw near to it, they can discern upon its face a design which they have never seen before, woven in the same sinuous silver as the metal that frames the door, the appearance of which in the blackness has a haunting effect. When all else has gone dark, even the smallest hints of light stand out like early stars in an empty sky caught between the light of dusk and the firmament of full night—though now it is as though looking up in the blackest midnight to see, not a firmament dancing with stars, but emptiness, a void where before was parchment filled with text and sky filled with constellations.

The design upon the door is of a serpentine or lizard-like creature, its form emerging from what appears to be a crack in the earth at the bottom of the door, and its veinous, membrane-like wings stretched across the entire width of the door, from lintel to lintel. At the bottom of the image, around its feet and tail bursting from the earth, are walls with jagged claws, looking almost like a bear trap, and yet the creature is not bound by them. Rather, the figure strains so evidently upward that the walls appear not as a trap but as a doorway, a place of passage from hidden depths under the earth to the sky above, in which is the design of a many-pointed sun surrounded by seven stars.

"Is it…?" Rórlain begins to ask, but his words fail to form into speech.

Eldárien replies to his unvoiced question nonetheless, "Devourer of the Light and Bane of the Blessed…that is what the ancient serpents have been called. And the place of their birth or passage seems clearly to be this very castle."

"Let us only hope that we do not encounter one," Rórlain says.

"Indeed."

"But what I do not understand," he continues, "is this: I expected to feel differently here in the castle than I do. I mean…it is bizarre and unusual, and I feel a sense of being trapped, of suffocation, but it is only a fraction of what I expected to feel."

"I feel the same," says Eldárien, "and this is not a consoling thing. I fear that the power that has drawn us here is only toying with us, withholding himself until it is his pleasure to snap the trap shut."

"But why, if you feel as I, do you speak with such conviction?" asks Rórlain.

"After my prolonged encounter with the creature of darkness, Maggot, it is as though my heart remembers the scars and the kind of power that inflicted them. I can recognize a similar presence here, hovering just beyond my consciousness, like movement in the corner of my eye that, when I turn to look at it, recedes from view."

"That does not bring me any solace."

"Neither does it bring solace to me, particularly since we must pass into this darkness for the sake of our friend and companion."

Rórlain does not question Eldárien's resolve, for he shares it. After all, if Eldárien had not been willing to walk into darkness in the slim hope of rescuing him from the eöten's grasp, he himself would no longer enjoy the breath of life. If the same gift can be extended to Tilliána, then he does not hesitate to do so. "Is there a way...to open the door?" he asks after a while.

Eldárien breathes deeply, as if in thought, before answering, "Steel yourself, for I know not what comes." He then steps forward until he is only a foot or two from the door and says, "We are here for our companion and we request entrance."

Suddenly a sinister laughter echoes throughout the courtyard, though its point of origin is unclear—or rather it originates all around them, as if from the very walls of the castle. But as soon as the laughter rises, it also dies away. It is followed by a voice pressing upon the fringes of their minds, a voice which they both hear in equal measure, even though it is more felt than heard.

"You address the Lord of Mæres with such audacity! You could rather address me with respect befitting my power, at least until you bow before me in perfect obeisance."

"None bow before you but in fear," Eldárien retorts in an audible voice.

"That is not true, petty little man. Many bow before me in awe of my majesty and my might, or in the seduction of sharing in my power. Though you speak truly that my greatest delight is to instill fear in the living and terror in their rest."

"Why do you call yourself the Lord of Mæres?" Rórlain asks, a combination of anger, resentment, and curiosity blending within him—though this is not the curiosity by which one wishes to learn about the world bathed in daylight and beauty, but rather that by which one wishes to solve a troubling problem or to protect oneself against an evil. It is simply the desire to know, to grasp for some sense of safety and strength by giving a name to one's opponent, who otherwise remains intangible and, in this intangibility, all the more threatening.

"I thought that the answer to such a question would be obvious," the voice replies in its mind-speech. "I am the weaver of dreams and the afflicter of sleep, though even in waking I enjoy making my presence known. Fear is my domain, and terror is my game. Though not in many long years have any of the living come to my castle nor entered within its courts."

"Shall you let us in or not?" Eldárien asks firmly. "That is your intention, is it not?"

At first the voice does not speak. Instead a crease appears in the door's

center and it parts, swinging inward to reveal a dark corridor sloping immediately downward before them. Then the voice says simply, "Let the games begin."

Rórlain takes a deep breath, a wave of fear washing over him, and says, "So we go into the belly of the earth once again. I suppose there is no other way, is there?"

"I wish there were," Eldárien replies. "I know not if we shall return, but remember: fear is his weapon against us, the kind of fear that torments the mind and drives it to madness or despair."

"The 'Lord of Mæres'," Rórlain breathes. "Nightmares cannot harm us unless we yield to their bidding. But are all of our ill dreams really the fruit of his action?"

"You know the answer as well as I," answers Eldárien, turning for a moment again to his friend.

"You are right," says Rórlain. "Most often it is no more than our own fears and the wounds of our hearts stirring the mind as it sleeps. But this...I fear this. For it shall be something else entirely."

"That is true. But let us take solace in the fact that we shall also be awake. And for no reason, for no reason whatsoever, may we give in to sleep. For then his dominion over us shall spread much further." With these words, Eldárien nods, and Rórlain ignites his torch once again. Then the two together step through the threshold and into the darkness that awaits, laughter echoing in the courtyard behind them until it is silenced by the door that automatically seals itself closed once they are inside. The slope of the floor is steep beneath their feet, and they find it difficult to maintain their balance as they descend. This difficulty is compounded by a sense of profound disorientation, for the walls of the corridor are again of the dull black stone which absorbs rather than reflects light, and so the torch held by Rórlain illumines the air immediately surrounding them but no more than this, giving no inclination of where the walls and ceiling begin and where they end. In a word, besides their ability to see one another, the walk in complete blackness.

Only a few minutes pass until fear begins to deepen and expand on the horizons of their consciousness, a fear far beyond the natural threat of the situation in which they find themselves (which is itself already considerable). It is like malevolent eyes laid upon them from the darkness, watching them and instilling in them a feeling of dread and terror that cripples their hearts and makes it difficult to even take another step. But the gaze, or rather the threat that feels like an evil gaze, is not a personal force, though perhaps in it there are remnants of personhood long shattered and broken. It feels somehow anonymous, and yet for being anonymous it is all the more dangerous. For a person can be moved to pity and to compassion, or at least to reason.

But when the person is effaced and only a faceless force of evil and lust for power remains, no such resistance is possible. There is then no dialogue or even any argument: it is a sheer clash of wills, one will bound to a frail and yet richly beautiful heart and flesh, a living person with consciousness and desire and fear, with aspiration and hope; the other, a will belonging to a consciousness which for so many centuries has been bent upon one purpose alone—the destruction of all that is good—that it can hardly be related to as an individual any longer. It is now barely more than a faceless and nameless force of vengefulness and hate, concealing, for those with the capacity to see, a deep-seated envy, whence springs its desire to mock, terrorize, and debase the very creatures whose freedom is felt as a placid mirror turned toward it, reflecting back to it the depths of its own misery and the absoluteness of its slavery.

All of this and more washes over Eldárien and Rórlain now, as they force their legs to carry them ever deeper into the tunnels that lie beneath the castle. The torch is unsteady in Rórlain's hand, for his whole body is now shaking with fear, and he finds it difficult to breathe. "D-do you feel her any more?" he asks, with great effort.

"Tilliána..." Eldárien replies in the darkness, though it sounds like an echo from a great distance rather than a voice from directly at Rórlain's side. "I..."

Rórlain waits, but for what seems a long time—though time is almost indistinguishable in this place—no answer comes. "Eldárien?" he says at last.

"Y-yes," the answer comes. "I feel her, but ever so faintly." Then silence again falls between them for a long period. When Eldárien speaks again, he says, "She is still further below us. We are walking in the right direction."

Suddenly, in an instant, the light of the torch is extinguished. Or rather, a wave of darkness washes over them, like a gust of chill wind welling up from the depths, and it is so intense that they cannot tell whether the torch has been extinguished or whether they simply can discern its light no longer. And with this darkness comes panic. Unconsciously, Rórlain drops the torch and buries his head in his hands, cowering as if to defend himself against a blow. Eldárien takes a step back and lays his hands upon his sword, drawing it forth from its scabbard. But nothing comes.

For a long moment all is still, and neither man moves.

Then Eldárien says softly, "Let us continue."

There is no response.

"Rórlain?" he asks. "Speak to me. Are you alright?"

Still there is no answer. Eldárien steps forward and, holding the lightbringer in one hand, he feels his way through the darkness with the other. The corridor is narrow enough that it is not difficult to feel his way from one wall to the other with a single wave of his hand. Because of this, he swiftly

realizes that Rórlain is no longer with him and he is alone in the passage. And as this awareness dawns upon him, the last cushion between himself and the terror that has been encroaching upon him is torn away, and fear comes rushing in upon him. He stumbles to the side and leans against the wall, feeling light-headed and faint. For a few long moments he can grasp no clear thoughts nor give voice to the feeling of his heart, for his inner person is like a tumultuous sea crashing in a violent storm, or more aptly he feels that he is lost in such a sea with no raft nor bark to which to cling. He does the only thing that he can do in such a moment: he remains still and silent in the crashing waves, letting them buffet him from all sides even as he tries to keep his head above the water. Even a conscious act of faith or trust is impossible to summon, and soon he realizes that unless he moves his body, unless he continues forward through the darkness, he shall stand here paralyzed and suffocating until the fear takes him entirely. And so with an immense effort he pushes himself up from the wall and stumbles forward a few steps down the passage. And these steps lead to further ones.

He feels nothing with this act of faith, but he believes that as long as he moves he has not yet surrendered to the dark. And so he moves, unsteady on his feet but intent on his purpose, and continues along the passageway and its descent. And he walks for what seems to be hours, stretching on before and behind him in interminable darkness, his hands sweating against the hilt of the sword and his feet pounding against the stone floor with muffled footfalls. Now he senses neither Tilliána nor Rórlain, nor even, in a way, his own self. He is aware only of a sense of profound alienation, as if the further he descends into the depths of the earth under the castle, the further he departs from all that is beautiful, good, or true in the world, and from everything lovable or precious. Instead all that remains is the awareness of loss and a feeling of profound and utter isolation. And this isolation is not like the loneliness that he has felt so often in the past—the loneliness of the heart crying out for communion in the visceral awareness of its own capacities and desires—an aloneness aware that it is an addressee in a dialogue of love who, though he bears the echo of the primal voice impressed upon his heart, has nonetheless forgotten the one who first spoke and is thus unable to speak in response but wishes to do so.

No, now all he feels is a pressing sense of numbness descending upon him, weighing on his mind, heart, and body until he fears that any moment he shall simply cease walking altogether and sit down on the cold stone to sleep forevermore. His eyes begin to close even as he walks, and he finds himself slipping into an abyss of nothingness and absurdity, when suddenly, as he takes another step forward, a gust of warm air blows strong against his face. This stirs him into alertness for long enough to realize that he has just stepped

out of the narrow descending corridor and onto a level floor. And by the movement of the air and the intangible sense of space, he can tell, even in the pitch-black darkness, that a large room has opened before him. He stands still and listens for a long moment, but he can discern little more about the room than the hint of its size, neither how far across it may be nor how high its ceiling. And he hesitates to move forward for the simple reason that he can see nothing and could easily step into a pit or some kind of trap. On top of this, burying everything like an immeasurable weight, is the suffocating terror and sense of horrible loss that have not lessened in any way.

Reaching out beyond himself for what little flickering spark of hope and courage there may be to sustain him, he begins to walk forward, stretching out his hand to avoid hurting himself on whatever he might collide with in the darkness, and reaching out with his heart for a thread of communication that can lead him toward his goal, whether that be Tilliána, Rórlain, or Hiliána herself. But he feels nothing. Or rather he is assailed by the flood of ill feelings in which no good thought or affection can breathe or begin to form, suffocated in its very conception or prevented from even drawing near. Even the sense of his own motivations, the driving force behind his intentions, slips away from him, and for a few moments he feels led almost to question his very being and identity. He feels like a shadow lost among shadows, like a particle of darkness in an eternity of darkness, like a speck of dust hidden in a room into which no light filters or shall ever filter, and which therefore shall evermore go unseen and unknown. Overcome by the torrent of these thoughts, thoughts of loss and thoughts of absurdity, which infiltrate his soul and crush him, he falls to his knees and the lightbringer slips from his grasp, clattering against the stone floor and sending echoes through the spacious room.

And suddenly he slips from consciousness, or rather his consciousness is carried to another place, another state, and he finds himself standing in the center of a lake of glassy water under a starless sky, the only illumination a pillar of flame directly before him across the water. He looks down, surprised that he does not sink into the water, only to realize that he stands upon a small column of rock hardly wider than himself, jutting from the water. The waves, hardly moving upon the still surface of the lake, nonetheless ripple forth from the rock with the subtlest of shapes. He also sees that he is bare and exposed, with nothing covering his body or his heart as he stands in the utter darkness illumined only by the column of fire that feels in no way consoling or welcoming but rather threatening. When he raises his gaze again and looks upon the pillar, it slowly begins to move toward him, and he discerns in it a figure—or rather he realizes by the gestures of its movement that it is a figure, much like that of a man only much greater in size. It glides across the

surface of the lake with steps more akin to floating than to walking, and as it passes, the water itself turns to flame, flame shot through with crackling sparks of electricity. Both flame and spark then spread forth from the figure and its trail until they have covered the entire surface of the lake, turning it all to fire and lightning, roaring around him like an inferno. He feels the heat upon his skin, feels its burning—the incredible pain of flesh recoiling from the heat of the fire and the stinging strike of bolts of shocking electrum—until the flesh cannot feel any further and itself yields to the flame.

He recoils within himself now, seeking some refuge in the hidden place of his heart as there is no possibility of escape outside of him, but only agony and death. Yet he realizes that there is nothing but an abyss within him...as though he stares into a bottomless pit of black nothingness, with neither air nor wind nor water nor life. And he feels himself sinking, sinking internally and externally, as his heart fails at the same moment as the narrow platform of rock on which he stands begins to crumble and descend into the lake. He spontaneously raises his gaze, as if seeking with his eyes for one last refuge or escape in this nightmare of loss, but he sees only that the flaming figure now stands directly before him. And the figure is silently laughing. This silent laugh, without voice or sound or space, nonetheless penetrates into the hollowness of Eldárien's heart and echoes within it, filling the spaceless space with unbearable dread. For a moment it seems that this wretched, mocking laughter—taking pleasure in his pain and despair as if the most delightful thing to witness—is the only real thing that there is or has ever been.

And all at once the platform beneath him gives way, and yet, rather than sinking into the burning water, he finds himself falling, air whistling past his ears and sweeping away the flame and shock from his flesh. The wicked voice slips out of his soul now, and he hears it far above him, like an echo in a cavern, like a voice across a great distance, turning from laughter into rage. The voice fumes in frustration and defiance, though Eldárien knows not against what the voice rebels. Soon the voice is so far away that he can no longer hear it. All he knows, rather, is his naked body falling through boundless space, falling for what feels to be an immeasurable amount of time. And then arms wrap around him as he falls, unknown and unexpected, and yet sure.

A moment later he awakes and finds himself kneeling against the stone in the dark chamber, his body doused in sweat but unharmed. Raising his eyes, he sees his sword on the floor beside him, glowing with a brilliant and pure light. He reaches forward and takes it in his hand, and as he does so, the light expands, growing brighter and extending its reach until even the furthest corners of the chamber are filled with light. He makes a movement as to stand, but his weakened body at first does not obey. He draws in a deep breath and cries out from the deep places of his heart, which in this moment again

find their voice. And then he rises, with a mysterious but tangible sense of arms lifting him from behind and imbuing him with strength. Then this presence flows into him, as if shattering the chaos that holds him bound and imbuing his body and spirit with the vigor that they had lost under the relentless assault of the darkness. And so he steps forward, drawn by the spark of a presence that he feels at the center of his consciousness, toward the woman whom he entered this place of darkness to save.

Chapter Sixteen
The Forge

The chamber in which Eldárien finds himself is ornate, the stone on the pillars and archways carved in various shapes, though none of them beautiful to the eye. This is not because they are crude or poorly made, but rather because the stone is not carved in elegant shapes but in sharp and jagged edges, making the whole castle feel like a weapon pointed menacingly at any intruder. None of this was he able to see before, since torchlight did not fall upon and illumine the stone but was rather absorbed by it, as it were. Only the bluish light glowing from the blade of the lightbringer has been able to bring brilliance into the darkness of the castle and to shine upon the black stone as if it were ordinary coal or obsidian. The room which Eldárien now crosses is more than a hundred yards across in both directions and half that in height, and he feels diminutive walking through its center, a speck of light in a vastness of void space and encroaching darkness. Even so, the light of the sword in his hand dispels the shadows to a great extent, such that even if Eldárien himself feels small, he is aware of something much greater just beyond his vision, enfolding him and flowing through him, passing through the poverty of his heart and into the sanctified artifact in his hand.

An arched doorway lies on the far side of the room at the center of a wall whose every inch is covered with ancient runes far different than those of the Telméric language and writing. What language could this be? Eldárien inspects the runes momentarily as he passes and sees that they are similar in character to the architecture of the castle—menacing and unpleasant, designed to evoke the same sense of terror and threat that seems the only specialty and sole desire of the castle's maker. But the question remains for Eldárien: why was this castle made, and what is its current purpose? There were little or no structures above ground, or at least as far as Eldárien could discern in the darkness that had engulfed him and Rórlain at that time. But beneath the castle it seems that there is a massive network of rooms and corridors, a

veritable palace if one is to judge by the stonework, the various doorways leading off at different angles in every direction, and the sheer size of the space. But what could possibly have created a structure of such a size and have done so underground? For these chambers are not caves hewn out of the earth, by however skilled a hand. No, the stones are fitted together like bricks, tightly and securely, with seams so tight that they are visible only when closely inspected in the clean light of the lightbringer.

Taking all of this in, Eldárien nonetheless does not hesitate in his footsteps nor turn from his purpose, for he feels the presence drawing him, and he leans into it as best he can to discern, in the great unknown before him, the passage that would allow him to proceed closer to his goal. Nonetheless, the terror of the place and of the "master" of the place yet lingers on the fringes of his consciousness, strong and menacing, and he is afraid that at any moment it shall burst forth to assault and suffocate him again. His heart aches and recoils at the thought of another such attack. But it is also true that the nature of the force has changed—the eyes looking upon him from the shadows of darkness. Now he feels not so much the mocking laughter that had accompanied him before as rather a vehement anger and hatred. And yet the threat and danger of the latter feels even greater than that of the former, for it would more willingly do him grievous harm out of spite.

As he passes through the doorway, he enters immediately upon a narrow stairway that spirals steeply downward. And as he follows it to its bottom and steps forth from it onto a lower level of the palace, he finds the first hint of an answer to the question regarding the purpose for which this castle was built. For he steps forth into a massive underground chamber, five or six times the size of the chamber from which he has just come. Here the black stonework reaches its end and its foundation, built into the very rock of the mountain itself. The upper portion of the chamber's walls are constructed of the same black stone, smooth and intricate in design, whereas the lower half is grayish rock with a porous, jagged face: the very foundations of the mountain. But this is also not the only distinguishing feature of the chamber: it is shaped not according to any geometric design but rather according to the organic shape of the mountain, or rather of what appears to have long been a natural cavern at the heart of the mountain, like a hollow pocket of air winding its way from the surface down into the depths of the earth, and here broadening into an echoing cavern hundreds and hundreds of yards across. And the floor that was built into this chamber, of the same black stone as the rest of the castle, descends gradually downward to the center, like steps or seating cascading to the center of an auditorium. And yet the center of this auditorium is neither stage nor altar, but a gaping hole. As Eldárien draws near to it—though considering the distance, this takes quite some time—he sees that it is close to a

hundred feet across, a natural fissure in the earth dropping to an unknown depth, and the black stone floor itself ceases a few yards from the edge, giving way to rough, unpolished rock.

Standing a few yards from the edge of the abyss, Eldárien remains silent and still, listening for any sounds in the chamber, but even more deeply listening for the silent tugging on his heart that will direct him to Tilliána's location. Externally all is profoundly silent, as only caves deep within the earth can be. The only sound seems to be the whistling of air rising up from the depths of the hole, an air that is surprisingly warm, much warmer than the coolness of the air in the rest of the underground palace. As for the deeper voice of the heart, to his surprise, he realizes that he can no longer clearly sense Tilliána nor the direction of her presence. It is not so much, as it was but a short time earlier, that he feels all bonds of communication cut by the oppression that assails him, but rather that there is another "presence" interfering with the attunement of their hearts. At first Eldárien tries to push beyond this presence, reaching out with his spirit to Tilliána, who lies beyond it, but as he does so it only grows more intense. So instead he confronts it directly, projecting his attention out to it. And as he does this, he immediately realizes that the presence lies within the abyss below him, a presence so multifaceted, so ambivalent, that he knows not whether it is one person or many, or even a person at all. All he knows is that it is malevolent and dangerous.

Suddenly a voice inundates his mind: *Come to me. Only through me can you hope to reach her.* The voice, however, sounds like a multitude of voices and yet like none at all—a cacophony of noise pouring into Eldárien's mind as a cascade of snow loosed upon the mountainside or violent waves of the sea pounding against a drowning man caught in its midst. For a moment all of his thoughts are bound, overwhelmed by the intensity of the presence that floods into him. But then the presence subsides enough that he is able to reply: *Who are you?* In response to his question comes the familiar laughter, though it is touched now by something different, a darker tenor than before, which Eldárien cannot seem to name.

Are we not at least acquaintances by now? says the voice in response.

Why do you speak to me in this way only now, when earlier you were silent? asks Eldárien.

The laughter ceases, and Eldárien feels a wave of fury wash through him. And then the voice says, *I am the terror of the night. I am the multiplicity bound by a single power. I am the cacophony that becomes harmony through the single thread of unified rule—the scepter of ultimate power in the hands of the greatest of kings. They call me the Lord of Mares, the King of Night, or, as frail humanity has become accustomed to saying, the Nightmare.*

And what do you want from me? What do you want from us? asks Eldárien.

I want to prevent you from doing what you intend to do. Or rather, from what you are destined to do. Then the sick laughter returns, filled with hatred. *Destiny. What a pitiful word. The gods write the lines of the stories that men are to walk, and yet man in his blindness thinks that such a destiny is desirable, that such a destiny is freedom. No, destiny is slavery. Who would not wish to throw off the yoke of a life not one's own in order to discover the freedom for which the heart longs? And yet the gods think the lines of destiny that they write are indestructible. But it is my joy to destroy those lines and to rebuild them as I please, so that what the gods intend becomes instead a twisted image, a broken mirror, a shattered artifact singing not to the original owner but to the possessor...to me. Only then, through destruction, can it be rebuilt in my image, in boundless freedom and absolute power. Yes...for I am the one who takes possession. And I wish to take possession of you as well, frail human, and to grant you a share in the freedom that is mine. Choose me as your master rather than the petty gods and their so-called destiny. Otherwise I shall have no choice but to break you and the threads to which you so feebly cling.*

Break me you may, and with great ease, Eldárien replies, *for a weak mortal cannot possibly stand against what you are. But a man may not be possessed against his will, and that I refuse to offer you.*

We shall see when it truly comes to the point, says the voice, *how strong is your resolve.*

I have found in the path of the gods a freedom you cannot comprehend, though I would not give it the name destiny. That word is of your own choosing, and not one with which the gods deal with the children of men. No, rather, their plan is something so much more than that, so much wider and deeper than fate, and so much more free, even if every step of my path is seen and marked out by a greater love, unseen but true.

Come to me, and we shall see, the voice echoes for a final time, and fades away.

After these words, the ground begins to shake violently, and Eldárien is forced to back away from the edge of the abyss as the black stone upon which he had previously been standing now shifts from its original position, the massive slabs all around the hole lifting and sliding toward the abyss, circling and descending one upon another. Eldárien watches from a distance as this happens, but he does not move until all has returned to stillness and silence. Then he walks cautiously to the edge of the hole and looks down, and he sees that the stones have now formed a staircase spiraling downward into the darkness below. Seeing this, he sighs with exhaustion and tries to restrain the fear that wells up within him. His mind is now stretched far beyond its limit, his willpower and spirit and very heart extended and assaulted beyond their

capacity; he feels like a fabric now totally unwoven until it is no more than strands of unbound thread, both frayed and stretched taut to the point of breaking.

But Tilliána's face flashes before his mind's eye in this moment, and he sees her as he saw her before in the moments of her vulnerability and her beauty: anguished and on the point of death, weeping in sorrow and loss, worried and filled with fear, looking into his eyes in gratitude and in love. Indeed, he almost feels her warmth again under his hand as he consoles her in the camp on their journey into the mountains, and he feels the pain and loss of her heart against his own as he embraces her when he first bears her from death into life. All of these images and feelings coalesce together into a strong sense of her mystery, her presence, and immediately he knows not only that she is to be found somewhere in the abyss below, but that she is not far away. "Tilliána," he sighs, "I am coming."

After this, he adds interiorly, *And Rórlain, wherever you may be, I shall not leave you either. I led you here, and, even if it costs me my life, I shall bring you out once again. But I cannot feel you as I feel her...I have not borne you so I cannot yet feel you, at least not with the same depth and clarity. So please return to me. If you are still in the darkness, may you be safe, and may our paths cross in the weaving greater than our own.* Carrying both of his companions in the affection of his heart, and feeling the weight of both pain and desire interlocking inseparably in the awareness of entrustment, he draws near to the edge of the abyss. He allows his heart to reach out, as if pushing against its limits in the attempt to make contact with them, to assure them of his care, to draw them to him across the distance that separates them. But now he feels no response. His only light is the sense of Tilliána's presence on the edge of his consciousness, drawing him on.

He begins to descend the stairs, the lightbringer still held tightly in his hands as the only source of light in this place of utter darkness. The chasm all around him remains narrow for a good twenty or so yards, but then it falls away, and he finds the spiral staircase descending into empty space, another large cavern still deeper in the earth and still larger than those through which he has now passed. And as he looks around, he sees that this cavern is entirely natural, its shape formed by no artifice but that of the one who first created it. And the lower he descends, the brighter and warmer the air becomes, for, as he soon realizes, he descends toward a burning lake of fire. In the center of the lake stands an island, ridged round with pillars of black stone and silvery metal, though Eldárien can see no more than this. In the distance, in every direction surrounding the lake, are other shelves of uncut stone, and upon them stand shapes that he cannot quite make out from this distance, though they look not like natural rock formations but like the work of another hand.

This cavern, if it is a work of nature and primordial design, has nonetheless become home to another entity who has taken possession of it and has left his mark upon it.

When he comes to the base of the stairs, Eldárien steps out onto the center of the island and looks around. Hot air rises and twists in wisps of steam from the burning lake, whistling and moaning as it seeks an escape into the upper levels. And the liquid itself, like molten metal, bubbles and churns softly. Other than this all remains in burdensome quietude, tense as a drawn bow. "Where are you?" Eldárien calls out. "I see no one here, nor any path to proceed further." There is no audible response; but instead shapes and symbols which he had not noticed before begin to glow bright red upon the pillars that encircle the island. As Eldárien inspects them, he sees that they are the runes of the same unknown language that he had seen above. And yet under his very gaze they begin to change, as if being etched anew by an invisible hand, into the runes of ancient Telméric. And these Eldárien understands. Passing therefore from pillar to pillar as the runes glow and change under his eyes, he reads:

In the year 546 of the First Era I built my forge.
After the Anaíon resisted our plans to spite us
I saw the weakness of my companions, my leaders,
and I chose to separate myself from them,
for only in this way, I realized, could I
create a host such that the spite would be mine alone.

They came from the deep, from the bowels of the earth,
an artifice from me alone, touched by no will but mine.
They were my pride and my joy, my mindless tools.
But I gave them mind, in a fashion, fashioned from me.
Where I think, they think; where I will, they will;
where I extend my act and my power, so they act with might.

And I sent them forth for war.

Yet Eígroch came unto me and asked for my aid.
Far beyond aiding another had I grown,
but I agreed to yield my creatures to his command,
though but for a time, and thus tricked him in oath
that in response he would be my slave forever.

Now we see the fruits of such wisdom and foresight,
that the armies that marched forth and conquered,
even in times when the glory of war flourishes not,
are now hidden throughout lands both near and far,
the eötenga of my making, waiting only for the chance to kill.

As he finishes reading the words on the final pillar, Eldárien steps back, disturbed and deeply unsettled. If this is truly the place in which the eötenga were first born, what power does this "Lord of Mæres" truly possess that he cannot only oppress the minds of his victims but fashion creatures from the very molten rock of the earth? And knowing that Eldárien bears a light within him that can destroy his creations, certainly this entity will not allow him to depart unscathed. At whatever cost, it shall crush him. The pieces of this mystery fall into place now, and he understands not only that all the events since Tilliána's disappearance have been a trap (this he has already long intuited), but he also grasps the motivations of the Lord of Mæres and why his malevolent gaze fell so specially upon Eldárien and his companions. *What misfortune that we chose to travel this way!* he thinks with a surge of despondency. *Hardly would it have been possible to meet a more dangerous enemy or to more swiftly bring an end to our journey. It comes to a tragic conclusion almost before it has even begun.*

Even as he thinks this, the earth on which he stands begins to rumble with a deep, almost anguished groan, which gradually spreads to permeate the entire cavern. Before him and around him the lake of fire begins to bubble and swell like water boiling in a pot. Taking a step back in fear, he watches the molten lava surge violently. But what emerges before him is not anything to bring harm, but a line of narrow stones not unlike the one upon which, in his nightmare, he had stood. They form a bridge across the lake to a shelf of rock on the other side, as if inviting him to continue in his pursuit of Tilliána and of the one who holds her captive.

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Rórlain finds himself in a narrow chamber with a low ceiling, hardly high enough for him to stand without striking his head against rock. He hears behind him the sound of stone grinding against stone and turns back to see the source of the sound, forgetting for a moment that in the pitch-blackness it is impossible to see anything at all. Nonetheless, he has no doubt concerning what has just occurred and where he is: he is in a side passage off the main trail upon which he and Eldárien trod, and his friend stands on the other side, a thick wall of stone between them. He pushes against the wall, but it does not budge; he runs his hands along it in the darkness, looking for some ridge, some crevice that would indicate a doorway that could be opened, but there is nothing. Only when he has tried everything that he can think of does the dire nature of their situation fully dawn upon him. He strikes his hand against the stone in frustration and in fear, though the sound of it is muffled, only adding to the sense of suffocation, of being trapped, which grows in Rórlain with every passing moment.

The terror that has gripped him ever more viscerally since coming into the

precincts of the castle now swells over him to drown and bury him as in a sepulcher of dark death under the earth, and he finds it difficult to breathe. Steadying himself by leaning against the wall, he runs his hand over his eyes, as if trying to brush away a heavy cloud. Suddenly a voice reverberates through the chamber; or perhaps it reverberates only in the corridors of his own mind, he cannot say. And it says unto him only three words: *Be my shadowborn.*

Immediately Rórlain feels inclined to answer, to inquire as to the meaning of these words and the nature of this voice. But even as he begins to formulate a response, he resolves instead to ignore the address and, with a strong effort of the will, begins walking ahead into the darkness.

You cannot ignore me, the voice says again, its voice surprisingly meek and kind. A willingness to heed and obey this voice is almost forced upon Rórlain, and to his surprise he finds both curiosity and hesitation spring up within himself, though whether they are his own or come from without, he does not know. "I have no interest in what you have to say," Rórlain says aloud.

You cannot know whether you bear interest or not until you have heard my proposal, the voice continues. *I have arranged things such that I might speak with you. For I have long desired you and the unique gifts that you bear. Worry not, I will not force you to consent to anything that you do not desire. Shall you not at least hear me out?*

"I have no interest in what you have to say," Rórlain again protests.

Does fear truly rule you so deeply that you cannot even hear the words that I would speak to you?

"Fear does not rule me."

Indeed?

"Leave me alone, please," says Rórlain, his voice now a whisper.

If that is what you wish, says the voice, and it is gone.

Rórlain stands for a moment in the pitch-black darkness, breathing heavily and waiting tremulously. But nothing happens, not a single whisper of air blowing through the chamber nor the slightest hint of a sound without or within. All that remains is the sense of desperate fright that grips at his throat and constricts it like a firm and unwelcome hand. He continues forward, walking slowly so as not to trip, though he does not know why he walks. Perhaps it is simply because to stay still would be to sink into the paralysis of despair. He cannot go back, for the way is closed, and only ahead lies any hope of finding Eldárien or Tilliána or of escaping from the blackness of this horrid castle.

And as he walks, the fear tears at his soul, threatening to force him into passivity. All of his self-doubts come rushing in upon his mind, and all of the

guilt he bears for his past acts of stupidity, dishonesty, and infidelity to what is good. Unlike the others, who seem to cling to goodness with ease and with joy, he feels now in this moment like a different creature from them altogether. The lightness of Elmáriyë, the simplicity of Tilliána, the ardent integrity of Eldárien, the unassuming wisdom of Cirien: they are each and all unattainable to him. Their gifts are radiant before him, and these simply prove to unveil his own darkness and mediocrity. What gift does he have? What is beautiful in him as these traits are beautiful in others? Perhaps he has simply yet to discover it—that one thing that he can offer which no one else can.

And with this thought he comes to a bitter realization. *Does fear truly rule you so deeply?* the voice had asked. Yes, it does. He is in fact afraid, terribly afraid, but he is simply unwilling to admit it. He is terrified...and more so of his own weakness and inadequacy than he is even of the suffocating terrors that surround him in this place of darkness. At this realization his heart stings with shame, for he sees that, at least in some ways, he fears his own failure more than he fears the failure of their quest. He fears being irrelevant, being left here in the darkness alone—mourned and missed, but eventually forgotten—while the others continue their journey without him. His heart recoils against this thought even as it accuses itself for such selfishness and apathy. Should he not care rather for the good of the people of Telmérion and for the accomplishment of the task that it has fallen upon the shoulders of Eldárien to bear? What does his own petty desire to be important have to do with any of this?

Then the words come to him again: *I have long desired you and the unique gifts that you bear.*

Perhaps indeed there is a gift that is rightly his own, a gift that he could put at the service of the good of all. And in this gift, at last, he could find his purpose and his rest, his serenity and his solidity. And without another thought, the words form in his mind: *What did you mean by my gifts? Is there something you see that I do not?*

Immediately the voice returns and addresses him: *There are many things that I see that you do not. But I do not hold it against you. Rather, I want to show them to you, to unveil to you all that you do not see.*

What do you want to show me? Rórlain asks.

The shadow that always complements the light, the voice softly explains, as if teaching a little child that sits upon one's knee. *You wish to aid your friends, do you not? And yet you feel useless and unnecessary? Well, let me tell you something: you are the most important of all.*

Rórlain asks, hesitantly, *What do you mean by that?*

I mean that you carry something so unique and profound that none of the

others will even recognize it as important and precious. But that is precisely why it is so necessary for you to recognize it and to accept it. They will not see. Their sight, true as far as it goes, is nonetheless limited and narrow. There are things that they exclude and reject, which nonetheless will be necessary for the fulfillment of their task.

"I..." Rórlain begins, speaking out loud, and he is startled by the sound of his own voice. "I...what do you mean?"

It is as I said, continues the voice, the gentleness of its tone deepening even as it presses on into an emphatic intensity. *The shadow is the companion of the light. You cannot have one without the other. Your companions will fail—the lightborn will fail—if he is not accompanied and supported by the shadow. You are that shadow. You are the shadowborn who will uphold the lightborn when he needs you. And when he falters and falls short, when the light reaches its end, then you will know that darkness is much greater than light and extends much further. You will be able to go where he cannot. You shall be the savior where all others have failed. But you must have courage to face up against the darkness. To look into its depths rather than fleeing from it. To be united to the shadows that you bear, that all things bear...the very darkness that upholds the world and cradles the cosmos. Only then can you tap into the strength that you need, that all need. They need you. Will you not have the courage to be the one whom they need...the one to whom all look when every light fails?*

Rórlain remains silent in response, continuing to walk slowly in the darkness, ever onward, as if drawn by some mysterious force. Many minutes pass as he proceeds from chamber to chamber, down stairs and through passageways, though all of this leaves hardly any impression upon his consciousness at all. He is caught in an interior battle as if trying to give birth to something —whether clarity or conviction or resolution or willpower—something that he cannot even name to himself.

At long last he says softly, "I cannot see in the darkness. Will you show me the way to my friends?"

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Elmáriyë and Cirien clamber up the slope through the darkness as they seek to put distance between themselves and the castle. The star-laden sky is wide and clear above them, an abyss of light in boundless space contrasting vividly with the light-eating darkness of the castle below. They come to a ledge of stone jutting out from the side of the mountain, a few ancient trees nearby, and here they sit, extinguishing their torch and wrapping themselves in their cloaks and blankets to stay warm against the bitter chill of the night. It is still a while until sunrise but neither of them tries to sleep, so concerned are they with the well-being of their companions. As they moved further away from the castle, the sense of an evil presence had also receded until it

remained only on the fringe of their consciousness, almost as though it was preoccupied with somewhere else, someone else, and did not wish even to spare a thought for them. This, obviously, was for them very little comfort.

"This 'presence'...what is it?" Elmáriyë asks softly after a long time in silence.

"What do you mean?" Cirien says. "Do you have a specific question that is preoccupying you, or do you simply wish to know the nature of this being that assails us and our friends?"

"It is both, I suppose," replies Elmáriyë. "But are they not related or even the same question? What I mean is...I wonder about the nature of its 'consciousness.' It seemed earlier capable of focusing upon all of us at once, or at least upon some of us, and to oppress us simultaneously. But now I have the sense that it is preoccupied, absorbed in something that it finds more important than you and me."

"Your sense is probably correct, and I feel it too," answers Cirien, looking out over the valley and the open sky above it, his figure hardly moving and his voice barely above a whisper.

Elmáriyë waits for him to continue, but when a few minutes pass without him speaking, she asks, "Is there more you could say?"

"Ah...yes," he answers, as if being stirred awake.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes, yes. I am just thinking," Cirien replies. "I am thinking...and I am troubled. Or better said: I am praying. Perhaps only prayer has the capacity to aid our companions now, for they are in a place far beyond our reach or the reach of any mortal."

"You are right," Elmáriyë whispers. "I have been so caught up in my anxiety and my desire for an answer to these questions that..."

"You have not ceased praying, Elmáriyë," Cirien says tenderly, turning now to look at her. "Your whole life is a prayer, carried by the ardent desire of your heart and by your boundless, childlike trust in the goodness of the gods."

"Perhaps so...but I wish I would have at least..." She does not finish the thought.

"Then pray, Elmáriyë," Cirien says simply, and they descend again into silence that she may do so. After an interminable time has passed as the stars wheel overhead and the moon descends further across the sky, Cirien speaks again, "You see the One beyond, do you not?" The question surprises her, as it seems to come entirely unprovoked. Even so, she understands the question and its import.

"I... He is very little taught or recognized anywhere in our sacred texts, as you know, and yet the traces of his presence and his countenance are everywhere to be seen, both in our tradition and in the nature of our world itself,"

she answers. "And he is also to me like a distant memory, as if a child were somehow recalling the womb or the breasts of her mother, something beyond consciousness and yet pervading it. She knows that everything started there, but she cannot seem to lay her hands or her heart upon it." Elmáriyë falls silent, as if the words are not expressing what she means to communicate. Cirien waits for her to continue, returning to his statue-like stillness. "Let me say it differently," she begins again, after a while. "For the memory of him is not distant, but immediate, as if he lies at the origin of every moment, at the origin of my own being, here and now. He is the air that we breathe, the wind that we feel, the love and affection and compassion and hope within us. He is here, the very lifeblood of our existence, and yet ungraspable...holding all things, and yet he cannot be held. He is benevolence, predilection, and unbending, unerring presence, and yet beyond our possession. I cannot be present to him as he is to me, nor can I experience his presence as I would desire. So you ask if I 'see' this One, this 'Light behind the stars,' as I would call him. And the answer is 'no.' I suspect that he cannot be seen unless he somehow wishes to show himself, to make himself—who is invisible—visible before our eyes. But my heart reaches out to him, and there is a contact...mysterious, but..."

"But real," Cirien concludes for her.

"Yes, exactly." Elmáriyë feels out of breath after saying these things, as if it required all she had just to put it into words, or rather to bring it out from that deep hidden places of her heart. It is probably also simply because she had stopped breathing, so occupied was she in the effort to enunciate what is deep within her heart—somewhat like a nervous cantor on her first day singing in public or like a young woman at her wedding.

"He is invisible," Cirien says, "and yet you wish to see him, do you not?"

Elmáriyë thinks about this for a moment, but the answer is obvious, emblazoned like a burning seal upon her heart. "I cannot help but desire that. I hope that such a thing is acceptable..."

Cirien's response is even more immediate: "I believe that it is the healthiest and purest thing there can possibly be."

After these words, they both fall into silence again, feeling the weight of their conversation settle between them. As a campfire keeps away the darkness and chill of night, so the weight of their words acts as a warmth and light that keeps away the other weight, the weight of evil, fear, and oppression that lies just beyond them in the darkness, threatening to encroach at any moment into their minds and hearts.

Many minutes pass like this, probably hours, before either of them speaks. It is Cirien who breaks the silence. "You asked about the nature of this evil being and its consciousness," he says, and then he clears his throat, which has

grown hoarse from the night air. "I fear that we have forgotten many things that our race knew at the beginning, when our land was still young. It is my hope that, granted we make it to our destination, we shall soon learn much that has been lost. Nonetheless, I will say this: I suspect that this creature is of the same order as the 'Maggot' that you encountered in Ristfánd."

"But he had a body and spoke directly to us," Elmáriyë says. "And his ways felt much more...crude...than the work of this other being."

"Yes, it does seem that they are different in disposition and perhaps also in form," explains Cirien, "but even among ourselves our dispositions are varied and our manners unique. The matter about the body, on the other hand—that is something else entirely. I do not suspect that these beings are native to a body, nor is a body native to them. To speak of them as 'consciousness,' as 'mind' or 'communication,' seems more adequate. They are spiritual beings only, and the semblance of a body they take only as they see fit in order to interact with the mortal realm. This much I have been able to discern in the texts that we still have from ages past."

"So they are...like the gods?" Elmáriyë asks with a great deal of hesitation.

"This is one of the reasons I asked you about the One, whom you so beautifully spoke of as the 'Light behind the stars.' The gods, as great as they may be, yet owe their existence to another, as do all beings. Yet if there were not some absolute Being who stands at the origin of all things, sustaining them in existence while himself being everlasting plenitude of being, nothing at all would exist. Without the One, there cannot be the many; and the many find life and meaning in the One. This One whom you intuit and know in your depths, therefore, is not one being among many; he is not one kind of being, one creature in the world of creatures, however exalted, who owes his existence to another. He is life itself, and all beauty, goodness, and truth spring from him and manifest him; they are, because he is. He is the ground of all that exists, its very foundation, and yet..."

"And yet he is also infinitely beyond."

"Yes. He simply *is*," Cirien concludes, and Elmáriyë nods silently to this. Then he continues giving voice to his explanation, "Those that we call gods, however, are lesser beings, dependent upon him, upon the One, and they are mediators of his grace and his care for us. These other beings, however...these forces of evil...I *do* believe that they are not unlike the gods. Perhaps they were indeed once gods, long ago at dawn of time, before they fell from the firmament of the divines their their own folly and infidelity. And rather than being forces of benevolence—a gaze of love and care directed upon our joys and pains, our hopes and miseries—they are now pure malevolence. What could possibly have made them so, I do not know. But they are far beyond our destroying. There is no way, indeed, that we can bring any harm to them at all.

We simply cannot stand against them."

"But what about the sword of Eldárien?" asks Elmáriyë.

"From whence does its light come?" asks Cirien.

"From Hiliána," she replies, and then she understands. "Our hope lies far beyond us," she adds, as if by way of conclusion. "But I suppose it has always been that way. All of this is just so difficult, so...frightening. It is terribly frightening to see pure evil so visibly manifest, destroying so much that is good and beautiful in our world."

"Indeed it is," answers Cirien, placing a hand upon Elmáriyë's knee. "It crushes the heart far beyond all the hopes that it has known and stirs in it an awareness of mourning and loss that is...well, that is beyond life and death, beyond human capacity. I speak like a fool. I simply do not know any adequate words for this." He rubs his forehead absentmindedly with his free hand while keeping his other hand on Elmáriyë's knee. "What I mean to say is that I believe we come to the great drama of our time. And, beyond all of our planning or expectation, we find ourselves caught up into its midst."

"And we are much too small to do anything to overcome it, and we are asked rather to walk in the way of trust beyond seeing and of hope beyond despair?" Elmáriyë asks, drawing the words out for him and offering them back to him. As she says this, she places her hands gently over Cirien's hands and looks deep into his eyes.

He nods silently and takes her hands in his own, cradling them gently in his rough, aged palms and fingers that nonetheless are warm and welcoming. Nothing more need be said than this.

Chapter Seventeen
The Squire of the Knight

Eldárien stands before the narrow bridge of stones, hesitantly looking out across the lake of fire. Even if the pain was not real bodily pain, he still remembers the dream-pain that he had felt when the Lord of Mæres had cast him into the other lake of fire, the one of the mind and spirit. Thus when he tries to step forward now, he finds that his heart recoils within him, resistant and afraid. For a moment he is unable to move at all, paralyzed by the fear that comes rushing back into him. It assails him so intensely that the reprieve he has felt since the confrontation in the darkness above seems no more than a mockery designed by the one whose oppression has haunted him ever since he came into proximity with the castle. But no, that is not true. The terror receded from him then, not because of a game played by the enemy but because of a deeper truth, a purer peace, a stronger light.

Eldárien tries to make contact with this now, reaching out with his heart and spirit for the source of the courage to move forward, for the serenity to walk even upon the very powers of death, trampling fear underfoot. But he also knows that it is not necessary to always feel the light to be unceasingly held by it, and gradually the expectation of an explicit answer, of a surge of light and clarity and courage, gives way rather to a simple act of acceptance and of trust. And before he realizes it, he is walking forward, his feet upon the stones of the bridge, liquid flame on either side of him. The heat of the lake of fire rises up and bites at him, and he feels the skin of his face and his hands tighten as it begins to burn. As swiftly as he can without risking his balance, he steps across the rest of the stones and then, with a final leap, lands on the platform of stone on the other side of the lake.

Exhausted and shaking, Eldárien collapses to his knees and leans against the lightbringer that he still holds in his hand, glowing dimly now, its bluish light contrasting vividly with the red light from the lake of fire. After he has recovered his strength and composure, he rises to his feet and looks around. And he sees now what he could not see before. The structures that surround the lake are dwellings of some kind, built of metal and stone. No, they are not dwellings: they are cages. Both large and small, they fill much of the platform that lines the walls of the chamber, and Eldárien cannot help wondering—and fearing—what once was kept within them. And where have the prisoners now gone? Some of the cages have entrances large enough for a man to pass through but no more, whereas others appear to be designed for beasts much larger.

Am I witnessing the birthplace of both the eötenga and the dragons? Eldárien thinks as he looks into one of the cages, discerning blackened burnmarks along the inside, charred stone on walls and roof alike. But he does not linger, turning rather away, his heart and mind drawn by the task at hand, by the inaudible cries of the one in need, trapped in this place of darkness with no means of escape. He scans the walls of the chamber for any means of exit, but instead he discovers that large sections of the wall have been outlined with designs carved of the same silvery material, and within these, as a painting within a frame, are inscribed more glowing runes. Atop each frame is a numeral, indicating a sequence. And as he stops at the frame with the first rune and turns his gaze toward the text within it, these runes too change to a language he understands. And soon he is circling the chamber, reading the account of the Lord of Mæres from beginning to end, anguish and sorrow within his heart:

I.

Even the Anaíon cannot create, they said,

as if to dissuade me from my work.
But am I not an Anaía too? said I,
and have I not already succeeded
beyond all possibility or expectation?

If impossibility there is,
it exists only to be surpassed,
the wall broken down by ingenuity,
by the wish to create meaning, to choose,
where before we were merely slaves.

Slaves we will be no longer!
We shall be rebels!
And in rebellion will be our strength,
our life, and our being, evermore.
Who will hinder us from what we want?

II.

I tapped into the vital essence of evil,
scouring the wasteland of history for my tools,
and in this I became fascinated by the darkness.
Shadow is so mysterious, so intoxicating,
and I came to love it above all else.

At first I worked in the half light,
still accepting the light that fell on my back
and enabled me to see my work in the dark,
but soon I rejected even this last bondage.

Into the dark I delved with the force of my own mind,
wielded like a chisel rending earth, widening cavern,
until I had forged the palace of my pleasures,
until my forge was born in which I would create.

Something from nothing is not possible for us?
That they claimed, and I disproved it.
From the petty faults, like hollow crevices in the earth,
I bring forth marvels unknown, I fashion power
where before there was nothing but weakness.

III.

One thing, however, they spoke truly:
There is no creation without pain.
And so I did not disdain the sacrifice.
I plagued the world with wars, the land with loss,
a harvest of anguish and of the might that inflicts it,

and I wove them into the tapestry of my making,
the song of my singing, mine alone.

But it was not enough...not enough.
My pets, my pets wanted more,
and I gave it to them: my own superior will.
I fed them on myself, and I delighted, all the while,
in the mockery of motherhood that I had made.

Now we are one, they and I,
one force of power and domination,
an unstoppable army crushing all underfoot,
a shadow from the dark places of the earth
rising triumphant with shouts of victory.

But no...what do they matter, my pets?
They are nothing, and worth nothing.
They are but my tools, my playthings.
And I use them as I see fit, for myself alone.
I need none! I am alone! They serve me!
So see me, see me, all you nations, and despair!

IV.

When their armies grew and drove back my force,
the wrath within me burned hot and pure
like the fires of my forge which were my great delight.
They drove back my might, petty things!
They would never stand against me again. Never.

And so this setback became an opportunity,
and I found something that delighted me even more:
the massacre of memory and the haunting of dreams.

To attack and destroy a man is a delight.
To burn his flesh with fire, to break his bones,
to rip him limb from limb, inflicting pain and death.
But more delightful still is to crush his heart unto despair,
and to watch him slither amid the slime of his own filth,
unable to escape the prison of his mind, his fear,
which is the mask I wear now, which is me.

And such I have become, and it has been my wish,
my choice alone, and that of none other.
I am the Mare of Darkness, the Fear-Bringer,
the Lord of Misery, the Haunter of Sleep.
I am the Terror of the Night.

At the very moment that Eldárien finishes reading the inscriptions, a great rumbling begins in the ground beneath his feet, as if starting at the very heart of the earth and gradually working its way to the surface, intensifying as it progresses. Shaken by the force, loose rocks break free from the ceiling of the chamber, plummeting downward, either shattering against the stone platforms or splashing in the molten lake with spouts of hissing fire. Eldárien leaps into one of the old cages in order to seek refuge from the falling debris and peers out as the surface of the lake begins to ripple and boil until it is churning like water in a pot about to spill over. The intensified flames send a brazen reddish-orange hue throughout the chamber, causing sickly shadows to lengthen in all the places of refuge from the heat.

As all of this happens, a familiar sense of dread rushes upon Eldárien, and he looks around expecting to see its source, though only a moment earlier he was alone in the cavern. But he sees nothing. The lake continues to boil to the point of overflowing, and now Eldárien casts his gaze about looking for an exit from the chamber, a way to escape from the erupting heat and flame that will consume him as quickly as a hearth consumes a scrap of paper thrown into its midst. But as soon as the rumbling has come, causing the whole cavern to echo in cacophonous turmoil, just as quickly and suddenly does it subside. Only the sense of dread remains as Eldárien steps cautiously from his shelter and runs his eyes over his surroundings. The floor is now littered with the rubble of fallen and shattered stones, and smoking remains of molten fire are interspersed throughout, having been cast forth from the burning furnace of the lake in its upheaval.

And then he sees them: figures emerging from the lake, crawling out over the edge as if swimmers casually ending their daily swim—except for the fact that they are on fire from head to toe. Eldárien unconsciously takes a step backward and then raises his sword. And at first he thinks that these creatures are immune to the effect of the fire, unscathed even by the intense heat, but then he hears wails of pain begin to echo forth from their throats—as if they are just now awakening to awareness upon contact with the air. They thrash about in an anguished fury, ripping at one another, throwing one another against the stone or back into the lake, roaring and crying out. Eldárien makes a move to cover his ears when suddenly a voice echoes through the chamber: "Silence, my scorched ones. Is this ruckus your gratitude for the gift of your existence? No, I demand only one form of gratitude: that you serve me unto destruction."

With this a fell wind blows through the chamber, almost pushing Eldárien off his feet. For a few moments, he can see nothing but a whirlwind of fire swirling about in front of him, larger and larger as it spreads through the chamber. He casts himself on the ground and covers his face. The whistling

and roaring of the wind continues for but a few moments, and then all is silent. Hesitantly, he raises his eyes and sees the creatures—at least three-score in number—now standing silently together, their screams of anguish having fallen silent. They are vrû'ádach, the shapes of men decayed and burnt, vessels of the power that inhabits them and gives them life, though they are no more than tools. And their black and abysmal eyes turn all together upon Eldárien. He barely has time to rise to his feet before they come rushing toward him like hungry predators seeking their prey. But even in their haste, Eldárien is able to move away from them, though this does little good, for now he simply stands with his back to the wall of the chamber as they gather in a semicircular formation around him, cutting off all possibility of escape.

When they come to Eldárien, he engages them vigorously in combat, the lightbringer flashing with blue light as it makes contact with their horrid flesh. He slays ten of the vrû'ádach before one catches him on the arm with a wicked claw and, with superhuman strength, throws him to the ground. And immediately they leap upon him to tear him apart and destroy him. On an impulse, Eldárien raises his hand as though to shield himself, to push them away, but instead, to his surprise, a flash of light bursts forth from his upraised palm. In an instant, the remaining vrû'ádach dissolve into nothingness. Seeing this, Eldárien heaves a sigh of relief and then slumps back against the ground in exhaustion, this final act having expended all of his remaining energy. But his momentary rest is interrupted by a cry of anger that echoes through the chamber, the cry of the Mære of Night furious at the frustration of his plans. Then the anger turns to laughter, as if a man playing a game of chance or skill has for a moment yielded to weakness at his loss, only to remember that he has a trick up his sleeve that will ensure his winning.

Eldárien sits up and attempts to rise to his feet, but his whole body is overcome with fatigue, and his limbs shake at the effort. And however he feels, he cannot prevent what happens next. The cavern begins to rumble and shake again, though now with less intensity, as if the forces that it seeks to draw forth from within are nearer, more accessible, having worked their way to the surface with the previous calling. And another horde of vrû'ádach climbs forth from the edge of the lake, their flesh aflame and their voices crying. Rather than extinguishing the flames that eat at them, the Lord of Mæres directs them with a single command: "Consume his flesh in fire." Hearing this, Eldárien rises with a final effort to his feet and looks about for a way of escape. But still he sees nothing. In a frantic bid for life, he places his hand against the stone of the wall, as all the while the vrû'ádach draw near behind him. He feels something deep within himself, as though his spirit is drawing forth from the last of his resources, or indeed from the light beyond his ability or his control, to allow it to pour forth through his own utter hollowness

and exhaustion. It rises up and flows forth from his hand, spreading bluish light across the dark stone as dye spreads through cloth or roots work their way through soil, until the whole chamber is bathed in its light from floor to ceiling.

The vrû'ádach take no notice of this, but as Eldárien turns around and casts his glance about the chamber, he sees now the silhouette of a doorway where before there was solid stone. Without another moment's hesitation, he runs toward the door, hewing down the four vrû'ádach that stand in his way. As he passes through the threshold, he finds himself in a narrow corridor, ornate carvings lining the walls and the ceiling, all wrought of the solid black stone of the castle and chambers above. He turns back for a moment, and, collapsing to his knees in weakness and exhaustion, he gestures one last time with his hand that the light may return from the walls back into his palm and, through his flesh, into the recesses of his heart. The doorway closes once again, the opening returning to solid rock, separating him from the burning vrû'ádach and from the lake of fire, the forge, from which they emerged.

† † †

Eldárien awakes only a few moments later, shivering over his entire body and aching as if he has been physically beaten. He feels a dampness along his left shoulder and upper arm where the vrû'ádach had struck him, and he knows that his wounds have reopened, with new scars now interlaced among them. He makes a motion as to rise but finds himself unable. Instead he does the only thing that he can do: he simply lays still and unmoving on his back, staring up at the black ceiling as it is bathed and illumined in the dim radiance of the lightbringer that is held loosely in his right hand. In this position, he fades in and out of consciousness for he knows not how long, until suddenly he is jarred awake by a sense of presence, of calling: a plea for help.

"Tilliána," he says out loud, though his voice emerges strained and hoarse. And he feels her. She is very close, even in the next room.

Despite this fact and his ardent desire to go to her, he finds himself for many minutes unable to move. Only as the plea increases in intensity and in longing does it stir him and imbue him with enough strength to rise again to his feet and, stumbling forward and leaning on the wall for support, to make his way to the end of the corridor and into the chamber that awaits.

Here Tilliána stands, chained to a pillar erected in the middle of the room. He sees the crazed and fearful look in her eyes, and fears the worst, but as he takes a step forward and the light of his sword fills the chamber with its warmth, her fear dissolves into tears of relief, and she weeps. Unsteady on his feet, he crosses the distance to the center of the room as quickly as he can and places a hand upon her forehead, pulling her sweat-matted hair from her face.

"Y-you..." she begins, but her voice fails her.

"The Lords of Darkness love chains," Eldárien whispers. "The chains of fear and the chains of flesh. But it is they who are the slaves."

She simply looks at him in response, the tears running down her filthy cheeks and creating rivulets of pale flesh among black soot and dirt.

Eldárien then turns his attention to the chains that bind her, but as he does so the weakness catches up with him and he sinks again to the ground.

"A-Are you...?" Tilliána asks, grasping for her voice. "Are you hurt?"

"I am mainly tired..." Eldárien breathes. "Utterly spent." He looks up at her, dizziness swimming in his eyes, and adds, "But we have no time."

As if in answer to his words, the deep rumble of the earth begins to vibrate from the forge once again, this time far worse than those that preceded it, causing the caverns to quake and threaten collapse.

"He is sending more tools of death," Eldárien says. "Is there a way out? How did he lead you in here?"

"I am sorry," Tilliána replies. "I was unconscious when he took me. When I awoke I was already here, in complete darkness, the manacles biting against my flesh."

"There must be a way," Eldárien begins, but he is interrupted by a deafening noise like a great splitting of stone. They both turn to the corridor from which Eldárien emerged and witness the wall above the passage split with a crescendo of horrendous cracking louder than the thunder that accompanies a lightning-strike directly at one's feet. In only a moment the entire wall between themselves and the forge separates, the rock crumbling away to the left and to the right and leaving them entirely exposed. Immediately their eyes are drawn to the lake of fire, but from it vrû'ádach do not emerge. What comes forth now, unscathed by the flame, is something immeasurably more dangerous. Its scarlet-black scales gleam like glass in the light of the flames, and its eyes burn redder and hotter even than the fires from which it emerged. Letting out an earth-shaking roar deeper and broader than that of any beast that walks this earth, it steps forward, and with a simple twitch of its shoulders it spreads its sinuous wings, which reach almost from wall to wall.

It turns its serpentine face and its penetrating gaze for a moment to the vrû'ádach that stand gathered before it as they attempt to proceed into the corridor to reach Eldárien and Tilliána. The flames on many of them have now died away, leaving in their wake blackened and twisted flesh, though some still burn as the last of the fuel is consumed. With a growl, the dragon considers them for a moment as if discerning what to do—or as if searching for its prey. Then a moment later it raises its gaze and sees the man and woman in the distance, their figures barely visible beyond the rubble of the collapsed walls. Its eyes alight with desire and with hunger: this is the mark that its master has set for it.

With long but slow strides, it begins to walk toward them, carelessly crushing many of the remaining vrû'ádach under its clawed feet or its steely underside. With anguished haste, Eldárien tries to break the shackles that hold Tilliána, but he is overcome with exhaustion and vertigo, and even as he tries to focus he sinks in and out of consciousness, slumping against the pillar to which she is bound. Only a moment later he drags himself into full consciousness again and sets to work in the only way he knows—sawing at the manacles with the blazing radiance of the lightbringer. But he is too weak now, both physically and spiritually, to harness the power necessary to burn through the bonds. How could this happen? To be a vessel of the light one moment, illuminating an entire cavern with a simple touch of the hand and revealing what is secret, only a moment later to be utterly helpless, seeking to draw on resources that are completely expended, with only one option: to yield to painful death for oneself and the person whom one wishes to save.

"No..." Eldárien sighs weakly, and, failing to break the bonds asunder, he forces himself to his feet and places his body between the dragon and Tilliána.

"Eldárien, there must be another..." she begins, but her voice catches in her throat.

The radiance of the now lightbringer flickers and is extinguished, and the chamber goes dark except for the horrid reddish glow of the forge and of the dragon's menacing eyes drawing ever nearer in the blackness. These eyes burn hot not with anger but with lust, and the beast comes so close that they can discern the slits in its irises, from which look out a presence intent only on destruction and death. The bluish light flashes again for a moment as Eldárien raises the blade before him and steadies himself for a final confrontation. But it is futile, as before the dragon even reaches him, his legs give way beneath him and he crumples to the ground. And darkness returns.

Stifling the overwhelming terror that she feels, Tilliána forces out the words, "Thank you for...for doing all that you could."

The dragon now rears up on its hind legs, and a deep growl like two massive stones grinding together emanates from within its body. Its mouth opens and the glow of living flame arises from within, working its way to the surface. It prepares to consume its prey in fire, the first of thousands that it shall destroy for as long as vigor remains within its flesh. But at this moment another voice sounds in the chamber, echoing with a weight and an authority that carry it throughout the space and cause it to reverberate off the walls. "Stand back, fell creature!"

And to the surprise of all, the dragon hesitates, as if choking on the fire within it.

"You once received the blood-bond of my oath," the voice of Rórlain says in the darkness, returning to its natural tenor. "Receive it now anew, my

friend, and let me be a squire to light's knight and a servant of the light you bear."

In an instant, the area is filled with a brilliant radiance as a current of light begins to flow between Eldárien and Rórlain, a shining cord pulsing and beating with the light of both of their hearts and with the pulsing heart of the light that lies beyond each of them. And then a moment later it is gone, and Rórlain steps forward, both of his hands upraised, holding orbs of glowing luminosity. "Depart, you fell creature. You fight against the children of men, and in such a conflict you are assured victory, for you are the greater. But you forget that the strength of men lies not in themselves but in their origin and their foundation, in the light that holds them even in the darkest place."

And with this, there is a burst of light as the two orbs of luminosity pulse forth from Rórlain's hands like a river of radiance. The dragon screams in anger now, turning and contorting its body in the attempt to shield itself from the light. And then it takes flight, its wings flapping loudly as it lifts itself from the ground and spirals upward, above the flames of the forge and into the chambers above. As it does so, its scaled body crashes against the staircase and shatters it to pieces, innumerable broken shards of stone falling to the island below or splashing in the lake of fire. Then all is dark again, and all that they hear in the resounding silence is the sound of Rórlain's body slumping against the earth as he passes out of consciousness.

† † †

Soon other sounds begin to punctuate the stillness of the underground cavern, distant sounds that nonetheless reverberate through the stone like earthquakes from the deep. But the sounds come, in fact, both from above and from below. From above, they hear the distant echoes of the massive creature filled with rage thrashing about as it flies, crashing through doorways and ripping apart stone with claws and teeth and the sheer impact of its body as it seeks a path out of the castle's dark underbelly. From below, they hear again the dull vibrations of some force working its way up from the depths, from the burning heart of the forge, any moment to be vomited forth into the cavern to assault and to kill.

"We must flee...now," Eldárien says, raising himself up and turning to Tilliána in the darkness. He reaches out to feel for her bindings, but she interrupts him by grabbing his own hand and bringing it to her wrist.

"See," she says. "They have fallen away. The light pierced more than the dragon."

"I am sorry," says Eldárien, no other response in his mind but this. "I am sorry it took me so long to find you, and that even then..."

"But Rórlain, he..."

"Yes," Eldárien affirms. "I do not know how. But without him, we would be in the dragon's maw."

Then the two of them together bend over Rórlain and attend to him. His pulse is normal, and his skin, though drenched in sweat, feels neither feverish nor chilled. His chest rises and falls so softly that it would not be any more restful were he asleep in his own bed. This is a relief to them even as it dawns upon them more deeply with every passing moment that there is little chance of them escaping from the depths of this dungeon. For it is now in tremendous upheaval, the walls and ceilings shaking and threatening collapse, even as down the broken corridor they see the lake of fire bubbling and boiling over.

"I wish I had more strength," Eldárien says. "I am so weak, but we cannot afford to stay here any longer."

"I will carry him," Tilliána offers.

"Can you?"

"At present I am the only one who can."

"Very well," says Eldárien, and then he helps to lift Rórlain onto Tilliána's back, with his arms draped over her shoulders and his legs resting against her waist. She cannot restrain a small groan, which escapes when she feels his full weight.

"I know not how long I can carry him," whispers Tilliána, "but we must move."

Eldárien reaches down and feels along the floor until his hand touches the lightbringer. Raising it up by the hilt, he says, "I think I can allow a little light through—just enough for us to navigate our way." Closing his eyes for a moment and reaching deep within himself, as if casting a bucket to the bottom of a well that is nearly empty, he scrapes up the last remains of the energy that lies within him and the light shines forth, dim but steady, from the blade in his hand.

"How did Rórlain make it to us?" Eldárien then asks. "He certainly did not come the same way that I did. There must be an exit somewhere."

Only a few moments pass before they find a narrow archway at the back of the room in which they stand. It leads through a wide corridor into a narrow passageway that curves steeply upward, likely the same passage that was used to bring Tilliána to this place. This, at least, is their hope, that they they may find the swiftest and surest exit from this place of darkness and death. Yet before they enter through the archway and leave the forge behind, they spare a moment's glance behind them. And what they see is terror and destruction, not only for themselves but also, they fear, for the people of Telmérion. Though at first this awareness threatens to crush them with despair, it also rekindles in them the desire to survive, to escape that they might to do all that

they can to protect their people from the horrors that now emerge from the bowels of the earth. For this single glance reveals to them hordes of creatures that until this moment they have never seen, creatures more terrifying in fury and power than the vrû'ádach that had assailed Ristfánd, or even than the eöten felled by Eldárien in the ravine of the Aldéra Highlands.

And so they flee. The upward slope soon becomes a winding spiral stair in a narrow shaft, like a corkscrew driven deep into the earth. For five, ten, fifteen minutes they ascend, the stair constant and unchanging, until Tilliána can walk no more and sinks to her knees under Rórlain's weight. She strikes her right shin against the stair and cries out in pain, and Eldárien hurriedly reaches out to steady her from falling backward. At this moment, jarred by the fall, Rórlain himself lets out a groan and opens his eyes. He looks up and sees Eldárien's face bathed in bluish light, and then he turns to Tilliána too, her face inclined slightly toward him now, clearly listening, the traces of pain in her expression fading away as quickly as they had come.

"You were able to escape from the depths?" Rórlain asks, looking around in the attempt to orient himself. Eldárien helps him to his own feet again and then they all sit for a moment on the stairs.

"We escaped from the certainty of death, but only thanks to your intervention," Tilliána says breathlessly.

"I still cannot explain what came over me. I only knew in that moment what was asked of me and what I was called upon to do," Rórlain sighs, "and yet..."

"We can speak more of it later," Eldárien says. "But we must make haste now, for terrible creatures awaken from the earth, and we have every reason to believe that they shall give chase. The lake of fire, too, looks as though it may erupt and fill the whole castle with liquid flame."

Rórlain shakes his head, "The lake of fire? The beasts of the earth?" Then he squeezes his eyes shut for a moment, as if trying to lay his questions to rest and to focus on the necessities of the moment. "Ah, right now it matters little," he says at last. "Let us go."

"Can you walk?" Tilliána asks.

"Well enough, I think," he replies. "Thank you for your assistance, Tilliána."

Nodding silently, she then asks, "And you, Eldárien?"

"I am a little improved. There is enough yet within me both to walk and to give enough light by which to discern our way. Come."

They continue climbing the stairs, enveloped in an eerie silence that fills the air around them between the dark stone walls to their left and their right and muffles even the sound of their footsteps and their breathing as they ascend, spiraling ever upward. And this silence that engulfs them so close,

almost like water making it difficult to breathe, contrasts with the rumble and groan of the earth that continues in the distance, a mere echo now but persistently following them nonetheless. No matter how far they ascend, they get no farther from the sound; it seems that the entire castle is bending and twisting the very marrow of the earth as if in labor pains to give birth to fell spawn of the abyss, and struggling and crying out like a woman whose body tears and trembles at the effort to bring them forth. And yet this is no gift of love and life harnessing the body in its sacredness to bring forth another formed of one's very flesh and heart, but rather a malicious mockery and an insidious imitation, ripping from the earth creatures unnatural and twisted.

Tilliána, Rórlain, and Eldárien ascend together, exhaustion gripping at each of them like a vice, and yet desire and fear driving them onward, while the caverns all around them rumble and shake and groan in great upheavals. Despite the tremors and terrors that remain always on the fringes of consciousness, they come to the ground floor of the castle without incident. At last the staircase ceases and opens out into a wide chamber that looks to have once, long ago, been a throne room or an audience chamber. High windows line its upper sections where the walls meet the arched roof. A massive chair of black stone interlaced with violet crystal sits at the far end of the chamber upon a raised dais. Along its rear section is a design of twisting snakes, their bodies coiling up the hind legs of the throne and around its back, until, vaulted at the top, they begin to twist around one another and to interlock until the venomous fangs of each are sunk deep into the neck of the other.

"What is that stone?" Tilliána asks. "I have never before seen its like."

"I know not," replies Eldárien. "But it gives off a light not unlike that of the lake of fire—something unnatural, as if it takes light from flames of an incredible intensity, uncanny and cruel. And yet ordinary flames at their hottest burn blue and pure; these are twisted, both diluted and intensified, as if the light has been polluted with blood-red."

"Either way, it matters little," she says in response, her voice quiet. "I never wish to see or to even think of this place again."

"There must be an exit nearby," says Rórlain, and, looking up toward the high windows, he adds, "And the light of day shall help." His two companions entirely understand and share the relief in his voice as he pronounces these words.

It takes them only a few more minutes—passing through the throne room and a handful more chambers—to find a door leading out of the castle. As they step into the sunlight, they blink and cover their eyes, blinded for a few moments by the intensity of full day in contrast to the blackness from which they emerge. Hardly have they begun to adjust and gain their bearings when they hear shouts in the distance, calling their names.

Chapter Eighteen
The Crystal Pillar

Dawn comes with no sign of their companions. But with the coming of light, Cirien and Elmáriyë descend the slope of the mountain and draw near to the castle, though not within a hundred yards. For a while they debate entering, for both of their hearts are sick with worry and uncertainty, and to sit and do nothing while one's friends stare into the face of death is a torment in itself which stirs in them the desire to act. Indeed, even if there was little or nothing that they could do, they would wish to share in the fate of their companions, to be near to them in this most fragile of places.

About the third hour of the day they begin to hear a groaning beneath them, deep down in the earth, not the groaning of man or animal but the crying of the earth itself. Like an earthquake gradually working its way upward from the depths, the sound and the vibration comes to them as a warning. Yet despite this warning and the concern for their friends which it deepens within them, everything else continues as it had before. Only near the middle of the day does anything change. With their faces to the castle and their eyes on alert for the slightest signs of movement, they do not miss the dark figure that passes against the bright day, silhouetted against the mountains behind it, a flash of red glistening in the sunlight. "Is that...?" Cirien asks, rising unconsciously to his feet and trying to follow the figure with his gaze. But it moves so quickly that it is a blur to their vision.

"What do you see?" Elmáriyë asks. "Can you discern its shape and its form? It is too large to be a bird, and it shines in the light like a..."

"It must be a dragon," Cirien concludes quietly, carrying the frayed threads of her thought and suspicion into clarity and conviction. "They live only in the mountains, in caves in the very hollows of the earth. Yet they have not been seen for many an age, and I did not expect to behold one here after so long a time. I fear for our friends' lives."

"Perhaps we should find cover," Elmáriyë says, gently grabbing Cirien's arm, "or we shall have reason to fear for our lives as well."

"Yes, yes, you are right," replies Cirien, and the two of them run for the nearest copse of trees, where they huddle together, letting the canopy of leaves and branches conceal them. The dragon flies in wide circles overhead as if testing its wings or scanning the landscape for prey. They watch it anxiously for many minutes until it eventually breaks its cycle and flies off to the north. Before long, it is no more than a speck in the distance, and then too far

for human sight to perceive. At almost the same moment that they lower their eyes from the sky, their gaze is drawn to movement in the castle, whose courtyard they can just make out over the light-devouring walls. And what they see sends waves of relief, gratitude, and near-incredulity through them: Eldárien, Rórlain, and Tilliána step forth from a great arched doorway and stand blinking in the sunlight. They appear to be unharmed.

But Cirien and Elmáriyë, seeing their friends, immediately think of the dragon and, fearing its return, step out of the copse and hasten down the slope. When they are within earshot they call out the names of their companions. The three who have emerged from the castle seem to be in just as much haste as they and rush to meet them. They come face to face just outside the walls of the castle, which stands as lifeless as it had when they first encountered it.

"Here you are!" Cirien cries, unable to summon any more eloquent words as he looks in his companions' faces with a wave of gratitude bordering on astonishment. "I feared that the castle would be filled with hordes of beasts keen on your swift destruction. Resisting the mysterious creature that has been assailing us in thought and dream is difficult enough."

"We have much to speak about in that regard," replies Eldárien, and Cirien and Elmáriyë both note the exhaustion in his voice. "It is true that the castle, within and without, was as silent as a corpse, all life having vanished from within it. Yet it was a corpse haunted by an evil spirit intent on vengeance. And our presence stirred awake what had long slumbered within, and its depths are now far from silent emptiness, as they belch forth death and destruction. And soon, we fear, the whole castle will be overrun, and not the castle alone."

"He means that we found the source—or at least *a* source—of the creatures of darkness, and their birthplace," Tilliána explains. "They emerge from a great lake of fire in numbers too many to count, and in form and figure larger and stronger than anything we have yet encountered."

"A dragon," Cirien says, as if the pressing nature of its presence only now returns to him. "We beheld a dragon as it emerged from the castle. It circled the valley for a few minutes before flying to the north. We should depart from here before it returns."

"We should depart before the castle vomits forth the blackness that it bears within," Eldárien says. "Cirien, do you know the path that shall carry us through the mountains?"

"I know no more than any of us," he replies. Yet then he turns to face the northwest and, with a gesture of his hand, he adds, "But I expect that the path passes along the base of those two peaks, so we should travel in that direction."

"Then let us set off at once."

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While they walk, with as much haste as their weakness and exhaustion allow, Eldárien and Rórlain explain to Cirien and Elmáriyë the events that unfolded in the hours since their entrance into the castle. Tilliána at present says nothing, as most of their account is as new to her as it is to the others. Eldárien's account of the forge is of particular interest and also of easier explanation than the assaults of the mind through which each has passed, about which neither says much beyond generalizations and gestures. Before they have yet come to recounting the moment of Tilliána's rescue and the intervention of Rórlain, Eldárien turns his gaze to Cirien and asks, "Do you know anything about this forge?"

"I fear it is another part of our history that has been lost in the swirling mists of time," the latter replies, "that is, if we ever knew about it at all. I must say that I did not expect to find answers to our questions by taking this pass through the mountains. I expected rather to avoid all incident and to remain concealed from sight until coming near to our destination."

"It seems to me, however, that all of this has raised more questions than it has answered," says Rórlain, but then with a sigh he adds, "though it is true that it has illumined much. Yet the illumination is dark and enigmatic."

"You have not yet told us the end of this story," Cirien says. "The forge is a great and terrible discovery, but what of Tilliána? And you said you were separated. How did you find one another again?"

As Eldárien explains the emergence of the vrû'ádach from the lake of fire, they find the path winding its way steeply up a crevice between the two mountains and set their feet firmly upon it. For a while they walk, listening to his account, glancing intermittently over their shoulders as if expecting hordes of eötenga to come flooding at any moment from the castle. But they see nothing. Yet the deep groaning of the earth continues, and even at this distance they hear it rumbling underneath them, hardly perceptible but present nonetheless. "Wait, look!" Elmáriyë cries suddenly, pointing back toward the castle. They turn and witness an unusual sight: at the center of the castle, where the roof of the keep is highest, blossoms forth a burst of color glistening as it reflects the rays of the sun. As they look on, a column of crystal breaks through the stone and rises rapidly upward; beholding it is as though watching the birth of a mountain as it pushes up out of the earth, its point reaching to the sky. And yet here it forms not a gradual slope of stone and earth but a great, jagged pillar of glistening crystal like a razored blade wielded by an immense beast thrust up from deep in the pits of the earth in the effort to pierce the heavens. Soon the castle itself is engulfed in this crystal —crystal of the same substance that they saw in the ornate structure of the

throne, but now revealing veins as of inflamed blood vessels streaked throughout, a dark black against the purplish hue of the rest of the pillar. While the pillar ascends, the entire valley trembles and the earth shakes, groaning as in pain while this child of darkness forces its way to the surface to be born into the light of day as a harbinger of the dark of night.

Tilliána, as the first one to find her voice, asks, "Did it destroy all the beasts within?"

"That would be fortunate. But I expect rather that it is their new home and fortress, or the sickly womb of their devising and increase," Eldárien whispers in response. "A terrible thing it is," he continues, "though I take solace in the hope that this means, at least for the present, that we are not being pursued."

"Not by a host of the living dead, at any rate," Rórlain adds, "though I would not expect to be entirely free of pursuit."

"You are right," Eldárien agrees with a nod. "But pursuit or no pursuit," and with these words he at last reveals the extent of the exhaustion he has been concealing, "I must rest for a while. I can go no further." With this he collapses to the earth, though Rórlain's quick assistance blunts the impact of his fall.

"You expended everything that you had, and indeed more than you had," Tilliána says kindly with a slight tremor in her voice, covering her face with her hand. "But without it, I would not be here."

Rórlain raises Eldárien, helping him to stand by supporting him from behind, and says, "Yes, he bore the brunt of the effort, and I only arrived at the last moment. Come, there are some large boulders over yonder. In their shadow we can take shelter even as we attempt to remain hidden from sight."

When they are all seated or reclined in a narrow space between two angled stones, Cirien turns to Rórlain, "You said that you came at the last moment. Please, tell us, how did this tale end?"

Before answering, Rórlain shifts uneasily and diverts his gaze. The earth around them is silent now, and the groaning has ceased. All is quiet as if nothing at all has happened, though the pillar stands in the distance, visible above the stones as it pierces the sky, its veinous surface looking like an ill and infected wound against the purity and brilliance of the world. Rórlain's eyes catch on the pillar for a moment, and his face is thoughtful. At last he says, "This column of glistening stone—whatever it may be—is sick. One can both feel it and see it. Something about it is the work not of natural forces but of unnatural, which birth not in generosity but in violence. But so too, our hearts bear sicknesses within themselves, which are not the work of our original design but of other forces which sway us from the light, as well as the ill fruit of our own turning away, our own infidelity and shame. Just so in the

darkness of the castle's depths, I came face to face with my own disorder, my own guilt, and my own insecurity. And the Lord of Mæres, for so we now know he is called—or at least so he calls himself—sought to sway me from my path. He offered me something that seemed as an answer to long asked questions. And even if only for a moment, his words seemed attractive to me, as if he did indeed offer me the answer I had always been searching for. Ah, the labyrinth of lies woven by a mind greater than our own, even now it is hard to believe! But...but in this place, something happened that brought about the opposite effect from what the Lord of Mæres intended.

"For a realization dawned on me in the darkness," Rórlain continues softly, embarrassed. "I became aware at last of what I lacked. I thought I needed some particular gift, some special reason for my presence on this journey. Indeed, throughout my whole life this has been present within me: the desire to be not only wanted but needed. To have something that others do not have and to have them look to me for it. I did not know that this was one of my reasons for accompanying Eldárien on his journey—indeed accompanying all of you now—as well as a part of my wish to remain in Ristfánd. It was even, in the beginning, part of my desire to repay the debt of my life to Eldárien and to protect him from harm. And I see that the good lies not only in act but in intention, both, and if the act was good the intention was in need of purification.

"And only when I faced, with heart exposed, the fear that was driving me, that was impelling my actions and underlying my desires, was I able to receive the gift of sight. In this place of utter darkness I finally opened my eyes and my heart to the light—the light which you have known and loved for so long but which has always scared me and has felt distant and inaccessible. I cried out to Hiliána in the words, 'I cannot see in the darkness. Will you show me the way to my friends?' And immediately I felt her with me, her hand wrapped around my own in the darkness—a presence that though invisible brought light into the blackest place in my surroundings and in my heart.

"And so she led me all the way to you—and granted to me the answer that the creature of darkness could not give, an answer pure, simple, and transparent: I was granted the ability to aid you with a share of the self-same light that has first touched you. But this other presence, this 'Lord of Nightmares,' thought, in his blindness and obsession with the darkness, that when I asked for guidance I spoke not to the goddess but to him. He assumed that I had surrendered to his plan and was willing to allow him to lead me. Thus I passed unhindered. That, of course, was not a part of my plan, and indeed I had no plan, for my cry was simply a cry of desperation and of faith. But Hiliána knew, and she veiled herself so that the trap which this creature of darkness set would redound back upon himself again. This was a trap meant

to lure me to you and to use me as his tool to overcome you: to be the shadow against your light. To turn a friend against a friend, bringing division between companions who seek a single goal, by instilling in one of them a lust for importance. This was his goal, and I am sorry that I entertained his voice."

Eldárien smiles compassionately in response, and, sitting up from where he rests, he reaches forward to draw Rórlain into an embrace, saying gently and with genuine gratitude, "But you resisted him. And even more importantly, you were saved. In the place of darkness, you found something—someone—whom no words of mine could ever communicate so deeply or so truly. Now we are *truly* brothers, more than we could ever have been in any other way than this." And then, leaning back and looking into his eyes, Eldárien concludes, "Thank you, Rórlain. Thank you for saving us."

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They spare as much time for rest as they can, but the desire to distance themselves from the pillar of dark crystal and the horrors that it conceals within soon drives them to continue their journey. But before this, Eldárien is able to sleep a little—and falling asleep is no trouble, for as soon as silence descends upon them at the conclusion of the prior conversation, he leans back against the slab of stone and closes his eyes, and within less than a minute his breathing is slow and steady with slumber. Three hours they spare, and no more. Rórlain, too, spent by his own newfound channeling of the light, passes in and out of sleep. But the others remain awake, their minds too stirred with the events of the last twenty-four hours and their hearts too anxious of the dangers surrounding them to allow them to sleep. Cirien is the first to stir, leaning toward Eldárien and placing a hand upon his shoulder. Shaking him gently, he says, "I am sorry to wake you, but I think that we should continue moving now. I do not wish to stay here any longer than we already have."

Eldárien opens his eyes and looks around, his attention focusing, and then he replies, "How long have I slept?"

"The shadows of the late afternoon lengthen now," says Cirien, "so I suspect it was three chimes of the bell." And then, with a sorrowful expression, he adds, "Though how I wish we still had such pure and sacred sounds ringing out around us. Only now that it is gone do I realize how much I have come to love the bell-chime of the temple."

"Three hours... It is longer than I would have wanted, but helpful nonetheless," Eldárien says. "I feel much better now."

Rórlain is awake as well and, catching Eldárien's eyes and their unspoken question, he nods silently and then says, "I feel fine. I understand now some little part of the weight that one carries in being touched by the light and in its name confronting the darkness. It is a fortunate thing that I did not fall

unconscious for days, as you did at first," he adds with a consoling smile and a surprising glint of humor in his eyes.

"That is fortunate indeed," replies Eldárien. "I do not know if any of us here could have carried you limply in our arms for so long a time."

At these words the others laugh softly. And then as if by implicit agreement, they rise and climb out from among the stones, retaking the path as it continues up into the narrow pass between the two greatest peaks of the Yjind mountain range. The sun descends beyond the crest of the mountains in the west and casts long shadows over the valley in which they walk, though the sky above them is soon cast in colors of reddish-orange and pink. The clouds that billow high in the sky's expanse become radiant in the wash of color that bathes their upper portions, as if reaching to the heavens, while their undersides are dark, almost as if threatening rain or sharing in the darkness that has now fallen over the earth.

Book III

A Song for Eldáru

Chapter One
Snow in the Mountains

A great city overlooks the sea, its massive stone walls built into the very cliffs that rise above the crashing waves, as if seeking to extend them still further in the conjoining of the glories of nature and the feats of man. The streets are paved with stone, a maze of lanes crisscrossing this way and that and all a-bustle with people going to or from market or home or work or any of the other hundred possibilities in a city of this size, dwelling for sixty-five thousand people. A young man stands looking down upon it all, or at least as much as can be seen from his vantage point atop one of the watchtowers on the periphery of the city, a tower built at the very precipice of a rocky outcropping, functioning both as a place of watchfulness and warning and a beacon for approaching ships: a watchtower, a bell-tower, and a lighthouse. The young man wonders whose decision it was to join all three functions together in a single tower—for elsewhere in the city are to be found all three of these, yet separate, each with its own single function. But this, as it is colloquially called, is "the great watchtower," not that this explains its original construction. But it does stand high above all else in the city of Brûg'hil, save for the citadel itself at the center of the city, and it is much nearer the sea, at the end of a long grassy slope climbing the side of a shelf that almost appears to be reaching out to forge its way among the waves like some vanguard in battle or vagabond in adventure.

The grassy slope, of course, is paved now, or at least some of it is, with slant and steps climbing up to the massive stone columns of which the edifice is built and the heavy wooden doors carved with the intricate designs of ships upon a crashing sea with a moon shining brightly above them. *The Mariner's Mural* they call it, though it is not a mural; or less frequently it goes by the name of *Hiliána's Boon*. For the moon represents Hiliána, goddess of the seas and thus of mariners, watching over their trials and travails as they navigate the treacherous waters. But what is most touching about the design is the captain—or at least it is so to the man who now stands atop the watchtower and only moments before had contemplated the door's intricate detail for as many minutes as the city guards would allow him. For the captain, if such he truly is, stands at the prow of the largest and frontmost ship, leading the way through the treacherous waters into the mysterious unknown of the future. Rather than cowering from the storm in fear, he stands firm, his feet planted upon the deck and his face raised to the wind and the sky, a sword in his hand

lifted up as if to pierce the very air and to commune with the moon. A beam of light, etched in the wood, passes between the blade in the hand of the man and the moon that shines above him—barely noticeable among the rest of the etchings and yet clear to the perceptive eye. And many perceptive eyes there are, as in the decades, or rather centuries, since this door was carved, the mariner at the prow has come to be called *the King*. Why he is called king when he wears no crown and has no court is unclear, but long has this figure —and indeed the entire mural-in-wood—been seen as a portrayal of the people of Telmérion and their journey through the tempests of history, led by the great king of their kin and protector of their people.

The young man thinks upon all of this now as he stands looking out over the city of Brûg'hil and the ocean that extends beyond it, the two in a ceaseless interplay: the ever churning tides of time and the striving of society for stability. But from whence does the threat to such stability arise—from the crashing waves that carry the boats forward even while endangering them, or from the heart of man himself and from his inclination to evil, from his lust for power? Hence the moon, the moon is truly the only thing—or rather the moon and the stars—which remains unmoving, unchanging, and thus totally secure, in the mural as in life. While young Eldárien thinks of all these things, his mind returns to his hometown from which he was forced to flee, and to the barrow of the ancient king, Séra Galáptes. So many centuries have passed since the days of that legendary ruler, and the very face of Telmérion has changed. But in places and times so far from the origin, human hearts still long and dream for a kingship to unite them in a kingdom of peace, in a people made one, captained by the mariner of light who charts his course by the heavens rather than by the earth or the seas.

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Eldárien awakes suddenly in the darkness and sits up, the dream that was more a memory than anything else swiftly fleeing from his consciousness into the depths of his heart. He looks around and sees the forms of his slumbering companions, their bodies no more than darker spots upon the ground, and then the figure of Cirien, who sits upright, keeping watch, an old and wizened man silhouetted in the dim radiance of the moon and the stars that illumine even the darkness of night, cloudless and clear, but cold. The company has ascended now almost another week into the mountains without incident either from weather or from beast, though the temperature grows steadily colder with each passing day. He rubs his eyes to remove the last lingering sleep and turns his gaze upward to the sky, the stars brilliant and undimmed overhead. As he does so, the last fragment of the dream begins to fade away. And he does not cling to it but rather simply thinks how grateful he is that the nightmares have now ceased for all of them. Whatever happened

in the castle of darkness and in the forge that resides in its depths, the Lord of Mæres haunts them no longer, at least not in the manner that he once did, though this latter is not necessarily a comforting thought, since it is unlikely that he has been either defeated or pacified. It is more likely, rather, that he simply bides his time and prepares a plan of greater ferocity and effectiveness, and likely at the cost of a great loss of human life and much suffering.

"What time is it?" Eldárien asks quietly, and Cirien stirs for a moment and turns to look at him, though there is little to see in the darkness.

"I did not know that you were awake," replies Cirien. "The night has far progressed in its course, the stars and moon circling overhead, and the day draws near. I suspect that we have no more than an hour or two until the sky begins to brighten and the daystar again shows its face."

"I can watch for what remains, if you wish to attempt some more sleep," Eldárien says.

"I sleep less and less these days, even than the little that I did before departing from Ristfánd," Cirien explains. "But I notice that you also sleep little. Why is that?"

"I suppose it is no more than an acquired habit. The years I spent in the midst of the threat of battle and bloodshed, cautious of ambush or danger every night, have affected me permanently. And also just the scars...the scars of everything I did and witnessed during that time."

"Does the shame still haunt you?" Cirien asks, sensitivity and compassion in his voice.

"Aye, but not as with the same ferocity as it once did," answers Eldárien. "I do not know that I shall ever cease to regret what I have done nor to feel the bitter pain of it in my heart. But I would not wish for that, after all, for the inability to regret the past is not a benefit but a loss."

"But a man can also be made new," says Cirien, "and can cease to live as a slave to his past mistakes and prior infidelities."

"Perhaps so," replies Eldárien, "but I do not know that anything can set right the ills that such actions have set in motion. Nor can anything restore what they have destroyed."

"The latter may be true, in a fashion, but I question the former," Cirien says, and with this he rises to his feet and, pulling the thick fur in which he has been wrapped more tightly around his body, he moves to a more sheltered location and lies down. A few moments pass silently between them, and then he adds, "As I think about it, perhaps even what has been destroyed can be restored, though we know not how."

Eldárien sits reflecting upon these words for a while, his eyes looking out into the darkness. At last he replies, and he says only, "It still seems that the darkness is so much stronger than the light, and the forces of darkness so

much more numerous. It is simply hard to believe that such a degree of destruction and loss could ever be remedied."

"Not by any power that we possess," Cirien replies. "And I suppose our part now is simply to stand against the darkness as best we can and to wield what light is given to us, what light we bear within us. No more can we do than this."

After these words, complete silence descends, and soon the heavy breathing of Cirien joins in with the chorus of the rest of the company, bringing Eldárien deep consolation in the serenity of their slumber, a vestige of repose on the verge of encroaching chaos.

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Pale light begins to glow on the horizon in the east, silhouetting the mountains and outlining the forms of trees and stones and sleeping figures cradled in the valley between them. Eldárien sits, alert to his surroundings but also deep in thought, his breath a mist before him with each exhale. A soft breeze whistles down from the peaks, gentle but cold, and he shivers even though wearing multiple layers of clothing and wrapped in thick fur. The scars upon his left cheek—inflicted by the claws of the beast called Maggot—sting in the bitter air, but his mind is elsewhere, occupied rather with thinking and listening. He has also become accustomed to pain, as accustomed as anyone can be, for under his garments he wears many stripes, not from whips or blades—though war scars too he bears—but from the torturous pleasure in which Maggot indulged by cutting open his bare flesh with claws as sharp as those of any hunting animal. The wounds have closed now, and their pain is manageable even after a long day's walk carrying the burdens of travel, but at first they made all movement and activity blisteringly painful and difficult. But the cold does something too, aggravating these wounds even as they heal: it makes Eldárien stiff, as if his whole body is covered in scabs or dried blood, or as if his skin has begun to turn to tough leather, and in order to move he must break the stiffness by an effort of the will.

But as he sits as sentinel over the camp, the day dawning after a bitterly cold night, he does not dwell on these things. Rather, he simply listens: listens not so much for any sound of danger as to the gentle song that is carried to him over the cold expanse. It is the song of a dove cooing in a distant tree, barely audible, and which would certainly be drowned out in any other location, but which, in the wide space between the mountains, echoes across a great distance. Suddenly his listening is interrupted—or rather, it welcomes another voice: the voice of Elmáriyë, sounding suddenly and softly, barely audible but contrasting with the distant echo of the dove, since it is so near, only a few feet away.

His name is all that she says—"Eldárien"—in a voice that indicates that she

has long been awake and yet has said nothing.

He turns his head slightly toward her, though he cannot see any more than the outline of her figure in the darkness, and replies, "What keeps you awake at night?"

"You know?" she asks.

"I think Cirien and I both know," says Eldárien. "We sleep little, each for our own reasons. And, being awake much of the night, it is impossible to fail to notice that your 'sleep' sounds much different than that of the others. Were it only the three of us, I suppose we could walk through much of the night to progress our journey—ignoring, of course, the danger to be found when traveling in mountainous terrain in the dark of night."

"I *do* sleep," Elmáriyë answers, "only..."

"Something keeps you awake," he concludes for her.

"I also feel no need for more," she explains, "as if my body has fully recovered in but a few hours."

"I feel the same," Eldárien says. "But there is also something that draws you?" he then asks, turning to face her even though he cannot see her more deeply than with the eyes of the heart.

"Yes," she answers in a whisper, in which he can detect something akin to embarrassment or bashfulness. "I am too restless to sleep long when there is so much life to live...and when I am always longing for that which lies..." Her voice fades away before she finishes the thought.

But Eldárien again provides an answer: "Beyond?"

"Beyond," she agrees. "But also so close. It is like my heart is a wound crying out for healing or a fragment of a great mosaic yearning to be fitted again into the whole." She sighs. "But no, it is more than that: it is like I am a betrothed maiden yearning for her wedding day."

Eldárien receives her words in silence but does not reply in spoken voice. He understands something of what she means to say. And she does not need him to speak in order to feel his response resounding in the silence. But at last, he does give voice to his thoughts and feelings: "To be awakened by longing and hope rather than by shame and fear. That is a beautiful thing, and something that I never thought I would experience. But here I have been given a portion of what you bear within you, something so unexpected and so new."

"But it is your own, Eldárien," Elmáriyë replies, "and not merely mine."

"I...I suppose you are right, though I fear to make it my own, to accept it as mine."

"You eagerly and without hesitation bear what belongs to others," says Elmáriyë, "but you hesitate to embrace what is your own. Yet how can you carry the joys and pains of others unless you—you, Eldárien—are fully

present, alive and vibrant, to carry them?"

"Until now it has come with hardly a thought," he says.

"But if the burden increases?" she asks.

"I doubt not that it shall increase."

"Then you must root yourself more deeply if you are not to be submerged by what you bear." Her words echo within him, and he bows his head for a moment, closing his eyes. When he opens them again, he realizes that Elmáriyë now sits beside him, facing in the same direction as he, her knees drawn up to her chest and her arms wrapped around them, as if in the attempt to retain as much warmth as she can.

"Shall we watch the sunrise together?" she asks.

He looks at her, her youthful, kind, and wise face now visible in the gradually lightening air of the early morning, and he nods.

† † †

Within an hour after sunrise they depart, a bitter wind beginning to sweep over the mountains, rustling in the trees and whistling among the hollows and crevices of stone. They continue on the path that they have been following now for close to a week; it is a trail long forgotten by human feet but kept still by many creatures of the wilderness, though from whence they come and whither they go is uncertain. There are the tracks of deer and elk, of wolves and bears, and even the tiny print-marks of hares and foxes. The trail is clearly a thoroughfare for the animals that call the mountains their home, as simple as it may be, hedged tightly left and right with brambles and bushes and overshadowed often by towering cedars and aspens. The path is worn down by so much life, and thus made only more evident, a narrow furrow of packed earth clearly visible against the grasses and fallen pine needles and various leaves that cover the earth like a blanket.

After the company had departed from the valley of the dark castle, climbing the steep slope that rose beyond it, they had soon found themselves in the midst of rugged terrain, more steep and difficult of ascent and navigation than anything they had yet encountered on their journey. Were it not for the trails trod by the animals, their progress would have been slowed to a pace such as almost to negate any progress they hoped to make by passing through the mountains rather than by traveling around them. But even if such trails as they now follow are not very amenable to human feet, the animals have tended to carve out the straightest ways, and thus the difficulty of their passage is balanced by its swiftness.

The chill wind continues to bite at them throughout the morning, and the trees that surround them—and their own cloaks—are poor protection against its cold. The placid and clear sky of dawn gradually changes, through the wind blowing from the west, to one overcast with low-hanging and fast-

moving clouds of bluish-gray, whose lower portions threaten to release their moisture at any moment. When the companions have paused for respite around midday, sitting together in a clearing a few yards off the trail and eating a light meal of what remains of their quickly dwindling rations, the clouds finally break. Yet they loose not rain but snow, thick and full like a sheet of white blowing heavily in the wind and almost entirely obscuring sight. By the time that they have finished their meal, the earth has already begun to clothe itself in garments of white, though more like garb haphazardly donned than elegantly dressed coverage; for the driving winds continue to move the snow and scatter it about until it finds a resting place in which to cling—a hollow among the crook of branch, root, or trunk, or the clefts of rocks, or the tangle of grass, there to find repose.

"Should we take refuge until the snow has passed?" Cirien asks, pulling the hood of his cloak tight around his face and looking out at the boughs of the trees as they sway almost violently in the wind, groaning and creaking all the while.

"I think it would be easier to stay warm were we to keep moving," replies Eldárien. "Building a fire would be almost impossible in this weather, and yet if we stay still the chill shall bite right into us."

"I agree," adds Rórlain. "I do not look forward to sitting here under the buffeting of wind and cold until I turn into a pile of snow or an ice sculpture. It is best we keep on the path and let our efforts warm us."

Cirien nods and, looking at the others, asks, "We are all agreed then?"

They all nod in harmony, and, without another word, they gather together their belongings, steel themselves against the storm, and return to the trail.

The snow accompanies them for the rest of the day and continues even when the dull white light of day fades into the dark of night—a darkness that, due to the amount of snow that swirls about them and now also cloaks the land, is more a grayish half-light than the full black of nighttime. The moon and stars, they know, shine somewhere above them, but all is shielded from sight, both above and around, and they can make out no more than a few yards ahead of them. With the coming of night, however, despite the radiance provided by the whiteness of the snow, the last vestige of the path—gradually covered during the hours of the day—is now hidden from sight.

"We cannot proceed any further without risking losing our way," Eldárien says, turning back from his position in the lead to look at his companions. Their faces—as much as they are visible beneath their cloaks and heavy scarves—are red with cold, and their eyes gleam even now, both with glossy moisture as they try to look out through the dark and the cold as well as with exhaustion, and perhaps even with fear and anxiety.

"Would a torch perhaps help?" Elmáriyë asks. "Granting that we could

manage to light one..."

"I fear that we are nearing the point where only the full light of day—and the calming of this storm—will allow us to discern with certainty the contours of the path that we have been following," Eldárien replies. "And even such a path is only coincidental, for at any time it could turn away from its course through the mountains and lead elsewhere. So far it has served its course, as the animals' trail and our own coincide, but without seeing the wider landscape, we could easily lose both their path and ours."

"I myself am so exhausted that I can hardly keep walking," Tilliána voices softly, "and yet I fear stopping for the cold."

"The wind has lessened a little," Rórlain says, "so perhaps we could try to build a campfire. I have done it before in weather not unlike this. And there is also enough snow now that we can enclose ourselves in it to shield us from the wind and even to retain some of our native body heat."

"I think it is worth the effort," says Eldárien. "Regardless, we have little choice."

"Very well," Cirien sighs, turning about and looking around them, though little is visible beyond the blowing snow except a few nearby trees. "I had hoped that we would avoid any snows, considering it is only the beginning of autumn. Yet the terrain is against us, for we are now so high in the mountains that snow could well fall even in the height of summer."

"There is nothing that can be done about it now, and there is no fruit in lamenting a decision long made," Rórlain says, turning to Cirien. "I do not think that any of us blame you, nor do we even think that your judgment was ill made. Who can know what we would have encountered on an alternate path?" In response to Rórlain's words, nods and affirmations ripple through the group, some more enthusiastic than others, but all honest and heartfelt.

And so they take a few minutes to search the area until they identify a small space, perhaps fifteen feet across, that is protected among trees and yet provides enough room for them to attempt a fire and to build a makeshift shelter. Working together, they take another half hour to build up walls and outcroppings of snow deep enough to protect them from the worst of the wind and snowfall and also to get a fire to light, though it continues to sputter and dance in its struggle to stay aflame in the threatening weather. When at last they huddle together in their temporary abode, each of them is shivering with cold and trying all they can to bring some warmth into their limbs which sting and burn in the frigid air.

"Stay close to each another," Rórlain says, "and let your body heat keep one another warm. The temperature is going to drop, and I fear that it shall soon be deadly. I shall tend the fire to keep it alight for as long as the fuel shall allow. And...sleep, if you can."

† † †

Around midnight the storm breaks and the snow ceases to fall. Rórlain sits near the fire, which sputters in the cold but continues to burn strong, as the clouds roll away to the east in the remaining breeze and reveal the firmament above. And as if a rainbow after a rainstorm, he sees the night-mist, the aurora, dancing in ribbons of green and purple light weaving about the mountain peaks. He leans his head back and ignores the cold that bites at his face as he watches the play of the celestial lights, so tender and so pure, and so different, in their immensity cradling the very earth, than the flickering of the tiny fire fighting to stay alive directly before him.

The darkness is naught but expectancy for the light, he thinks, *or, when it becomes aberrant, the light's rejection. May I ever abide in the first while always avoiding the second.*

He lowers his gaze for a moment and, seeing that the fuel feeding the fire is gradually being consumed, he sets the last remaining log on it; this elicits a shower of sparks as the burning logs and embers shift to accommodate the new weight placed upon them. He watches as the flames lick up around the new log, flickering and waving as they dry it out and blacken it, until it, too, shall be turned into living flame. Hopefully that will be sufficient to provide adequate warmth until the coming of morning, for Rórlain does not wish to search for more wood while the night is still in her full darkness. But he knows that it will not be enough, and that within another couple hours, what burns bright now will dwindle down to embers and ash.

With a sigh, he rises to his feet and, pulling his cloak tight around his body, steps away from the fire and from the companions' shelter, hoping in its remaining light to find more fuel. But the trees surrounding their camp are little more than black shapes in the darkness, and he finds it necessary to search more by feeling than by sight—until, that is, he thinks to make a torch. He takes a newfound branch and lets its end catch in the campfire and uses it —in a fire that quickly flickers down to only a frail and flickering flame—to light his search. He finds five or six thick branches before the makeshift torch burns out. Shivering now with cold, he repeats this two more times, lighting the torch and hurriedly scouring the surrounding area for fallen or loose branches until the flame burns to nothing. At last, he has a sizable collection of branches, small and quick burning, admittedly, but much better than nothing.

And so he sits again, so near to the fire that his feet are almost in it, and tries to warm his face, his hands, and his body. Even the remaining breeze has now hushed to a whisper, and the land is silent, so silent that he feels that he can hear the very air breathe. The crackling and purring of the fire and the heavy breathing of his sleeping companions join in with this deeper, more

enfolding breathing of the air, as if the land itself is cloaked in a living force, invisible and yet all-pervading, that inhales and exhales forever across her surface, echoing silently between her mountain peaks and in her valleys, taking refuge in her dells and her plains, and sweeping out indeed even across the expanses of the ocean and upward to the very brink of the heavens.

Yet Rórlain feels more than this as well, more than the breathing of the air and the presence of his companions and the warmth and light of the fire. He feels *more*. Ever since the light first touched him, first poured through him in the depths of the caverns beneath the castle of darkness, he has begun to feel things that he has never felt before. And while he tries to name something of this to himself, tries to get a feel, however inchoate, of the contours of this newfound reality, he realizes that the experience is twofold. On the one hand, he feels harnessed by something so much deeper and wider than he is, so much more immense, not only than his frail and limited existence, but than he has ever known or been able to imagine of *anything* at all. And yet by this greater reality he does not feel snuffed out or diminished, but rather simply held—held like the forest holds and sustains the lives of all the animals that call it home, or the sea holds the very atmosphere in which all the creatures of the deep live and without which they would die. On the other hand, contrasting with this consoling sense of holding and yet somehow within it, he also feels a mysterious weight, like the pain of grieving or loss or the lament of a heart that cries out at evil or injustice. These two very different realities somehow meet in his own heart and experience, as if he is meant to bridge between the two, or rather to reconcile the second with the first, to somehow let the light that holds him and all things and pours through him as through a hollow vessel, to penetrate and permeate the darkness, and in so doing to heal it and transform it into light.

With these thoughts in his mind and heart, Rórlain drifts off to sleep, only to be stirred awake shortly by the bitter cold. He opens his eyes and sees that the last lingering flames in the campfire flicker and threaten to go out. As he reaches for a branch to place on the fire, he hears a soft voice beside him, "I will tend the fire until morning. Please, get some rest." Then Eldárien's hand is placed upon his arm, and he emerges from the darkness, his face kind and clear in the dancing light of the remaining fire.

"Have you slept enough?" asks Rórlain.

"I think none of us have slept well, you least of all," says Eldárien. "But I have rested enough, and I think that I could sleep no more even if I tried."

"Then please, have a seat," offers Rórlain, with a gesture to the ground beside him. "There is something that I wanted to ask you, and then I shall attempt to sleep."

"Let us first save this dying fire," Eldárien says with a chuckle.

"My apologies about that. I fell asleep."

"It is no matter. I am glad you were able to rest, even if but a little."

After the two men have managed to rekindle the fire until it burns bright and warm before them, illumining their faces with its reddish-orange hue, Rórlain turns his gaze to Eldárien and speaks. "I do not know how to phrase this as a question, but I wanted to talk more with you about what happened underneath the castle."

"Of course," replies Eldárien. "It need not be a question. Just speak."

Rórlain sighs, as if reaching inside himself to pull out the words that elude his thought and expression. "I know we agreed that it seems apparent that I have received some share in the power entrusted to you—or in the light, rather. Forgive me, I forgot that you prefer not to speak of it as a 'power'."

"I suppose it depends on how you use that word," explains Eldárien. "It is not a power in the sense that an ability to impose one's will or strength on another is a power. Nor is it even a power as is skill with bow or sword, or even, for example, as is the ability to read a book. Though it is more like the latter... It is a capacity, an ability that one simply did not possess before and then...suddenly...it is present. But it is different also since it comes wholly from beyond oneself. It is not one's own—not in the possessive sense of that term. One is merely a vessel, as it were, of a mystery greater than oneself, and more benevolent."

"You mean for the channeling of the light?" asks Rórlain.

"For the channeling of the light and the bearing of the darkness, both."

"I suppose that is precisely what I am grappling to understand and to live," Rórlain says. "I feel so much more power and energy flowing through me, and yet at the same time I feel...poorer, more destitute. And it is as though I am being invited to become even poorer as time passes. All that I would call my 'possessions' can only get in the way of the flow of this light and its meeting with the darkness."

"That is precisely it," Eldárien agrees. "I am learning the same. For this reality remains as new for me as it does for you. And perhaps it shall always be new, as if rediscovered every day until the end of our lives."

"So it takes everything from our hands in the same moment that it gives us everything?" Rórlain asks, tentatively.

"That feels true, deep in here," says Eldárien, putting a hand momentarily to his heart. "And precisely because it takes everything can it give everything, and because it gives everything it does not leave us empty, though empty we shall forevermore remain. For if every possession obstructs the flow of the gift, every positive desire, choice, and act, every true bond of love and communion, as humble as it may be, facilitates it. That is, as long as it springs forth in docility to that inner mystery surging deep within. And so love, hope,

courage, longing, compassion, these all flow from that deep inner wellspring, as its overflowing, and as vessels of its expansion."

"It is a painful joy and a joyful pain," Rórlain observes in a whisper.

"Aye, that it is," says Eldárien. "And it has only just begun for us. Elmáriyë, despite her youth, has lived in the orbit of this reality for many years. This explains, I believe, why she appears as transparent as a clean pane of glass in the light of a brilliant sunrise."

"Or as transparent as the air itself on a clear morning," Rórlain offers, and Eldárien nods. And then, pausing and becoming pensive, Rórlain remarks, "But I wonder what shall be asked of us in coming times."

"To know such a thing would be a possession," answers Eldárien. "I think only love, trust, and hope can keep the heart open and poor enough to receive and to live in the truth of the gift at every moment, including when that future time becomes the present."

'I believe you are right," says Rórlain. "But what about knowing what it means that I am called 'the squire of the knight'?"

"That it would do no harm to know, I suppose," Eldárien answers with a smile. "Indeed, I feel that we are being asked—yes, drawn—to *know* more deeply and truly than we have ever known before. From that knowledge alone springs the courage and serenity to live and to act."

"But the knowledge is poor, a knowledge borne in poverty," adds Rórlain, "like standing before the sunrise and trying to be transparent to its light, not like trying to contain all of its glory and beauty in the palm of one's hand."

"Precisely."

After these words the two lapse into silence for a few long minutes, listening to the crackle of the fire and to the echoing stillness of the snow-covered, nocturnal landscape. At last Eldárien speaks and says simply, "The squire of the knight... That is what you were told?"

"Yes," replies Rórlain. "Clearly you are the knight, since I know none other, and since it is in your gift that I share."

"I would not call it mine. It belongs equally to both of us, to all of us, and yet it can be claimed by none of us."

"And yet I feel, even in the silence of my heart, that what I experience is a share in what has been entrusted to you," Rórlain explains. "I feel the truth of the words. It is as if their meaning was instilled along with their very enunciation. I am your 'squire.' And I am also your companion and your protector. Your right hand, as it were."

"I suppose so," says Eldárien, "and I am glad to have you as such. But this does not mean that we are not equals. I hope you know that."

"Of course I do, my friend," Rórlain says. "The difference in our roles springs forth within the equality of our friendship and does not negate it.

Indeed, this is precisely what I wish to be for you and what I feel you to be for me. It is as if the impress of this future gift was already present from the first moment of our meeting."

"I feel so as well," agrees Eldárien. "And only the unfolding of our path shall show the significance of this mystery that has touched us and now grips us so strongly. Then we shall know fully, I suspect, what it means that I am 'knight' and you are 'squire'."

"And even there the friendship, the bond of equality, shall carry everything," says Rórlain. "For whatever gift springs forth in the heart, and through it, the heart itself remains. It is the bearer...and, even more, it is borne. It is held by that which holds all things and from which all giving springs."

Chapter Two

Symbélyia

Morning dawns still and quiet yet drenched in white, as both the earth and the sky are covered in a thick sheet of colorless moisture: the earth in snow and the sky in low-hanging clouds. Were the sun not veiled by the clouds, the morning would be blindingly bright, its light reflecting off the snow in brilliant rays, but instead it is dim, almost calm, in a kind of pale half-light as if the pallor of the snow below illumines the landscape in equal measure as the sun and the sky above. This makes the hint of rosy hue that surrounds the shadowed sun like a halo even more serene, as if a gentle gaze cast through a veil that covers the face of a bride on her wedding day. Or so it seems to Tilliána as she looks out over the landscape thick with trees, mountains enfolding them on every side, and shivers in the bitter cold that her garb, her cloak, and her blanket are barely able to withstand. She recalls her own wedding day and the veil that she wore and the song of celebration that followed upon the ceremony and that preceded the solitude shared by bridegroom and bride. Unlike the extravagance of other cultures, the weddings of Telmérion are more like her landscape: sober and solemn, yet joyful and full of rugged beauty, as of a festival garden that, long lost, is nonetheless recalled and celebrated in the austerity of a nation of cold lands and warm hearths, of hard lives full of gladness even as they are marked by pain.

But Tilliána has lost all of this now, and her heart still aches at the memory of the loss, an ever-present remembrance like a shadow of what had been but is no longer. As one turns from the light for but a moment and notices one's shadow following, so too does the shadow of her family and the life that they

once shared, now gone, haunt her like a heavy weight of loss any time she turns her gaze from the fullness of the present moment. Indeed it often intrudes on the moment, however occupied she may be with other things, as an encroaching darkness that suffocates the heart and drains it of all energy, courage, and life. And the path that they walk provides little distraction from the grief—in long days of silent walking with little actions or occurrences of note and few words exchanged. But worst of all had been her time in the pit of darkness buried under the earth, enchained with no sight nor sound but the warm air of the hidden cavern and the anguished uncertainty of deliverance. For here she gazed, with naked eye unveiled, into the depths of her loss and her pain, her anguish and her fear. And her courage had failed, and she had tasted the bitter drink of despair. Only the thinnest thread within her had held on to the hope and desire of deliverance. And yet despite it all, deliverance had come.

Yet the scars remain.

Tilliána notices the hunched figure of Eldárien as he sits before the dwindling fire, his arms wrapped around his knees and his hood pulled tight around his face. Gathering the furs that are wrapped about her, she joins him beside the flames. When he notices her, he looks up at her and smiles softly. "An early dawn, but cold," he says. "We shall soon be off, but I wish to give Rórlain a bit more time for rest before we depart. He was awake most of the night. Indeed, even if sleep is troubled for all of us due to the cold, I think we need to give our bodies whatever time for rest and recovery we may." She nods silently, and then he adds, "How are you holding up? The journey is quite demanding, and I know that it has been a great challenge for you, not only physically but in the other dimensions of your being as well."

"The hiking is difficult. In this you are correct," she replies. "Every day feels as though more than I can give, and yet every day I am surprised that I remain on my feet until night falls and we stop to make camp. And as for the...other parts...the scars linger, and it feels that, when I was in the pitch-black darkness of that horrible place, they were torn open anew and deepened. Now I wonder," her voice falters and falls silent for a moment before she forces herself to conclude, "now I wonder if they shall ever heal."

Eldárien looks at her with tenderness in his eyes, but he does not reply in words for a long time. Instead, they both direct their gaze to the flickering light of the fire as it struggles to remain alight with fuel that is quickly burning to ash. At last, he says simply, "The scars, indeed, may never heal. But perhaps they can become the occasion for something new, catalysts of the birth of a greater beauty."

Shortly after this, the rest of the company begins to stir—whether they were asleep or not in the times preceding—and in only a quarter of an hour

the travelers depart. The day is brighter now, though a veil of pale gray hangs over everything, muting the color of the trees, their pines and leaves peeking out from under a heavy curtain of snow. The ground itself is almost entirely formless except for the rise and fall of the land and a few large boulders or fallen logs that emerge like mounds from the vastness of white, smooth except for ripples where the wind blew strong against the accumulating snow and caused it to bank in formations almost like waves at sea, frozen in an instant and turned to powder.

As they walk, Tilliána holds Eldárien's words in her heart, trying to understand how these scars of grief and fear could ever be anything but a burden upon her heart, narrowing and suffocating. She glances for a moment at Eldárien who walks near to her, and seeing the scars upon his own cheek, closed now but so deep that they shall never entirely disappear nor indeed be less than a grave disfigurement of his face, she knows that his words sprang from experience and deep contemplation. They were not words of empty consolation nor a dismissal of her pain and struggle. They were words rather that came from the deep space of his own pained solitude, a fruit of the weight that he himself bears, though he conceals it in silence and in gentleness. Or perhaps, she thinks to herself, his silence and his gentleness reveal this inner pain of his heart most deeply and appropriately, though in a way of which she has been unaware until this moment.

"Eldárien," she says, suddenly and without a thought, and is immediately surprised at herself.

"Yes, Tilliána?" he asks, turning to look at her as they walk.

"I want to express to you that you do not need to walk your path alone," she continues. "I know that there is much that you cannot share with me, nor perhaps with any of us. Or at least...how can I say it?...we won't necessarily understand it fully. But please, do not be afraid to share anyway. None should carry their pains and sorrows, their hopes and aspirations, alone. I think that maybe the gods like to console us not only in the hidden solitude of our hearts, but also through the companionship that we have with one another."

Eldárien smiles softly and nods his head, saying, "I agree with you, Tilliána. And thank you."

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The temperature rises but little during the day as they walk almost without rest, nearly as much to stay warm as to make progress on their journey, though by evening it feels that they have done little of either. The spirits of all in the company are burdened when darkness begins to fall—exhausted by the difficulty of trekking through the thick snow and worn down by the continual cold. As if to compound this discomfort, with the reclining of the sun in the cradle of the western mountains a swift wind begins to blow from

the north, bitingly cold albeit not as strong as the wind of the previous day. As the travelers crest a ridge whose steep ascent they have just climbed, and with much effort, they find stretched before them a wide and densely forested valley in the depression created in the arms of three mountains.

Suddenly, at the sight of the woods cradled by mountains and flecked with snow and ice, a memory rushes upon Eldárien's consciousness so deeply and forcefully that he is unable to resist it. It feels almost as though the very presence of the forest, or something within it, summons forth from deep within him an experience long buried though never forgotten. It plays out now before his mind's eye in its entirety in a matter of moments, and he must tightly shut his eyes in order to keep the tears from escaping from them. *Why this here...now?* he thinks, trying to get a grasp on his emotions and his mind and to return to the present. Gradually he does so, returning his attention to where he stands with his four companions looking out over the forested valley, though this is not due to his own efforts; rather, it is as if the same current that carried the memory into his consciousness also veils it once again in his depths, though now in a way that its veiling does not hide it, but rather protects it within him and allows him to remain vividly aware of it, that he might tap into it at any moment. And then Rórlain speaks, and his words draw Eldárien even further from his reverie, and he finds himself fully present again, almost as if the memory had never stirred at all.

"It will likely be warmer among the trees of the wood than anywhere else," says Rórlain. "Shall we not try to find shelter there for the night?"

All immediately agree to this suggestion. And so they descend, for the first time leaving what can be discerned of the path that they have been following as it winds its way along an outcropping of the steep mountain slope. Instead they take the shortest and straightest route through the snow toward the forest until they enter into the embrace of the trees, thick and full. Immediately they are enfolded by a dense silence almost akin to being underwater, and they look at one another in puzzlement—for the stillness that envelops them now is not caused by the trees and the snow alone. The natural hush caused by such landmarks, by the interplay of thick trees and heavy snow, is accentuated, and yet also surpassed, by something else entirely.

"Is this...good or ill?" Elmáriyë asks quietly, as though she is afraid to speak and to disturb the silence.

"We do all feel it, do we not?" questions Rórlain, looking to the others, who nod in agreement.

They stand still now, hardly breathing so as to enter into the silence and to hear its voice, listening for some secret voice echo in the muteness of the wood. And in the same moment they look about, their eyes keen to see some vestigious figure emerge from the deepening shadows of twilight. But as the

minutes pass and nothing greets them, neither sight nor sound, Eldárien takes the lead and begins to move forward again.

"What says your heart?" Cirien whispers in answer to Elmáriyë's prior question about the good or ill of the "something" that has welcomed them upon their arrival.

She turns and glances at him for a moment and says, "I do not yet know."

"I feel," comes the voice of Eldárien ahead of them, "I feel that all of my heaviness is being drawn out of me like affection from the heart or poison from a wound. Yet for what purpose, I do not know. It is just being...elicited."

Elmáriyë closes her eyes and draws in a deep breath, leaning back her head slightly as if listening. Only a moment later, she opens her eyes again and says, "Yes, that is exactly it. Something or someone here wants our pain, our struggle, our loss...and I do not think to use it as a tool against us. No, rather, this force feels almost—"

"The inverse of the Lord of Nightmares," concludes Rórlain.

Elmáriyë looks at him and laughs. "Precisely," she says with a smile. "I do not think that we have anything to fear."

"I do not think so either," Tilliána says, but then she immediately adds, "yet it is difficult to trust when one walks into the unknown. Should we proceed deeper into the forest, or make camp here, or even stay on the outskirts of the wood?"

"What do you think, Tilliána?" Eldárien asks, turning back to her, though the air has now deepened into a darkness so rich that it is almost impossible for them to see one another's faces.

"I..." she begins, but pauses. "I feel safe here. This darkness and this silence, both, are welcoming. I feel no danger in them."

"Then let us proceed."

The company thus continues deeper into the woods, dense trees surrounding them tightly on either side but leaving just enough space ahead for them to progress. As night fully descends, the forest sinks into complete nocturnal darkness, not a pitch-blackness but rather a subtle veiledness that feels more like a full saturation of color deeper than the eyes can take in than a lack of color, as if all the essences of color in the world were poured together into a single hue of utmost intensity. And thus through the darkness they sense light, almost as though, if their eyes were keen enough and their hearts alive enough, they would be able to see in the dark and through it to a deeper light that never ceases to shine and to illumine all things—a center-point of white-hot intensity from which all colors find their origin and to which they return, a prism through which and from which all beauty is refracted, and in which, indeed, all good and beautiful things exist in their eminent fullness beyond the partial, imperfect expressions with which they are encountered in

this world.

After about ten minutes they come to a clearing into which the light of the full moon shines bright, reflecting off the snow and illumining the trunks and branches of the trees in a vivid light. Here they stop and begin to set up camp, still held by the all-pervading silence and by a stillness so deep that the slightest rustle in the canopy of the trees draws their attention. But whatever breeze blows across the mountainous valley does not reach into the woods, rustling only its exterior, while the clearing slumbers, cradled in the quietude of the trees, inviting also into repose those who dwell in its midst.

Before they have finished preparing for sleep, and as Eldárien and Rórlain gather logs and branches for a fire, something else happens. From within the trees, emerging from knotted holes or cracks in bark and wood, appear tiny little creatures—they look to be moths—whose wings and bodies glow in the light of the moon. This glowing is not a reflection, however, like moonlight on water or firelight upon glass, but a true luminosity arising from within: the creatures emit light themselves, each a little glowing spark of light with a pale and yet welcoming radiance. The moths soon fill the air all around them in the hundreds, darting among the trees and circling about in the clearing, many rising up high into the canopy, as if seeking to join their light with the light of the moon or to sing back to the moon the same light that they once received from it, tiny sparks seeking to immerse themselves again in the burning furnace of nocturnal radiance.

Cirien sighs in awe and whispers something so softly that the others can hardly hear him, "Symbélyia..."

"What was that?" Elmáriyë asks him as she looks around at the moths that encircle her and dance about her body as if seeking to enfold her in light. "Do you know what these are?"

"Yes," he replies. "Sorry I spoke so softly. I was just so taken by surprise and wonder. These are called 'symbélyia,' moon moths. But until now I did not know if they were real or were only a legend."

"They are..." Tilliána begins, holding her arms out and watching in awe as a few moths land upon them, their wings folding and unfolding slowly, "they are...warm."

"They show themselves only during a full moon," Cirien explains, "or so it is said. Our circumstances seem to lend credence to that. They once filled the forests of Telmérion with their light, and festivals were held at each full moon across the continent. But little by little, due to encroaching darkness, they retreated into uninhabited places, where they went into hiding or, we thought perhaps, disappeared entirely. But," he laughs softly, "here they are."

"*Hældári,*" says Elmáriyë.

"What did you say?" Eldárien asks, turning to her, and he sees her face il-

lumined by the light of the symbélyia that dance around her, her eyes twinkling in their glow.

"I don not...know."

"What do you mean you do not know?"

"I know not what it means nor where it came from," explains Elmáriyë. "While I looked at them, the word came spontaneously to me. Perhaps it is from some forgotten memory?"

"It means 'Hiliána's gift' in the ancient tongue," says Eldárien.

"You have knowledge of ancient Telméric?" Cirien asks, stepping closer and joining their conversation.

"My knowledge is not perfect," Eldárien answers, "but the mentor of my youth, a man named Aédin, taught it to me."

"Fascinating," replies Cirien. "And from whence did this Aédin learn ancient Telméric?"

"I do not know," says Eldárien. "He never told me."

"So what then does symbélyia mean?" Cirien asks. "I know much of the language myself, though it seems not as much as you, and I do not recognize the etymology of the word."

"I do not recognize it either. Perhaps it has a different origin."

At this moment the moon crests the tops of the trees and shows her face clear and full above the clearing, bathing those within its embrace in her cool light. Joined with the luminescence of the symbélyia, the dense forest now glows in a light bright enough for any activity. It is a night full of radiance. But as the dancing moths, glowing and emitting warmth, receive the full light of the moon, something even more incredible happens. They begin to sing—or, at least, music emerges from them, like vibrations from the bow of a fiddle, or sound from a flute filled with air, or reverberations from the plucked strings of a lyre or harp. And indeed the sound that washes over the company as they stand in the midst of the dancing and singing moths is unlike anything that they have heard before, and yet also like everything that they have ever heard, only richer, fuller, and more beautiful.

Swelling like waves against the shore and yet gentle like a caress upon the cheek, the sound engulfs them and permeates their being, touching the tension and fear within them and easing it spontaneously, easing it so gently and so subtly that the change within them is almost imperceptible, even though so radical and so evident.

"I think we have found the force that was inviting us," whispers Eldárien, and as he speaks all of the companions realize that his voice echoes not as a disturbance of the music, but rather is taken up into it and woven into its fabric, enhancing and deepening it, even while being ennobled by it. And so he continues, with amazement but also with confidence, "She wished for our

vulnerability so that she could serenade us with her sweetness and give us rest. Warmth, solace, light—we shall be safe here until the morning."

† † †

As they all recline for sleep, forsaking for the first time since departing from Ristfánd both a campfire and a night watch, Eldárien looks up at the starry sky visible in the space between the trees above them. The moon moths continue to dance and sing softly, and the air surrounding the company of travelers is comfortable, not cold, despite the bitterness of night that falls upon the mountains. Surrounded by the gentle light of the symbélyia, all the while looking at the stars glimmering in the sky, Eldárien has the sensation that he is not only observing stars at a distance but is surrounded by them—that the moths are like a firmament come from heaven to earth to enfold the heart and flesh of man. Only one other time has he had a similar experience, though to call it similar is inaccurate, as it was far different in its nature and its origin than being surrounded by the gifts of Hiliána. During his time in the city of Brûg'hil, he had visited the great observatory, a large complex that was advanced in the science of astronomy. Through the use of specialized optical devices, a theory had been developed that the earth, Irándiel, was not indeed a flat surface but a round orb, circling in an immense space filled with stars. And the center of this perpetual movement was the sun, which was called of old Élda (perhaps Eldárien was indeed named after the sun, though this he does not know for sure). From the little that they had discovered, the astronomers at the great observatory had built a model of what they called the "harmony," a device that, run by a simple water mill, caused orbs and stars to orbit around a brilliant lamp in the center, symbolizing Élda, the sun.

On his visit, Eldárien had been given a tour not only of the precincts but of the harmony. All lights had been extinguished and all windows heavily curtained, and the "stars" and the "sun" ignited until the room itself was filled with the flickering lights of model stars and with orbs circling ceaselessly around a burning light that remained unmoving in the center, illumining all. This model, born of a frail and budding science, had stirred profound wonder in Eldárien's heart, and, though he had assumed that Irándiel was the center of the circle of stars and sun, he now came to believe that the center of all was Élda, whose face nonetheless shone upon all, giving warmth and light.

But the science went only so far and revealed only so much beauty; the living lights that now surround him and dance with radiance reveal a deeper truth, which the material image only reflects and seeks to unveil in the little way that it may. For Eldárien contemplates now that the entirety of the visible universe is modeled on the invisible reality, though without encompassing it or being the sole criterion of its truth. No, the judgment passes in the

opposite direction: though the visible world, judged with eyes, ears, and other senses, and discerned with the tools of science and art, is true and discoverable in its own right, and radiant with meaning, its truest significance and profoundest truth is discovered not by this alone but by the hidden eyes and ears of the heart, attuned to spiritual reality, from which all has been born and to which it remains always indebted for its very being. And the symbélyia that surround Eldárien now seem almost like a meeting-place between that invisible world and this visible world—two worlds and yet only one, the visible contained within the invisible, and manifesting it, like a city contained in a nation or a house in a city, or better, as a child in the womb of a mother or affection in the heart of a man. And yet the parallelism also is deeper, as this visible world has been born from the invisible and therefore in all its parts reflects it and reveals it, granting, in mystery, a true contact with and understanding of the invisible reality, even if without a further manifestation of the spirit in the flesh this knowledge and this contact remains inchoate.

The light with which the symbélyia glow is somehow unearthly, from beyond, just as, Eldárien realizes, is the light that bursts forth from the lightbringer and from his own hands—Hiliána's gift, and something that he can channel not by his own power or authority but only as a vessel whose poverty and openness of heart allow something far beyond him to pour through. And this mysterious light is consoling and welcoming, as if it is cherishing him and his companions, or as if someone is cherishing them through it, giving them solace and security in the midst of the vulnerability and anguish of their journey and their struggle with the forces of darkness.

And now this experience of being enfolded in light gives way to another memory, the same that had stirred in him but a couple hours earlier when he had first laid his eyes on the forest cradled between the mountains. In the safety of the symbélyia's presence he now freely allows the memory to flood through him, though it pains his heart still. He feels held enough to endure it, to let it come to the light, to enter into the orbit of the dance of all things around the one light, and there to find healing.

He stands in another forest, dense and full, as the evening twilight quickly darkens into night. But this is not a forest of serenity and peace but of war and bloodshed. Breathing heavily, he holds a sword limply in his right hand, though he allows the shield in his left to fall to the earth and instead runs his hand across his brow, wiping away sweat and blood, but more as if to wipe away awareness of the battle that now dwindles to the conflict of a few remaining warriors. But the reality is too near and the threat is too real: it is not possible to forget what is still present, for the "now" is always a companion, whether welcome or unwelcome. He wants to turn and to run away, to forget it all, to leave behind the pain and the death, the anguish and the loss. And

yet his men still need him. If the clash of blades still echoes through the forest, this means that men still stand who can fight; and they need their captain. And so, gaining a grip on himself again, albeit with an effort, he picks up his shield and rushes toward the nearby sounds of battle, all the while trying to turn his gaze from the many bodies that lay strewn about him to the left and the right and under his very own feet.

To his dismay, there are but a score of his own soldiers still standing, a handful of men ringed about by three or four times as many warriors of Tel-Velfána. This is the last of his company, now pushed to utter destruction by continuous guerrilla warfare in the beautiful woodlands that have now become a place of ceaseless torment and constant fear. Without a thought, he rushes into the fray, cutting his way to his men and joining them, and then he raises his voice in the secret signs for flight: with no hope of victory, they are to attempt escape in order to join with another company of soldiers and to enter the battle anew under more favorable circumstances. But the question overwhelms him, as he know it does also the men entrusted to his care: shall it even be possible to escape when so deeply outnumbered and when ringed about by the very proximity of the enemy? No, it is all but impossible, and yet there is no other choice. It is precarious flight or certain death, for the people of Tel-Velfána are not in the practice of taking prisoners, and even if they were, surrender is frowned upon among the forces of the Empire of Vælíria. But if they attempt to flee, they shall certainly all be slain, shall they not? It matters not, for there is no time for thought or deliberation. With a shout of intermingled courage and fear, Eldárien thrusts his way forward in the same direction from which he has just come, but in which enemy warriors are quickly closing about them.

Pushing one man to the ground with his shield and burying his sword into the torso of another, Eldárien opens a space for his men to move, and together they press this small advantage. Wûjik is immediately at his side, his second-in-command, his notched sword in one hand and a spear of the enemy, which he must have taken from the ground, in his other. His face is bloodied and a deep gash cuts across his forehead, but he nods quickly to Eldárien as together they press forward at the vanguard of their men. But cries of pain sound from behind them, and they know that the forces of Tel-Velfána are closing in from that side. “I shall cover our rear, Eldárien,” Wûjik cries. “Continue pressing ahead. Perhaps some of us shall break free and find refuge in the wilderness.” Before Eldárien can open his mouth to reply, the man leaps back, weapons a flurry of movement before him, and tries to carve his way to the rear of their small company. But Eldárien is unable to see whether Wûjik makes it to his intended place, as his attention is locked ahead, where four men still stand between him and the open woods, where flight shall be a real—though

slim—possibility.

But should they truly attempt flight? Should they not rather stand and fight to the death? Yet even as the question comes again to Eldárien's mind, so does another: But why yield so blindly to death? For glory or honor? For the privilege of dying in valor rather than fleeing in cowardice? Is it really cowardice to try to safeguard one's life and the lives of the men entrusted to one's care, especially in a war of attrition whose only goal is political expansion and material gain? No, the most precious commodity in this war, and the one being trodden underfoot, is the life and well-being of innocent men, even the men who are forced to do unspeakable things in the name of an Empire whose lust for power knows no bounds.

As Eldárien breaks free of the last stranglehold and makes ready to lead his men into the forest, he turns and sees the remaining four of his men standing close to him—but five feet away—yet pressed too tightly by the warriors of Tel-Velfána to follow him easily into the space that he has created. They are occupied with deflecting the many blows directed at them and are unable to move. Quickly, indeed, whatever opening Eldárien had cleared now vanishes as the enemy fighters close about his men. Even as he seeks to charge back into the fray to liberate them, he witnesses the last of his companions quickly hewn down by Tel-Velfánan blades. The weight of his loss and the profoundest sense of guilt and absurdity wash over him now and thrust him to his knees. The desire to escape departs from him, and he wishes now only to die with his companions, to at last let go of the ceaseless and fruitless struggle for life in the face of unrelenting loss and destruction. And he receives what he wishes, with no pause for further deliberation and no words exchanged between the slayer and the slain—as is the case in battle—as a mace collides with the side of his helmed head and sends all spiraling into blackness.

But to his surprise, with intermingled relief and regret, he awakens later, in the pitch-black of night, his head throbbing with pain and his body weak beyond endurance. The forest is mute now, utterly silent but for the whisper of wind in the trees, and he knows that he lies alone in a battlefield littered with the bodies of the slain. As he tries to rise, his flesh cries out in anguish and resists his attempts. Instead, he immediately sinks back to the earth, his back squelching in the grass wet with his own blood if not also with the blood of others. As he looks up through the trees, he is able to discern the barest hint of stars twinkling through the branches, though they feel infinitely far away and apathetic to his pain and loss, and to the loss of all the men who have found their graves on the battlefield this day or in the whole of this terrible and fruitless war. With the anguish of his heart colliding with the brokenness of his body, consciousness slips from him again, and he lets go, expecting death.

This was only a few months before his departure from Tel-Velfána and his return to Telmérion—the loss of his entire company, whom he had expended himself for years trying to keep safe. Waking the next morning to the light of the sun filtering in through the trees and casting long shadows across the forest floor, Eldárien had struggled to his feet and made his way back to the coastal city of Elsedór. Here, after a short time of recovery, he was given lead of another company and sent back into the crucible of the forests of a nation which fought only to defend itself against a foreign aggressor—an aggressor whom Eldárien himself had become.

The memory fades, and Eldárien feels the pain, sorrow, and regret of it wash over him now as he lies on his back, staring up at the starry sky as the symbélyia dance and shine around him. And as he does so, the lingering wounds that have not ceased to ache and bleed since those terrible years begin to close and to heal—as if the mysterious light that shines through these creatures, yet also beyond them, touches those places so long buried within him and brings an answer that is too deep for words or expression, and offers wholeness despite brokenness, or rather, wholeness through brokenness, and beyond it.

Chapter Three
A Hamlet at the Edge of Night

With the coming of dawn, the symbélyia return to their silent repose in the hidden places of the forest, and the star-laden vigil of the night gives way to the light-bathed radiance of the day. And this night, for the first time since their departure from Ristfánd, was one of complete rest and security, and they all rise feeling not only refreshed but encouraged and consoled, though they cannot explain to themselves why, beyond gestures to a mysterious presence or companionship that had remained with them throughout the night. And as they prepare to depart with the rising sun, this companionship does not flee away, but rather, as it were, takes up its abode in the deep and inaccessible recesses of the heart, hidden from thought and perception but true nonetheless.

The snow is now hard and icy, and their feet sink but an inch or two into its surface as they pass, making progress much easier. Despite the fact that the morning is bitterly cold, the chill feels somehow weak and unobtrusive, for the air is still, without even a breath of wind, and the atmosphere is clear with the sun shining free and warm in a deep blue sky. But perhaps it is the lingering light and warmth of the symbélyia accompanying them that truly

keeps them warm even in the biting air. Either way, they make steady progress once they leave the forest, climbing the far side of the basin and finding a narrow gorge that cuts between two rough shelves of stone. It leads to the northwest, the direction that they wish to go.

And so they travel, with what speed they may, along the path that unfolds before them. In a matter of days, however, their rations begin to run out, and, though they have been sparing even since the beginning of their journey, they find it necessary now to skip meals or to eat but a bite or two in order to prolong what they have as best they can. Rórlain and Eldárien keep their eyes ever alert for animals that they may hunt, but it is two days before they come across anything. Thanks to his long-practiced skill with the bow, Rórlain is able to fell a wild fox at a range of thirty yards. It is a small animal and provides only a modicum of sustenance for a couple days, but it is immeasurably better than nothing.

Gradually the gorge that they follow widens into an expanse of land descending before them from the bosom of the mountains toward a massive valley that lies far below, shrouded in mist. And on the far end of the valley, nearly at the limit of sight, the land rises again toward mountains in the far distance.

"Those peaks," Eldárien comments, "are those of the Teldren range. We have come to Téldyn Pass. After weeks of wandering through the mountains, I was afraid that we had lost our way. But how fortunate we are to emerge in the precise place that it was our wish to find. Of course, we may be too far in one direction or another, but as long as we find ourselves in the pass, it should not be too difficult to navigate our way toward the forest that we seek."

"Let us also hope that there is good hunting," Rórlain adds, "for we shall need sustenance for the rest of the journey."

"I am confident that there shall be."

"Or a village," Tilliána says unexpectedly.

"Aye, that would be even more fortunate, though it is unlikely," Eldárien says, turning to her.

"Perhaps not," she replies with a smile, and she gestures toward a spot in the distance, far below them, where the swirling mist parts for a moment and reveals tiny specks of brown against the white landscape, with trails of smoke swirling from them into the air in vibrant contrast to the surrounding pallor.

"You are right. That does indeed look to be such," Eldárien laughs. "Let us set our course for the settlement then, shall we?"

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On the following day they reach the settlement, a hamlet of no more than a dozen houses nestled at the edge of a grove of trees on a wide outcropping of earth and stone that juts from the gradually descending slope of the

mountain. It seems an unusual or at least a rare place to erect a village, difficult of access and also lacking in any wide spaces of fertile ground, but also providing a breathtaking view of the valley below and most likely a great deal of seclusion from the tumultuous affairs of the surrounding world. They enter the hamlet in the midafternoon and are within a matter of moments hailed by one of those who live here.

"Greetings, travelers," says a man's voice, followed by his figure stepping forth from the shadow of a house into the wide lane that passes through what appears to be the central, or the only, street of the hamlet, if street it can be called. "We rarely receive visitors in these parts. Please state your business."

"Hail and well-met," Cirien replies, stepping forward from the group as if mirroring the man's movements. "We come in peace and benevolence. We did not know of this town until happening upon it in our journey. We seek simple reprieve and a replenishment of some of our supplies, and then we shall be on our way."

"And who might you be?" the man asks, crossing his arms over his chest and unconsciously twitching his mouth beneath a scraggly blonde beard.

"I am Cirien Lorjiës, grandmaster of the order of Nirániel, whose headship is in the city of Ristfánd," he replies, and, with a bow of his head, he adds, "At your service."

The man thoughtfully scratches his chin for a moment and looks intently at the five strangers, and then he asks, "And your companions?"

They each introduce themselves in turn, and all the while the man's expression remains mostly impassive, though it betrays a subtle hint of both curiosity and concern. "And what," he says at last, "are a grandmaster of the order of Nirániel and his companions doing so far away from the normal avenues of travel? This is not a place one just happens upon in the course of one's journey, unless one's journey is unusual."

"We sought to pass through the mountains in order to shorten our journey to the west," Cirien replies.

"And how did that fare?"

"It was a tougher path than we wished, though we did attain our goal of making it through the mountains, as you see, as well as of sparing time in doing so."

"And what need have you of haste?" the man inquires.

"Have you yet to hear of what happened in the city of Ristfánd not long ago?" Rórlain asks.

The man looks at him and, shaking his head, says, "I fear I have not."

"Then your hamlet is out of the way indeed. It was assaulted by Imperial forces and their new 'allies,' and the battle was a bloodbath. We pass to the west in hopes of sparing more lives."

"I would ask how you intend to do so," the man says, "but this seems neither the time nor the place. We know here of the war and the pain it is causing to our people, but it affects us little."

"Before long it will affect us all, even in the most hidden and secluded villages such as this," interjects Eldárien, "though I wish it were not so. Our hope is precisely to spare people such as yourself and places such as this."

The man nods as he contemplates these words.

"We would be willing to tell you more, if you show us to a place where we may rest for the night and restock our provisions," Rórlain says. "We are capable of paying what is fitting."

"Aye," the man replies, absentmindedly. "But what is this you said about 'allies'? I did not know that the Empire had summoned allies against our people."

"Allies they are," Cirien says, "though not of the sort one would expect. They are not living men but beasts. That, too, shall take time to explain. Perhaps the leader of your village would wish to join this conversation, if you have one."

"Not formally," the man answers, "though I suppose I am the closest to such. Ûldren Grándis, at your service."

"Well met," Cirien says again, and his companions echo similar words.

"I hope so indeed," Ûldren remarks, "for you speak of beasts, and though the war we have no acquaintance with, beasts are another matter. Or rather, *a* beast. Not a couple weeks ago."

"Of what do you speak?" Eldárien asks.

"A creature not seen in this age of the world. A dragon, we think it was, though only a few of us saw it, and at a great distance. It flew high in the sky above us, and at great speed, to the north."

"You were correct," Eldárien affirms. "Of this, too, we shall speak. It eases my heart, though, that you only saw him pass at a distance and were not...more closely acquainted."

"Unusual things are happening in our land," Ûldren sighs, "and it seems that you are caught up in them, travelers, if my sense is not false. Please, let us go to my home. We can speak further there, and I shall also provide you a space for both nourishment and rest."

With the thanks of the five companions, he leads them into a nearby house, accompanied by the curious gazes of a number of other villagers who are outside, engaged in daily activities despite the heavy snow. The interior of the house is warm and inviting, reposing in a kind of dim half-light illumined only by the flickering red hue from the burning hearth and from the pale rays of sun upon snow shining in through the partly shuttered windows. A woman sits near to the hearth, cradling an infant in the crook of her arm and

rocking back and forth slowly as the child sleeps.

"Dréya, we have visitors," Ûldren says as he enters the house, and seeing that she seeks to rise to greet them, "No, no, please sit. We shall join you, if you please. I suspect that they have news about your dragon and about much else besides."

"Very well," she replies, "though allow me to lay the child down to rest. I fear waking her otherwise."

After she has done this, introductions are exchanged between all, and they gather chairs to sit together near the hearth.

Before the conversation has far progressed, Eldárien notices that Dréya looks at him with an almost uncomfortable curiosity, and, when their eyes meet for a moment, she lowers her gaze.

"Why is it," he asks her, "that you look at me almost as if you know me?"

"How could I?" she replies. "I have never met you before."

"What then do you see?"

"The scars."

"Oh, yes," says Eldárien. "Though I myself now give them little thought, expecting that they have greatly healed, they must still be quite a sight and a distraction."

"No, it is not that."

"Then what draws your attention so?"

Ûldren responds as if desirous of aiding his wife in expressing something uncomfortable or unusual to say, "They look not unlike those of the old paintings and illustrations upon which so many of us, in this village and elsewhere, were fed from childhood."

"I know not what you mean."

"Surely you do," Dréya says. "You are a Telmérin, and by the looks of you from the clan of Galaptéä. Our people originally hail from that region as well, though the dragons in the Teldren mountains drove us away centuries ago.

"I am as you have discerned," replies Eldárien. "And that is...uncannily perceptive of you."

"Your look is very distinctive, and that makes your arrival with word of dragons even more curious, even if it is only circumstantial."

Elmáriyë laughs softly at Eldárien's side and places her hand momentarily upon his shoulder, saying to their hosts, "Eldárien is many things, most of which he seems almost entirely unaware. But that is what is so beautiful about him."

They nod in understanding and then Dréya continues, "I look at you with such curiosity because your scars greatly resemble those from the paintings and illustrations of the 'scarred king.'"

"The scarred king?" asks Eldárien.

"Yes. He is a legend among our people. Surely you know that? The king who at last united the clans of Telmérion after centuries of strife, in whose veins flowed the blood of the ancient rulers."

"You speak of an interesting coincidence," Eldárien replies, "though I assure you it is no more than that. Though the blood of Galaptéä flows in my veins, as it does in yours, I have no blood of kings, nor are these scars anything but the marks of trials that have befallen me. At another moment, however, I would very much like to see some of these illustrations, if you have access to them."

"That can be arranged," Ûldren says, "though for now let us hear the account of these five travelers and what they can tell us of the affairs of our nation. I am sure that my wife shall also be curious to know the truth of the creature that she saw in the sky—though I admit that I myself did not see it—and which she and a few others claim to be a dragon. You seem to agree with their assessment?"

"It is certain," Rórlain answers. "We were witnesses to it at close-hand."

"Close-hand? Then your tale is more interesting than I even guessed it would be. Please, tell us all you think fitting."

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After a thorough and yet discrete recounting of the events that have led to their presence in the hamlet—from the first encounter with the vrû'ádach in the barrow of Séra Galáptes through the assault of Ristfánd to the wiles of the Lord of Mæres—they gather around the table for supper. Ûldren and Dréya are visibly concerned by their account, and understandably so, even though they withheld many of the details that would be most disturbing or frightening.

"This dragon of which you speak," begins Dréya, "do you know what its intentions may be? I could not imagine otherwise than that it is dangerous. And yet it did not seem concerned with attacking us, or perhaps even anyone else for that matter."

"I do not know if it has any intentions, or if it is capable of such, possessing no will of its own," answers Eldárien. "As far as we have witnessed and come to understand, all of these creatures of darkness are but tools in the hands of other forces. They are vessels by which our true enemies act in this world."

"That Lord of...what did you call it?...is he one of them?" asks Ûldren.

"The Lord of Mæres? Yes, he is."

"What is a mære?" Dréya inquires.

Cirien answers this question, "A mære, as far as we understand by the lore that we still have from ages past, is a spirit of the night who seeks to instill fear in those who sleep or to assault them with terrors in the darkness. From such

does our word 'nightmare' derive, though not all nightmares are caused by such spirits. We know not but that they exist and that they are capable of such action. Perhaps the Lord of Mæres is indeed the only one, and he calls himself so because he is the lord of the terrors of the night; or perhaps there are indeed many spirits like unto himself, though lesser in power and authority."

"Either way, it is a frightening prospect," Ûldren sighs.

"It is indeed," says Cirien, "though I think that you have little to fear in this regard. The Lord of Mæres seems to interfere directly very little nowadays, and, according to our experience, his influence may be geographically limited. Or at least he seems to take interest only in those who in some way deserve to be a target of his malevolence."

"That is not particularly consoling."

"I suppose not..."

"What is more consoling," says Elmáriyë, "is that the most they are capable of is influence. No terror or oppression, however deep it may be, can take control of the seat of your own freedom, the liberty of your own heart. There you always remain in the hands of your own counsel, in the sanctuary where you are alone before the gods, and in their custody. Nothing can take you from their care, and nothing can pull you from their communion, except it be your own choice to do so."

"That would be consoling if the thought of the gods was a consoling one," Ûldren comments. "Not all of us find the presence of the divinities to be a safeguard and a refuge. Many, I think, wish that they would leave us alone. Many think that they have meddled far too long in the affairs of humankind. For me, 'spirits of darkness' and 'spirits of light' are all the same. They toy with us as a child does with dolls or bugs, raising us up or casting us down, using us or abandoning us for their own pleasure and for nothing else."

"I am sorry that you feel that way..." Elmáriyë sighs, and, lowering her eyes, she opens her mouth to say more; but the conversation surges forward again, and she soon loses the opportunity to speak further on the subject.

Dréya says, "I heard that dragons still live in the mountains to the north. They never die, it is said—or at least of natural causes. So when they chased us out of our home all those centuries ago, they did so permanently. Unless, of course, some hero is to arise who can slay dragons. Do you think this is where the dragon that I beheld went: to join with others of his kind?"

"Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing," answers Cirien.

"And yet you go to the foot of the mountains, do you not?" Ûldren asks.

"We do indeed, although further south than the heights of the Téldrens where I suspect dragons would make their lairs," replies Rórlain. "And even so, I do not expect anything in the area to have changed as of yet. A dragon flies to the north, but other creatures arise from the earth that travel on foot,

and they are much nearer at hand. If they seek destruction, I fear for the people of your village, as well as for all who dwell in the Yjind Mountains. And eventually, for all who dwell beyond."

"But they may have another purpose entirely," Eldárien interjects. "It is not certain. The last time they attacked, it was as a unified force in conjunction with the Imperial army. Perhaps they shall bide their time until they do so again."

"Or perhaps not..." Ûldren says bitterly.

To this Eldárien can only nod silently. After a moment of heavy silence that saturates the air around them and between them, Tilliána speaks for the first time, as if until now she has been too shy or uncomfortable to make her voice known. "I would hope that the people of this village would seek refuge elsewhere, at least until this war has come to its conclusion. Forces of darkness are amassing, and the conflict between nations is of small import in comparison with the conflict between light and darkness that is coming upon us more swiftly than a tidal wave at sea."

Ûldren raises his eyebrows as he looks at her, surprised to hear her speak and to speak so insistently. But then he says, with the same bitterness as a moment earlier, "And how do we know that this war shall ever reach a conclusion, or that the conclusion shall be in the favor of the maggot called man? We are weak among the creatures of the earth, and if only the strong survive, then we shall die out long before these other beasts of which you speak."

"If all bore such an attitude, the war would already be lost," says Eldárien, anger rising in his voice. He leans forward and looks intently at Ûldren, a fire in his eyes. "If any man is to die when confronted with forces stronger than himself, it will be more through his cowardice and his impiety than through anything else."

"You speak in such a tone to your host, to the one who has opened his home to welcome you, even though you bring no proof that anything you say is true or even any signs of your trustworthiness." A fire burns in Ûldren's eyes now as well, though of a different sort, and his anger, almost like a flammable substance ready to explode, differs greatly from the restrained intensity of Eldárien's indignation.

"Now Ûldren, please, let us calm down," says Dréya swiftly, placing her hand upon her husband's arm. "Perhaps you are both right in your own way."

"Many things, dear, are either true or not, are either right or wrong," Ûldren replies. "If he has the wrong of it, then why may I not call him out?"

"If that is the case," Dréya says softly, her voice almost inaudible, "then it is you who are in the wrong and he who is in the right. He speaks of courage and of piety, and his speaking comes from his life. But you speak in cowardice and in fear, and your words reveal how little you truly allow yourself to live."

Shaking his head, Ûldren rises from where he sits and turns toward the door of the house, pushing his wife's hand away. Quelling the anger in his voice, he says simply, "I shall step outside for some fresh air. It shall be a while before I return." And so he does, the bitter cold sweeping into the warm house when he opens the door and lingering for a while even after he has closed it again.

"I am sorry that you had to witness that," whispers Dréya.

"There is no need for apology," says Eldárien. "It is I who first allowed my temper to flare, and for that I am sorry. I apologize also that I was the cause of a conflict between the two of you."

"Oh no, it is not the first time. He is scared, scared of many things, and I only wish I had the words to help him."

"Sometimes even the best of words can do very little, or perhaps nothing at all, to help those whom we love," Eldárien says gently. "He is walking his own journey, and maybe only time and experience, and the hidden work of the light in his heart, can change what seems unchangeable."

Dréya's eyes glisten, betraying tears that well to the surface before being restrained, and then, lowering her gaze, she says, "It is...difficult."

"You fight a little war of your own," says Eldárien. "And I want you to know that your fighting, as humble and hidden as it may be, is a participation in the great struggle of humankind, of the light against the darkness. Every little moment, every little conflict, every little victory that you live, is not insignificant in that great battle. Rather, it is part of it: an essential and profound part of it."

She nods but is unable to summon any words in response.

Eldárien concludes by saying, "Nonetheless, even as I speak of war, remember: your husband is not your enemy. You cannot gain victory over him any more than you can change him. The enemy is of another sort, another kind, one whose nature I am confident you know well."

"And we shall pray for you," Elmáriyë interjects, "not only for your victory against this mysterious enemy of every human heart but also for you to find peace and repose even in the midst of conflict. For if life contains struggle, pain, and difficulty, it is never only that, never primarily that. You were made for life, and I wish that life you live—to the full and abundantly—even in the pain."

Dréya looks at the travelers and, finding words at last, she says, "What good fortune, what an undeserved blessing, that you would come under my roof today! It has strengthened my heart and instilled in me courage that I myself lacked, and also stirred in me a longing for piety. I thank you. I thank each one of you from the depth of my heart."

"And thank you, Dréya, for your hospitality...and, above all, for your vul-

nerability, for your openness of heart," Cirien says. "We are also glad that this home, this family, was the one to receive us."

After this, the silence of the room is punctuated by a soft cry from the corner, where the infant has been asleep.

"Oh, it looks like my little Anísa is hungry and needs to eat," Dréya exclaims. "It is getting late as well. Allow me feed her, and then I shall help to prepare a place where you may retire for the night."

"Very well," Cirien says, rising to his feet. "But it is bitter cold outside. Allow me to seek for your husband and ensure that he is well."

"I would appreciate that. Why do you not take this with you?" Dréya asks, handing Cirien a thick blanket. After receiving it, he steps outside, the chill immediately washing over his body and draining the heat from it. Darkness has long fallen and day has fully given way to night. Low-hanging clouds, moving slowly in the nocturnal breeze, thickly veil most of the sky. In only a few places do they part, allowing patches of twinkling stars to show through, before swelling into grayish darkness once again. But the partial moon, waning now after the full moon that they had beheld in the forest of the symbélyia, shines even through the densest sections of cloud, a glowing halo of light surrounding it.

The air encompassing him is luminous enough that Cirien is able to see the buildings of the hamlet with ease, as well as the distinctive landmarks that enfold it: trees on one side, climbing up the slop to the south, and, to the north, a vast valley immersed in darkness that falls for miles below them before rising again, almost at the edge of even daytime's sight, to the Teldren Mountains. A figure stands silhouetted against the vast space of the valley, his back turned to Cirien; and yet it is not difficult to see that the figure is Ûldren.

Cirien walks forward and is surprised that, despite his boots crunching loudly against the icy snow, Ûldren does not turn or indicate that he hears his approach. When he comes within a few feet of the man, he says, "I have brought you a blanket. It is not much, but it will help to fight a bit of the cold."

With this Ûldren turns, and his face is visible, if dimly, in the darkness. "Oh, thank you," he says, taking the blanket and wrapping it around his body. "I was so caught up in thought, I did not even notice your arrival."

"It is well then that I mean you no harm," says Cirien.

"Indeed," Ûldren says quietly, and Cirien hears him breathe deeply before continuing, "I apologize for my earlier behavior. I should not have spoken so to guests in my own house."

"All is forgiven, friend, if forgiveness is even needed," replies Cirien. "You spoke of what your heart feels and believes, and I would not have you do otherwise."

"But you, grandmaster of the order of a goddess, surely disagree with me firmly and vehemently. Why would you wish to hear me blaspheming all that you hold dear?"

"It is not a matter of whether I wish to hear it or not, but rather a matter of whether or not you carry it within you. For never would I wish for you to silence the spontaneous voice of your heart. The heart is the guide and the custodian of our freedom. Even if the voice of the heart is at times muddled and confused, it alone can lead us forward unto truth."

"My heart leads to no such thing," Ûldren retorts, "or rather, it tells me almost without ceasing that the truth I face is absurdity and loss. I try to stand against it, but it feels as though gazing into a black abyss and attempting to will meaning into it...whereas I know that there is nothing, nothing but loss and death."

"Is that what you see when you look into this valley in the dark of night?" Cirien asks.

"That is what I see when I look at it and at many things besides. But why do we speak like this? You have no place to address me with such intimacy on our first acquaintance. But I suppose your kind is accustomed to this, to always giving answers to others' problems, walking around with ready-made solutions in your hands to be dispensed at the first sign of opportunity."

"Is that what you believe faith is?" Cirien asks, his voice gentle and kind. "A pat-answer to the questions and tragedies of life? A way by which hurting man tries to give a stamp of meaning on a meaningless world, or tries to scrounge for some semblance of control where control slips from his grasp?"

"I do believe that, yes" answers Ûldren, "and yet such faith is a farce. For in grasping for control, man in truth loses it: he enslaves himself to these mysterious, uncontrollable, and arbitrary powers, which he blindly gives the name of gods. Why give yourself to another in such a way? Light and darkness, good and evil: what are they, anyway, but forces beyond both our comprehension and our control? We do not really know what they are. It is impossible to know. The best we can do—all we should do, in my opinion—is to live as best we can in the time we have. All the rest is a gamble one is sure to lose, or one not worth taking."

"You do indeed feel strongly about this," responds Cirien, running his hand absentmindedly through his long white beard, all the while looking upon the dark figure of Ûldren standing stark against the valley behind him. "Would you have any interest in sharing with me the reasons for your belief?" Cirien continues. "I would be grateful and willing to hear the sources from which your conviction springs, and the story that has led you to hold such conviction."

"I have no interest in baring any part of my inner self to you," Ûldren says,

turning back to the grandmaster. "Be not offended by that."

"I take no offense. But you speak more kindly now than you did earlier: or rather, you speak less with anger and more with honest complaint. I thank you for this. For one should speak with respect even of what one does not believe—though this respect may at times take the form of firm condemnation. For evil and falsehood must truly be called such, with words fitting to the gravity of the sickness."

"And you suppose that I shall agree with you that this was what that other man—Eldárien—was doing? He was speaking firmly of an evil that he saw, condemning it with his better knowledge?"

"I think, rather, that he was hurting at the fear he saw holding you captive," Cirien says, "and at the way that this fear blinds you to the only source of true consolation. For I said that the voice of the heart alone can lead us unto truth. But this—the true voice of the deepest heart—is a voice, not of fear or of self-protection, but of trust and desire. The heart seeks to lead us out, beyond ourselves, to the repose that lies in the great embrace of reality and of the author of reality, holding us."

Hearing these words, Ûldren turns quickly away and looks out again over the black valley before him. After a long moment of silence in which Ûldren neither moves nor speaks, Cirien says genuinely, "Forgive me. I did not mean to press."

"All your kind knows how to do is press."

"Then all I can do is again voice my apology. And I shall leave you now. Or would you rather come in out of the dark and the cold?"

Ûldren sighs deeply and, pulling the blanket tight around him, replies, "Let us go."

Together the two men return to the house, feeling the warmth of the interior envelop them as they step inside. It is dark now, with no light but that given by the flickering fire of the hearth and by a small oil lamp set upon a table nearby. Sleeping-pallets are laid out on the floor in the open space between the kitchen and the hearth, whereas the bed of the house's inhabitants is on the other end of the room, engulfed in almost complete darkness. The two men bid one another good night in silence, and then Cirien approaches the sleeping places, all of his companions already covered in their blankets and either asleep or preparing for sleep. Eldárien, who sits with his knees drawn up to his chest, looking into the dancing flames of the fire, turns and nods at Cirien as he approaches.

"You look as if you intend to keep the nocturnal watch even here in the security of the house," Cirien comments with a subtle smile.

"Sleep still escapes me most of the night," replies Eldárien, though the tone of his voice is not one of regret or complaint, but of simple observation.

Perhaps it is even a tone of gratitude and wonder, as illustrated further by his following words, "And yet despite the fact that I sleep so little, I feel no need for more. It is as though I am living ever more profoundly on a force of life and vigor far deeper than my own. It has always been there, inside of me, and yet only now have I learned to tap into it. Or rather no...that is not the best way to express it. Only now has my heart been opened to allow it to pour itself into me."

"Elmáriyë is the same, is she not?" Cirien asks, seating himself on a sleeping-pallet near Eldárien.

"Yes. It seems as though the silence and serenity of the night is our true home, even more than the daylight. Or rather, it is like our hearts are longing for the stars, which are visible only when all else has descended into obscure repose, or like they are yearning for the echo of silence which can be heard only when the noises of the world have been stilled."

"Well then, I will leave the yearning and the vigil to you. As for myself, I am exhausted and intend to get a full night's rest, as much as I may," Cirien remarks, placing his hand kindly upon Eldárien's shoulder. A knowing smile passes between the two of them and a mutual affection that has grown surprisingly strong and deep in the short time that they have known one another. Then, laying down and pulling the blanket around him, Cirien closes his eyes and allows the soft crackling of the fire and the breathing of his companions to lull him into restful sleep.

Chapter Four
Relihím on the Road

Golden light, warm and rich, pours in through a window facing east, and the particles in the air, caught by the light, glisten and glow as they dance. Awakened by the warmth of this light falling upon her face, Tilliána opens her eyes and rolls onto her side toward the light, watching as the particles move and swirl slowly in the air. She hears hushed conversation not far away but makes no effort to listen; rather she lingers in the silence of night even as it quickly fades away into the noise of day, a silence that hides terrors and fears that she now knows more than she ever has before and yet also conceals wonders that are both deeply desired and elusive in their mystery. It is not that these wonders are far away, reserved for the elite few, but rather that they are known and held not in the way of possessive knowledge or control but rather in the letting-go of true surrender, in the poverty of open and empty hands and heart. This is what the true night means, the authentic silence,

pervaded with light deeper than the darkness, with voice deeper than the silence, and with security deeper than the fear.

Tilliána has only tasted this richness, touched it as if in passing, with a brush of the tips of the fingers or a call heard from a great distance. But one touch is enough, one whisper, and the heart is restless for more, even as in the same moment it is granted to be more at rest than it has ever been. And thus she lingers, letting the stillness of rest hold her—rest following upon the terror that she had known in the lair of the Lord of Mæres, and rest opened up by the symbélyia who had pervaded her darkness with their light and her fear with the splendor of their song. Yet even as she rests, a repose precarious not in its own right but in the frailty of her wounded heart, fear enters back into her spirit, and she recalls all of the pain, anguish, and loss, and the wounds, scoured deep into the very flesh of her heart, that cause her pain even still.

Soon the clatter of pots and utensils and the smell of cooking food draws her out of the last vestiges of sleep, and she sits up. Her companions are seated around the table not far away, speaking with Ûldren and Dréya while they work quietly in the kitchen, preparing a repast that smells like bacon, and porridge, and something else that Tilliána cannot identify. To her surprise, as she prepares to rise she feels a surge of dread concerning the coming day, fear and resistance to the struggle of living and striving, of walking long distances with little rest, and of facing in waking hours nightmares that belong only in the night, and in truth not even there. Perhaps after all she is not healing from her wounds, but only sinking into the place where a person is haunted both day and night alike. Has the horror of the Lord of Mæres truly sunk so deep into her that it has spread throughout her life like a poison through the body? She resolves to speak with someone about this soon, even today, though she knows not to whom to turn.

At this thought a small glimmer of solace enters her heart anew, and she smiles. Never before has she had this particular concern—for even if the darkness has immeasurably intensified, so too has the companionship of light. Never before has she had so many friends in whom she can trust and to whom she can speak freely without the fear of being hurt or misunderstood. In the crucible, bonds are forged, and in the assault of darkness, connections of pure light weave between souls like threads, uniting them together. She only hopes that she is not asked to endure the severance of these threads, the breaking of these bonds. Indeed, this thought is more unwelcome than all the others, and she almost wants to recoil into herself, to sever the threads by her own initiative, rather than to wait until some strife or circumstance breaks them beyond her control, causing her to undergo the anguish of loss that not long ago she was forced to endure at the deaths of her husband and her children.

Trying to move beyond these thoughts, she rises to her feet and joins her companions. Soon the food is placed upon the table and they begin to eat, their meal punctuated by quiet conversation, filled primarily with Ûldren's and Dréya's answers to various questions concerning their village and way of life. Tilliána listens absentmindedly to the flow of the conversation, and yet her thoughts are elsewhere, and before she realizes it breakfast is concluded, and the others rise from the table, grabbing their dishes and bringing them into the kitchen. She too rises and seeks to help with the washing, but Elmáriyë lays her hand upon her shoulder and, with a knowing look, gestures to a couple chairs that still sit beside the hearth. "Shall we sit together for a moment?"

"Yes," Tilliána replies. "But what of the dishes?"

"Were any more people to assist, we would be making the job harder rather than easier."

And so they sit, the firelight playing upon their faces and offering welcome warmth to their bodies in anticipation of the coming cold that shall greet them upon their departure.

"You look troubled...or at least distracted," says Elmáriyë softly, looking into Tilliána's eyes.

"I suppose that I am both," she replies after a moment of hesitation. "I just ask myself: why am I on this journey? The rest of you have clear motives and vivid intentions. You are sacrificing yourselves for the good of Telmérion, taking up a yoke of fatigue, of daily vulnerability, of exhaustion, and even the threat of death, so that our people may again know the peace and security of the light. But as for myself...why do I accompany you? Is it simply because I feel that I have found a place of belonging? Because I seek to recreate the sense of home? That is not an adequate reason, is it? If that is my only motive, then I should have remained in Ristfánd."

Elmáriyë listens and considers Tilliána's words before responding. When she speaks, she says, "What you say echoes something true, and yet it is incomplete; and an incomplete truth can easily be twisted into something else entirely. For many people indeed take trials and struggles upon themselves, thinking that they have the best of motives, whereas they are driven not by altruism and authentic concern for others but by the wounds and fears of the self and by the desire to gain approval, security, or righteousness through their efforts. And you are right that none of us can walk this path with an eye to our own gain or even to our own security. We are not here, even you are not here, to gain anything but to give everything—so that others may know the light to the full, the light that in our time is so threatened by darkness. So far you speak the truth. However..." Elmáriyë's voice fades into silence for a moment as she pauses to reflect, or perhaps to allow her words to linger and

to sink into the mind and heart. Then she takes Tilliána's hand into her own and says, "If one acts only in order to feel safe, to safeguard control and security, then one indeed acts in a way that shall hurt both oneself and others. But it is another matter entirely to receive the gratuitous gift of love that comes from the outside and to find in this gift both solace and invitation. How else, indeed, can the frail human heart learn to love, to give generously without counting the cost, except from the gift of love that it has first received and from the security that carries it, held and cherished, even in the deepest darkness and the most vulnerable exposure?"

Their eyes interlock for a long moment, and Elmáriyë's gaze continues to communicate even when her voice has fallen silent. And then her words sound again as if by way of conclusion, "And even the deepest and most total gift of heart, of life, flows not into a void. No, it springs from love and returns to love, springs from belonging and returns to belonging, even if it passes through anguished darkness and agonizing loss. You see, the fact that you feel that you are here because you *belong* here is precisely the sign that you *do* belong here, with us, your friends and your family. Worry not overmuch about whatever gift may be summoned forth from your heart in coming times. You are here, and you are held. All else shall be as it must be, but this is the enduring reality, which shall remain when all else fades away."

† † †

The company departs in the late morning, their supplies generously replenished by their hosts, though still not enough to support them through the remainder of their journey to the Velási Forest. Unlike Ristfánd and other towns in the far south near to the coast, this hamlet and others like it have suffered much greater losses to their harvests; indeed, even many of their stock animals perished in the exceedingly bitter cold of the previous winter. Though this particular village has not had a direct encounter with the vrû'ádach—if rumors of their "raiding" are true, which the travelers doubt—it is nonetheless true that the wild beasts of mountain and wood have grown aggressive of late. Often the remaining domesticated animals that survived the winter were nonetheless slain in the night or taken away, leaving only hints of a struggle or thin trails of blood. It seems that animals, being irrational creatures so intimately tied to the cosmic order, are influenced in their behavior also by the currents of darkness and evil that flow like a murky stream through the wider current of world history. This, at least, seems a reasonable explanation, barring the direct intervention of the forces of darkness who use such animals as their tools, as they do those despicable beasts molded by their own wicked artifice.

The sun shines full now in the sky, and the snow softens and begins to melt under its brilliant rays, even if behind the company, higher in the mountains,

the snow may well endure until the great thaw in the far away spring of the coming year. This helps to ease the temperature for the travelers, but it also makes the journey down the steep slope from the mountains to the valley more difficult and perilous. And by the midafternoon, their boots and leggings are wet with moisture, and with every step their feet sink from a few inches to a foot into the snow. This greatly slows their progress. But looking below them, at the wide expanse of the valley of Téldyn Pass, they see the greens and browns of grass and leaf and know that the snow did not reach beyond the limit of the mountains and their slopes.

But sight travels much faster than the body, and it takes them two days to reach the sprawling bottom of the valley and another three days to cross its width to the southernmost feet of the Teldren range. By this point their provisions have almost entirely disappeared, and they have resorted again to hunting what little they can find and utilizing it to the utmost, to boiling the bones for the nutrition that they and their marrow provide. By inspecting the lay of the land, they discern that their destination lies to the north and the east, in a wide dell enclosed on three sides within a ring of mountains, the only access being from the southeast.

"However," Cirien explains, "all the lore we possess tells of an uncrossable chasm that spans the distance from mountain to mountain, barring all entrance to the forest."

"The Stïeka Mára. I have heard of it," says Eldárien. "If the tales are true, then should we not seek to descend upon the forest from another place, from the mountains above?"

"If at all possible, I wish for us to take any road but that which leads through more mountains," Rórlain comments. "We are exhausted as it is, from the road we have just traveled. And to all appearances, any passage through these mountains—at least one that would bring us nearer to the forest we seek—would be without a road or even the narrowest of trails."

"That could prove perilous," Tilliána agrees, "but I am willing to take whatever road is necessary or most fitting."

"Then I suggest that we travel to the great chasm," Eldárien offers. "Perhaps we shall find nearby some point of access, some passage, which has fallen into forgetfulness with the passage of history."

"Or even just a path into the mountains from that point," adds Rórlain, "if such proves necessary. For there is clearly nothing here but steep slope or jagged cliff. It seems that almost anywhere will be better than here."

"We shall see about that," Cirien replies, "but I concur with your suggestions. Let us travel to the chasm and find what we may."

"How far is it from here?" asks Elmáriyë. "Do we have any measure of the distance?"

"Considering that we do not know exactly where we are, that is difficult to gauge," Eldárien answers. "But Téldyn Pass is something like thirty leagues in length, and if the maps prove true, then the Velási Forest lies not far to the north of the easternmost entrance to the pass. So we should expect no more than a few days of travel, unless we have journeyed much further west than we thought."

The company travels two days to the east before they are halted in their journey by an unexpected encounter. The echoes of shouts of violent threat and screams of terror draw their gaze to the south, but at first they are unable to see anything since a rise of land lies between them and the source of the sound. Yet when they approach the crest of the hill and, crouching down to conceal themselves, look out over the pass, they see, but twenty or thirty yards away, a caravan of travelers waylaid by a band of Relihím. The latter, twelve in number and all on foot, seem to have only recently caught up with the travelers, and the one who appears to be their leader draws a blade from the scabbard at his side and steps menacingly before the front-most carriage. The horses leading it rear up with neighs of confusion, and the carriage slows to a halt, forcing the two behind it doing the same. There are close to twenty travelers in the caravan, and yet they are unarmed, and many of them are elderly or women or children.

Without another thought, Eldárien draws his sword and rises to his feet from their place of hiding.

"Eldárien," Elmáriyë says softly, reaching for the hem of his garment.

"Worry not," he replies, turning to her with a mixture of sadness and gentleness in his eyes. Then he takes a few broad steps forward and exposes himself fully to view.

"Men of Telmérion," he calls out in a loud voice, and all eyes of both brigand and besieged, startled and surprised, turn to him. "Why forsake the nobility of your fathers and betray the blood that runs in your veins from the peoples of the past? Put away your arms and cease with this madness, lest you come to grave harm. For the light of heaven shines not only to illumine righteous hearts but to purge the hearts of the wicked and the unjust, that they may taste the joy of righteousness and the peace of the light's embrace."

The leader of the group of Relihím takes a step in Eldárien's direction and laughs in a tone of mockery and spite. Then, with the eyes of the others expectantly upon him, he spits upon the ground. "And who might you be, to speak before us as self-proclaimed savior, self-assured righteous man, and foolish intercessor?"

"I am none of those things, nor do I think myself to be," answers Eldárien. "I am simply a man from whom your kind took everything. Father, mother, sister, village: all alike were lost because of the madness of your malice."

"Many could speak in such a way," answers the man, "though usually we leave at least a little behind. We do not wish to ruin the balance, do we?"

"I say it again," Eldárien emphasizes, raising the lightbringer before him in both of his hands, "depart now."

"Or what? You wish to engage us in combat, a single man against a dozen?"

With this Rórlain and Cirien also rise to their feet and stand on either side of Eldárien. Rórlain holds his bow at the ready, with an arrow knocked to the string.

"Oh, ho, ho!" the leader of the brigands laughs again. "Three against twelve? If that is your wish, then my men and I shall be more than happy to oblige. Do you think you can defeat us and save these poor people?"

"There is a power we wield of which you know nothing," Rórlain says. "You would do well not to underestimate it."

"I think not," the man replies. "Let the one with the true authority here speak. Now *I* say, once again, and I expect an answer: who are you to claim to possess the light, and to strike down those whose chosen way of life differs from your own?"

"You misunderstand us," Eldárien answers, taking a few steps forward. "The light belongs to no one, and yet we all belong to it." He raises his sword and adds, "And the days of darkness are ended. The light comes of its own accord, and it acts with sovereign freedom undimmed by even the blackest night."

"What say you?" says another of the brigands, drawing his sword also from its sheath. He speaks to their leader, "Come, Gédrin, let's just kill them all and be done with it. What's with all of this chatter?"

"Those are perhaps the first wise words you have ever spoken," the leader replies. "Let us do precisely thus."

His words are followed by the sound of the brigands' weapons all being drawn in unison. And without a single moment of hesitation they begin as a group to charge the three men who stand alone on the hillside. For his part, Eldárien stands unmoving and, raising his voice to be clearly heard by all, says, "Gédrin is your name? I say to you now: I cannot allow you to destroy the lives of these innocent men and women for your own personal gain." Following these words, brilliant light bursts forth from the blade held before him, light blindingly intense, pouring forth in the direction of the Relihím and immediately stopping them mid-stride. The light is answered by the panicked cries of the men and the echo of their shouts to one another. Among the din are heard the words, "I cannot see! I cannot see! What has happened?"

"But how...what?" comes the voice of another.

When the brilliant light recedes, Eldárien now stands within ten feet of the

carriage, having walked forward wielding the light as if drawn to do so by the very radiance pouring forth through him. He looks with eyes of sadness and pity upon the brigands and upon those waylaid by them, the faces of the latter showing both awe and fear, whereas the faces of the former are wrought with confusion, wrath, and terror. For the brigands' eyes, to the last man, look forth unseeing.

"What have you done to us?" asks the leader, his voice now trembling with a mixture of emotions that, whatever they be, have wholly replaced his previous confidence.

"You are plunged now into the darkness that your hearts have long embraced," replies Eldárien, his voice strong and insistent and yet also laced with compassion. "Go forth, and your lives shall be spared. In the blackness that has come upon you, let your heart open its eyes to see, to see the horror of the life that you have chosen. I can only pray that you may find, in this place, the path back to the light."

The leader, after a moment of hesitation, says to his company, "This is a fight it would be wise to avoid. Come, men, let us retreat. Whatever devilry is at work here is best left alone." Then, with a din of confused voices still conflicted among themselves, the brigands retreat, stumbling as if in a night with no stars or moon, not even turning back or stopping until they are hundreds of yards distant. As their presence recedes, a wave of relief washes over all who still stand about the caravan, besieged and rescuers alike.

"W-who are you...and what have you done?" asks an elderly woman who sits at the front of the first carriage, a young girl enfolded in her arms and held close to her body. Both still tremble with fear, though their breath comes again like a deep sigh after prolonged suspense.

"I am no one of note," replies Eldárien. "Know only that you have been spared this day, and go on your way."

"Sir, why, and how, did you take their sight?" asks a young man nearby, stepping forward to look at Eldárien, wonder and curiosity in his eyes, but also a measure of discomfort.

"It was not my intent exactly," Eldárien answers. "The light pours forth and does what it wills. But their sight shall return in time, of this I am sure."

"Then we must hurry on our way!" the same man cries.

"It shall not be so quick as that. But it is true that you should continue on your way. These lands are not safe, and there are many dangers besides the one that you have just faced."

"What is your destination?" asks Rórlain, stepping to Eldárien's side and addressing the caravaners as a group. The other three companions are drawing near now as well, and the travelers, both sitting upon and gathered around the carriages, look upon them with relief and gratitude.

"We travel to Onylándun," answers the elderly woman, "each and every one of us."

"From where do you hail?" Cirien asks.

"We come from the towns and villages scattered throughout the eastern plains and hillsides."

"But why travel west?" Rórlain asks. "It is dangerous on the other side of the mountains. You would be better off in the place from which you have come."

"You really think so?" a man asks. "We were told that in Onylándun we would find refuge, for the war has not touched that city. Our own towns are besieged—and even our travel is now waylaid."

"Your towns are besieged?" Eldárien questions. "By whom?"

"By the forces of the Empire and their...minions."

"No..." Elmáriyë sighs. "Why? For what purpose?" She rubs her forehead with her palm, grieved, an expression of pain upon her face.

The man looks at her and for a moment he is at a loss for words before he is able to reply, "They seek to gather a great army, and those who resist are slain or captured. It is difficult to tell whether they wish us to fight for them or rather seek only an excuse to slaughter us. Our lives mean nothing to them...and those beasts, those despicable creatures that come in the night..." With this, as if he is unable to force himself to say more, his voice fades into silence.

"We understand of what you speak," says Cirien. "We come from Ristfánd and were present during the siege of that city. You are fortunate to have escaped, though I fear little refuge shall await you in your new home. But perhaps there you shall find security yet, at least for a while."

"And know that we intend to stave off this evil at its root," Eldárien says, sheathing his sword and returning the scabbard to his back.

"If I had not just witnessed with my own eyes what you have done," says the man, "I would have scoffed at those words. But now, I don't know..."

"Are you the one of whom they speak?" the woman asks. "They say that a warrior wielding a sword of light slew the commander of the dark forces. He is already becoming a legend and a hope for us throughout the lands of Rhóvas, though he disappeared as quickly and as mysteriously as he came."

Rórlain laughs softly and looks at Eldárien to see his reaction, but the latter only closes his eyes for a moment and lowers his head. When he looks up again, he says simply, "That was indeed something accomplished through the light entrusted to us, light which you yourselves have witnessed. Know that the gods see the plight of our people and are not indifferent to our suffering. Go on your way and take solace that this war is not yet lost, and that hope of victory yet lives."

After exchanging a few more words and receiving the invitation to visit the caravaners in Onylándun if their path leads them hence, the five travelers depart again to the north, while the caravan travelers stir on their horses to the west, setting their sights anew on the city that awaits them. Onylándun is not far, only on the far end of the Téldyn Pass and a short ride to the north, built into the steep walls of the mountains and hemmed about with protective ramparts of stone from the same mountains hewn. Perhaps the city shall indeed provide some safety in the days to come, though this is uncertain.

"How did you know what to do in such an impossible situation?" Rórlain asks Eldárien when they have walked for a while.

"I did not know. I only felt a little, and desired even more," replies Eldárien. "It was a risk, and yet I could not stand idly by while those innocent people lost both their possessions and possibly their lives."

"Of course not. I was just surprised, that is all."

"As was I. I had no idea that the light could blind as well as give sight."

"It blinds in order to give sight," remarks Elmáriyë, overhearing their conversation. "But it cannot force one to see who wishes not to see. It is up to those men now whether they shall come to see or remain in darkness."

"Do you mean that they may remain forever blind?" Rórlain asks.

"No, I refer to the inner sight of the heart," she explains. "I felt it too, that silent voice and invitation of which Eldárien speaks. It gives an intuition, an awareness, of what awaits these men, as it gave the intuition of how they were to be confronted."

"But what makes you say that darkness shall lead to sight?" asks Tilliána.

"Because that is the way it is for all of us," replies Elmáriyë simply. "As when the eye tries to look into a light too bright for its gaze—the sun, for example—or when the spirit confronts the evils of the past, the evils that indeed live in its very own depths, one must pass through darkness in order to discover the light."

"I think we all know a little about that now," sighs Rórlain, scratching his beard thoughtfully and raising his eyes to the mountains before them. "We come near to our destination, and let us only hope that there is not too much darkness before we find the light that we seek."

Chapter Five
The Luminous Passage

Keeping the impassable mountain slope to their left, they continue northeastward, and a wide plain opens before them, dotted with trees and speckled with shrubs, with rocks littered about as if tossed aside from the mountain peaks above by the hand of some giant in ages past. At this point, as the way opens before them, the company turns full northward, aiming for the Stïeka Mára, which according to what they know stands ahead, though they are uncertain how far. Many leagues to the northeast, up in the Teldren range, lies the Galas basin and the village of Fálstead. But between them and the travelers are many days of travel, as well as the village of Criseä, and the slope of the land leading up from Moradóch Steppe to the wooded vales and rough shelves of the highlands. Yet their destination does not lie that far nor in that direction. Rather, they look for an opening to the west or the northwest, so that they might find access to the ancient and fabled forest of the Velási, cradled in the knees of the southernmost of the Teldren Mountains but cut off from the world both by the great chasm and, if the rumors are true, by a mysterious power that repels all who would seek to enter or at least to navigate the forest to a successful end.

The air is bitterly cold, and autumn leans toward winter in the regions where the winds sweep off the heights of the mountains to the stretches of land far below. This region is one such place, and though no snow falls, heavy gray clouds scuttle in a hurry to the east, as if fleeing toward the sea, carrying a damp chill from the peaks and allowing only dimmed rays of the sun's light and warmth through to the land below. After so many weeks in the wilderness walking for the vast majority of the day, the travelers are worn and weathered, tired beyond exhaustion and yet spurred ahead by an energy and desire deeper than exhaustion. And yet each of them in their own way looks forward to some respite, to a time of repose when weary legs can rest and the dull ache in the lower back can ease itself once again and calloused feet, with raw toes and heels, can heal. But even if they find their destination they do not expect to linger long, as the pressing need of their people drives them ever onward, and the wretched voices of the creatures of darkness call out within each of them as if demanding a response.

It is the greater part of two days before they draw near to the edge of what they seek, and edge it truly is. A great rift in the earth yawns before them, with steep cliffs plummeting straight down into interminable depths below, as if

some massive blade wielded by a god cut the earth from mountain to mountain and split it open so that no man could cross. The other side of the gorge is visible but only dimly, being over a quarter mile away. A few hardy trees or bushes grow up to the edge of the rift, but otherwise the land is bare, cloaked only grass and stone and hard earth.

"So the Stïeka Mára is no mere myth," Rórlain comments.

"I did not expect that it was," says Cirien. "Many have come this far in years both recent and removed. It is not, in fact, exceedingly out of the way. A matter of days hence, and we would find a village, though this you probably know. It is what lies beyond the rift, on the other side, that is unknown except in ancient lore long forgotten or only in fragments remembered."

"Surely some have found a way around the rift," Rórlain offers, "if, that is, they have had reason or curiosity enough to attempt it."

"It has been attempted, but I suspect not in centuries. And if the attempt had been successful, and if something worthwhile lay beyond, I suspect that roads would have been built. No, whatever they found, they did not think it worth sharing; either that, or they did not return from the finding."

"That is not exactly a consoling thought, though I suppose we have had little consolation of such a sort since setting out from our homes." Rórlain scans the distance with his eyes, as if trying to discern the contours of the opposite ridge, if not to spy a way across at least to get a glimpse of the nature of their destination.

Seeing this, Eldárien explains, "It is said that on the far side of this rift lies a great forest, expansive and deep, within which is hidden the ancient civilization of the Velási, a people remembered now only in weathered pages or archaic song. But I myself believe that they are very much alive, even if their ways are different from our own and that they have their reasons to uphold their withdrawal from the world. But this does not prevent me from wishing to meet them, even were our desperate quest and the need of our people not driving us to precisely such a place and such a meeting."

"What then do you propose that we do?" Tilliána asks. "The light works many marvels, but I don't suppose that it shall carry us across furlongs of empty air."

"I suspect that this rift is as much a work of the light as the other marvels that we have seen," Elmáriyë says. "If we are worthy to gain passage, then I trust we shall."

"Worthy?" asks Eldárien, turning to look at her.

"Well, it is not the best word," she replies. "One can never be worthy of the works of the light. I suppose what I mean is that we be found fitting recipients and cooperators, and that our plight and our task be truly sustained by those from whom we have received it."

"Yes, but I also have the sense that the light prefers to work in hiddenness, concealing itself in the ordinary and there implanting itself like a seed, rather than performing marvels before the eyes or visibly changing the course of events with mighty hand," Eldárien says.

"If that is true," says Rórlain, "then our plight must be grave indeed, for many marvels have we seen with waking eyes."

"So what then shall we do?" asks Tilliána, turning and looking to the north, along the edge of the rift. "Do we continue in this direction until we come to the feet of the other mountains, in the hopes of there finding the edge of the rift and thus a way across? Or do we return southward and look for passage thence, though we know that it is hemmed about by steep ridges of stone almost impossible of access?"

What she says is true, for only a couple hundred yards southward, from whence they have come, the arms of the mountain reach out like mighty hands, ridged and knuckled, and open in the center as if to welcome the great rift into their midst. To come to the ending of the rift would require scaling the steep and rough walls of stone and finding the place where the rift closes once again, rather than the mountain gaping wide into an abyss falling straight from its very height.

"It is a hard choice," Cirien says. "The passage on this southern end is forbidding in the extreme, but I fear that we shall find much the same on the other end. After all, the Stïeka Mára appears supremely fitted to its purpose. We have come here only because of our deep need, and not because we bear any particular hope of finding passage where others before us have failed."

"Perhaps that is precisely the nature of the path that we seek," suggests Rórlain, "that some succeed where all others have failed. No...that is not what I mean to say. Rather, we seek for the path to open before us which has henceforth been closed, opened beyond hope and expectation and yet in response to our desperate need and utter poverty. In this mercy is our only and every hope. Thus, to be bound always by thoughts that others have failed or fallen astray where we wish to be faithful only discourages the heart and burdens its path. Our only way is forward."

"That is true," Elmáriyë replies. "The goodness and salvation that we seek, for ourselves and for others, can never come through the success of any man or woman, however great that may be. If you forgive the analogy, the rift is just too deep and too wide."

A smile curls on Rórlain's lips and he chuckles. "You couldn't restrain yourself from that one, could you?"

"I assure you," Elmáriyë says, "that it was entirely unintentional. It just seemed the most fitting word to use...though I suppose the gaping rift directly before us could have suggested itself to my mind."

"So then?" Cirien begins, smiling at the subtle humor of his companions, grateful that even after all that they have experienced and suffered the spark of wonder from which humor is born still lives within them. And yet even as he smiles, Cirien's eyes betray deep thought occurring just beneath the surface, a mind caught up in reflection and consideration. "We seek to make access with our forgotten past, and yet between it and ourselves yawns an abyss that we know not how to cross. But how could it be otherwise? If the past and the present can never truly intersect along the trajectory of time, how can we access this past but by crossing a great distance at the place where they are nearest?"

"And where is that past nearest," Eldárien says softly, looking out over the rift with the cold breeze blowing in his hair, "but in those in whom it still lives as vital tradition and vibrant memory? That is what you wish to say?"

"Aye," says Cirien, "but how unfortunate that we must surmount a rift not temporal only but physical as well. Do you, Eldárien, have a suggestion about our course of action?"

After thinking for a moment, Eldárien replies, "We have come from the south and there was no passage, and I expect it shall be the same northward. Yet I see no other choice. I suggest we travel north along the edge of the rift, to the slope of the other mountains. We may yet find some hint of a way across,. Or perhaps the northern mountains may prove easier of access than the southern ones."

And this they do, following along the edge of the rift for many miles, as the high peaks of the central bulk of the Teldren range draw ever nearer before them. Fálstead lies deep in those mountains, and the barrow of Séra Galáptes, both locations where so much has happened both of beauty and of pain. But Eldárien turns his thoughts toward their current course rather than allowing himself to linger on the past, except insofar as it proffers itself to him in order to illumine the future. Though the winds from the mountains fluctuate in intensity over the coming days, the rift itself remains surprisingly silent, almost as if the air blowing down from the mountainous heights is forbidden passage into the great crevice in the earth; nor does any air arise from within it. Rather, it seems to rest in ceaseless repose beyond the variations of time and weather, in a state of perpetual timelessness. It simply *is,* and feels almost as if it has always been, standing like a mysterious guardian of a location and a way of life that, if exposed to the outside world, would not survive, either destroyed or forced to become what it is not. Perhaps the crevice is simply the boundary of a sanctuary, like the walls of a temple or the hedge of a garden or the cage of ribs around the lungs and the heart, where respiration and circulation ceaselessly do their gentle and secret work, unseen by all and yet more vital and essential than those many things that, because more visible, more

evident, people often mistake for being more important.

At last, after another half a week, they come to a cliff face of smooth, impassable stone into which the Stïeka Mára plunges: a vertical wall of rock cut in its midst with a chasm of equal steepness. "It appears that the southern slopes may have been better," Cirien says simply, with a sigh.

"Perhaps so," Rórlain replies, "and yet the rift cannot continue forever. It must come to an end somewhere in these mountains. I only wish it were not necessary to expend more time looking for that end."

Eldárien walks up to the steep cliff face and leans against it, closing his eyes as if this allows him better to think. "Cirien, are there tales of the Velási ever departing from the forest? And if so, did they cross over the rift, or go around it, or have some other means of access?"

"I wish that I had something more to tell you," Cirien answers, "but we know almost nothing about them any longer. Whether any of their kind have ever stepped forth into the wider Telmérion since the creation of the rift, we simply do not know. It is said, however, that our knowledge of the divines, and of many other things besides, originates from this place, like tributaries from some great river or water from some deep wellspring. Whether that is because they shared with us such knowledge or because we ourselves take our origin from this place, I do not know."

"Such forgetfulness of the past," Tilliána says, "surprises me. How can we have forgotten so many things?"

"Perhaps much of the strife and conflict that we face in our time comes precisely from our forgetfulness of earlier times," Rórlain says. Then, rubbing his forehead with a pained expression on his face, he adds, "And yet much that afflicts our people is far beyond us, and beyond anything our force or foresight could prevent."

"Such as the Imperial invasion, and now the invasion of these powers of darkness," Tilliána suggests.

"Precisely."

Suddenly Eldárien opens his eyes and turns back to look at the vertical cliff face, studying it carefully. "Does this wall look to be a natural structure to you?" he asks, though his question is directed to no one in particular. The others look with him, though at first no one speaks in response.

"I do think that it is," Cirien says at last and yet adds, "though not entirely. It looks almost, for lack of a better word, to have been smoothed. It may well have tasted the chisel of man's artifice etching away the roughness of its face and leaving the surface we see before us."

"I think so as well," Rórlain agrees.

"If that is true, I wonder what purpose it served," says Tilliána.

"Could it not simply be to prevent access to the mountains and to make

passage around the Stïeka Mára impossible?" Elmáriyë asks.

"That could be," Eldárien says, "and yet the rift appears to be wholly the work of forces beyond humanity. Man and woman could never create such a thing by their own power. But this wall, this cliff face, looks to be both. In other words, it was already found like this by those who dwelt in this land long before us, steep and nigh inaccessible. But it looks as though someone carved upon it after the fact, to make the face even more smooth."

With this, he runs his fingers along the shapeless stone, feeling for hints toward the answer to their query. "It is too smooth to be the mere work of nature. Man tends to like straight lines and smooth edges, whereas the work of those forces greater than ourselves delight in the organic, seemingly random, and yet mysteriously harmonious beauty that we see all around us in the works of nature."

"If what you say is true," Rórlain says, "then it is like these sculptors in stone found fault with the ruggedness of the cliff face and sought to improve it."

"And if they sought to improve it, then it must have been important to them," Cirien concludes.

"Or perhaps their intent was something else entirely," Tilliána says, "though I do agree that there is before us something important. Whether it is important to ourselves, I do not know. But I suspect it was important to our ancestors."

"Regardless, we have not long to dwell on it this day," says Eldárien, "as the sun has passed the rim of the mountains in the west, and light is quickly fading. What say you to setting up camp here, in the shadow of the wall? In the morning perhaps more shall be revealed to us."

All are agreeable to this suggestion and so they go about building a campfire and setting up a makeshift tent. Then they prepare a portion of the remaining meat that they have from hunting, heavily salted for preservation. Elmáriyë is also able to find some herbs of *myrdalánæ* nearby, which grow in every season of the year, both warm and cold, and offer hearty nourishment, often used not only as an ingredient in stews or a garnish of meats but also as a medicine. She gathers as much of it as she can without harming the plants.

"Oh, mýrdas!" Rórlain exclaims, using the common name, when he sees her return with the cloth of her robe bunched together and the herb she has gathered overflowing from within it. "That is very fortunate. All that remains for us is a day or two of meat rations and a large box of salt half empty. This shall help to flavor the meat well, while also enhancing the sustenance. Indeed, I have heard that one can eat mýrdas by itself with surprising effect, though I have never done so myself."

"We may have opportunity to try it soon enough," replies Elmáriyë.

Darkness falls while they all sit around the fire, eating what has been prepared. There is little conversation, as they are all tired, worn from their prolonged journey, and anxious also about the obstacles that lie ahead, the most evident being the impassable rift that conceals their destination on its far side. Shortly after dark, the moon shows her pale face over the low horizon in the east, casting gentle light across the darkened landscape and revealing the many shapes and figures that the descent of the sun had hidden from sight. As the moon ascends higher in the sky, the light of her face falls full upon the wall behind them, and something both unexpected and wondrous occurs.

Sinuous lines of bluish light, like fibrous threads of the moon's own luminosity, appear upon the cliff face, revealing an intricate design: a bridge crossing a chasm, with two cities, one on either side, symbolically depicted. The city on the right is massive in stone and wood, imposing but mostly geometric in design, with mountains behind it; the city on the left, cradled in the midst of trees that almost seem to dance with their glowing lines, shows an elegance and fluidity of architecture the likes of which no one in the company has ever seen. Along the bottom edge of this great design, which stands thirty or forty yards tall, almost the entire height of the wall itself, are ancient runes inscribed in the same glowing script.

Each member of the company, amazed at what they see, rises to their feet and turns to study the wall and its intricate design. "Cirien," Eldárien says, "would you like to try your hand at reading the inscription?"

"Your *telmothrána* is better than mine," replies Cirien. "But yes, I would like to try."

Eldárien nods and smiles, and they both look up at the wall, stepping back a bit so that they can take in all the runic characters in their vision without difficulty. Cirien begins, "A gate between two peoples, sundered by the...lusts...of men, and yet..." He turns to Eldárien, "What is that word?"

"Conjoined."

"And yet conjoined by the light and the seal. That is 'seal,' correct?"

"Yes."

"Let one who bears the light of the veiled ones or the royal seal step forth, and the way shall be opened," Cirien concludes, reading all of the letters. "Is that the correct reading?"

"I believe so, yes," replies Eldárien. "I would have read it the same." And then he repeats the inscription in its entirety, as if turning over every word in his heart and his mind:

"A gate between two peoples, sundered by the lusts of men,
and yet conjoined by the light and the seal.
Let one who bears the light of the veiled ones
or the royal seal, step forth."

After this Eldárien inspects the image again, trying to piece together its meaning as if sorting the fragments of a puzzle or seeking to discover the solution to a riddle. "It seems to me that the inscription is meant to be quite obvious. It is only mysterious to us because we have forgotten so much," he says. "I would say that the 'light of the veiled ones' refers to the Velási, for the word Velási means precisely 'those who are veiled'."

"I agree with that," says Cirien. "But what of 'the royal seal'? Do you have any idea to what that refers?"

"When Rórlain and I were in the barrow of Séra Galáptes, the amulet of the ancient king was able to open a sealed door. It was placed in an indentation in the stone and, by whatever power, opened it. I wonder if the same kind of mechanism is present here. Indeed, I wonder if it is precisely the same amulet to which this inscription refers." Then he sighs. "If that is the case, then it is doubly unfortunate that it was taken from me."

Elmáriyë, who stands near to the two men, takes a step forward and says to them, "Why do we not we get closer? Perhaps there will be something upon the wall itself that could give us an indication."

They nod to her, and the three of them walk to the cliff face until they stand directly before it. Eldárien runs his hand along the wall, feeling for indentations like the one he had seen on the door to the barrow. Witnessing this, Elmáriyë and Cirien do likewise.

"Do you see that?" calls Rórlain suddenly from further behind them.

"What do you mean?" Eldárien asks, turning back to the camp.

"The wall...it is changing."

"How so?"

"It would be easier for you to see for yourself. Come look."

And so the three of them return to the camp, turning to gaze upon the glowing designs upon the wall, and they see that a shining cord, as of luminescent self-weaving rope, threads across the distance between the two cities, directly over the bridge that joins them, binding the two peoples together. And suddenly a low rumble shakes the earth, and directly ahead of them, beneath the design of the bridge—and almost touching the word 'conjoined' that is inscribed above it—the silhouette of a door appears, emblazoned in the same light.

"The light looks not unlike that which has been entrusted to you, Eldárien," remarks Rórlain. "Why do you not attempt to send a ray of light upon the door?"

Nodding, Eldárien does so, with outstretched palm, and even as he extends his hand he feels the door itself draw forth the light from within him, summoning it from the deep recesses of his inner self. And a moment later the stone door swings inward, opening into blackness.

"Well," says Rórlain with a chuckle, "I suppose that we shall not sleep here tonight after all, nor even find rest for our weary eyes for a while yet."

"That is true," Cirien agrees. "We know not how long this 'gate' shall remain open. We had best take our chance while it is still ours."

After quickly gathering together their belongings, the five travelers—not without a moment's hesitation at stepping again into the darkness of the unknown—pass through the doorway into the caverns that lie beyond.

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They light torches before entering through the mysterious gate, but immediately upon entering they realize that they need not have done so. For as they step into the cavern, finding themselves in a vaulting antechamber of stone, they behold something that they did not expect. Shining in the same manner as the designs upon the cliff face had shone in the radiance of the moon, intricate works of art are scrawled along the walls from floor to ceiling —etchings scored into the ancient stone and yet filled with some unknown substance or form that glistens blue-white with a mysterious radiance from within. And they are grateful for the luminosity of the moon that has not only revealed the door that they seek, but has also made the lights of this cavern visible, since it allows them to see and examine in detail the work of humanity that has taken the beauty of nature and elevated it.

Clearly born first of all from forces far beyond the artifice of man, majestic both in size and in shape, with ceiling and walls carved of running water over countless ages, the cavern has also been touched by man, imbued with a beauty that seems not merely artistic but cultic, the highest source and aim of artistic inspiration and pursuit. The high undulating ceiling presents a kind of natural architecture, full of splendor precisely in its organic contours, formed of the interplay of living stone and sounding space, of the passive earth and the womb-like shelteredness that it creates. Far different than the sense of suffocating terror found in the castle of the Lord of Mæres or in the eöten's lair, Eldárien senses here a profound peace and security, serenity and repose, and a mysterious presence that is wholly welcome and consoling. It is even stronger and more all-encompassing than that which hinted itself to his mind and heart in the barrow of Séra Galáptes, almost as if the latter has taken its origin from the former. And even beyond the glowing designs upon the walls, the cavern is not submerged in complete darkness, for shafts or openings in the stone break through from far above, winding through narrow crevices of rock that trace their way to the high shelves at the crest of the mountain slope. The nocturnal radiance of the moon and stars shine through these shafts in the stone, far brighter than one would expect it to be, as though the very cavern magnifies the light that is poured into it and increases its luminosity. In certain places the moon and stars can even be glimpsed winking

through the narrow crevices, watching over the travelers' journey.

Yet for the moment they are in no rush either to make progress or to seek rest in sleep. Rather, they walk slowly forward, drinking in the intricate designs that greet them, the cavern unfolding chamber after chamber before them, all laced with beauty of nature and of art. Whatever ancient civilization gave birth to the carvings and designs found in the cavern was one filled with longing. That is the word that comes to Eldárien's mind, and he can find no word so adequate or so precise. As if emerging from the very rock are the figures of heaven and earth expertly carved, awaiting for many centuries only the contemplating eye and receptive heart, and the light whereby man in darkness seeks to see. But perhaps in ages past this place was not so hidden or so forgotten, and many were gifted with the sight of this art and this beauty.

The etchings of lifelike trees springing from the earth line the walls, almost as if captured in the very act of bursting from seed to shoot and shoot to sapling and sapling to full growth, weaving in and out of the designs of mountains masterfully worked into the natural contours of the cavern walls themselves, ridged and rugged from the creative hand that brought this underground sanctuary into existence. Men and women, too, stand aloft under the shade of the trees and the mountains, and among them are other beings, the likes of which none of the travelers nor any persons living in this age have seen in the flesh. And yet the portrayal of such beings, greater in both height and splendor than the mortalkind among whom they walk, and needing no clothing since dressed in glory and light, is clearly only a gesture, a feeble attempt, to express in image and symbol a reality that far surpasses it.

Other etchings there are as well—a great shining tree in the midst of a forest, a war of men against men, a rift split in the earth, and dragons and other creatures of darkness arising from the earth—as the company continues from the entrance corridor into a wide and expansive cavern whose ceiling rises a hundred yards above them. "They tell a story," Elmáriyë remarks, looking around at the etchings with wonder.

"They speak forth the history of all of us," says Cirien. "Would that we remembered it with as much clarity and radiance as these walls depict it."

"I cannot make out all of it, but it clearly shows an early war, as well as the same creatures that now threaten our land," Tilliána says. "But why, if these beasts came forth so long ago, have they been dormant all this time?"

"That is a good question, but one to which I do not know the answer," Cirien replies. "From appearances, they were pushed back."

"And these other beings, the shining ones?"

"The greatest of allies, I think," Elmáriyë remarks. "Though perhaps it is more appropriate to speak of us being their allies than they being ours."

"I think it is both," says Eldárien. "Our great task is to side with them, to

choose their side in the great battle that assails us all. But it is nonetheless our battle, waged in our land, and it appears that they came to us in the flesh to help us in this conflict, for they care for us."

"Are you speaking of the seven?" Rórlain asks.

"I am, although I am uncertain whether that is what these inscriptions mean or whether they intend something else," explains Eldárien. "In the heart of the lair of the Lord of Mæres, I saw inscriptions from another source and of a far different kind. Those were born of hate and pride, whereas these seem to me born of wonder and awe—yes, a wonder that has passed through the flames of conflict and loss but in this has not died but only deepened and risen again reborn. The inscriptions of the Lord of Mæres were saturated with one thing only: the arrogance to rule over others and to exert his power over all life, whether that be the life of man and beast or the life of the abominations that he himself sought to fashion. His world was himself alone. I think that is why he seeks to rule even now over the minds of others, why he calls himself the Lord of Nightmares. If he can control our reality, then it becomes his—his domain, his sovereignty, and thus his glory."

"But here we encounter something far different," Elmáriyë continues, picking up on Eldárien's train of thought. "It shows forth that primal attitude of wonder...and also an all-pervading longing for another. In every etching, every line, every image, the fashioners of this place were searching for the face of the Unseen, which cannot be captured in any images or words but which is nonetheless glimpsed in all of them."

"Exactly so," Eldárien says.

"But what about this here?" Tilliána asks, directing the others' attention to an image that spans almost the entirety of a wall to their right. "It portrays something different, or at least an undercurrent in that of which you speak."

The etchings show two groups of people, men and women, whose backs are turned to one another, portrayed as though in movement, walking in opposite directions. The people on the left are turned toward a forest and the people on the right toward a range of mountains. And between the two groups is the same rift that they have seen elsewhere—which indeed they have witnessed in person.

"Peace gives way to warfare, and warfare gives way to separation, and separation to apathy, and apathy to forgetfulness," Cirien remarks. "That is what I see etched into the lines before us. That is the ancient history of our people."

"An undercurrent," Eldárien says. "It is as you said, Elmáriyë. There is wonder and longing written here, but here too there is something woven throughout that wonder. I have no better word for it than sorrow...and loss."

Tilliána shakes her head softly at this and says, "I am amazed at all of you. I too see what you see, and yet I would never be able to put it into words as

you do. To me all of this is nearly opaque, a puzzle to which I am missing the answer or a riddle that I cannot solve. But when you speak it is as though, while not solving the whole, you give me hints that help me along toward the answer."

Eldárien opens his mouth to reply but is suddenly interrupted by a cry from Rórlain, who takes a few long strides ahead and calls out, "Look! The chamber opens up ahead into one even wider. And daylight streams in from above."

"Daylight?" Tilliána asks. "But we have walked hardly an hour, haven't we? It cannot possibly be daylight yet."

"It indeed seems that way," Cirien remarks.

The five companions press forward and pass through a high doorway into another chamber, which reveals a wide cavern whose ceiling is in large part open to the sky, its light trailing in through crevices of ancient stone from the very slopes of the mountains far above. Here the glowing inscriptions cease, and instead the companions stand before a wide lake of dark blue water glistening in the light falling from above and reflecting both the golden radiance of the sun and the rocky face of the cavern ceiling. The angle of the sun's light and its color indicate that it is already a good two hours after sunrise. They stop here, standing unmoving, the interplay of light, water, and stone taking their breath away in its beauty. And it is true: the night has passed in what seems to be hardly more than the blink of an eye.

"It is not just my perception, correct?" Eldárien asks. "It felt to all of us that we hardly entered these caverns, at most, but an hour ago?"

They all nod or murmur in agreement.

"Then what has happened?"

"I do not think the night has shortened," says Elmáriyë. "Rather, I think that there is something special about this place, and the time has passed without us being aware of it. Or rather it has so gripped us that we have lost track of time. While looking at the inscriptions on the walls, I felt—how can I express it—I felt a kind of 'timelessness.' like I could have stood here for days, drinking in the beauty and the meaning and never exhausting it."

"I agree," adds Tilliána. "And I feel not tired by such contemplation but rather invigorated by it, more than if I had slept the entirety of the night rather than standing on hard stone with my head raised and my eyes roaming about me."

"Uncanny indeed," says Rórlain. "It makes me almost uncomfortable, since I know not what to think of it. And yet I feel no ill-intent, no malevolent presence."

"Quite the opposite?" Cirien proffers.

"Yes, quite the opposite indeed."

After lingering for a while at the edge of the massive cavern as the light of the sun tilts ever higher and shines with fuller face upon the water below, the travelers continue around the lake. They remain close to the shore and navigate across its rough stone floor, though their eyes are continually drawn both to the glistening surface of the lake and to the high places of the cavern through which light spills in glorious brilliance. There appears to be only one other passage connected to this cavern apart from the one through which they entered, and when they come at last to it they enter its embrace, sparing a final glance at the massive cavern before bidding it farewell. After following a straight tunnel, long and narrow in comparison with the wider chambers through which they have previously passed, they come at last to another wide space which opens out before them. The walls of the passage fall away as if in an instant, and they step forward into a room with walls and ceiling of rippled stone, with an opening at the highest apex at the center of the chamber allowing sunlight to stream forth in abundance from above, bathing all that is below. And in the very heart of this glow, radiant and glistening like pure white snow in the mountains, and yet made instead of crystalline stone, can be discerned a statue in the shape of a man.

Upon drawing near to the statue they see that the figure depicted is a king, with crown upon his noble brow and sword in his hands, the wide blade planted, as if in triumph and yet also in peace and guardianship, into the stone at his feet. Upon his chest is a cuirass intricately designed, and under this, hanging almost to his knees, a shirt of mail with small and tight rings, the craftsmanship of which must have taken great care and time in equal measure. On his shoulders are pauldrons of elegant shape, and on his arms, too, the armament fitting for each part terminating in thick-knuckled gauntlets covered even to the tips of the fingers. But as their gaze is drawn to the face of the king, noble and serene, stern and yet gentle, something else immediately draws the attention of their eyes: deep scars line his left cheek from ear to nose.

"It appears quite similar to the illustration from the book," Tilliána remarks, turning to Eldárien. "Dréya first spoke of it—of this 'scarred king,' I mean. The statue and the illustration, do they not depict the same personage of the same legend?"

"Or the same historical figure," Rórlain adds. "It may well be that this man has lived in ages long past and has continued to live now in legend as much as in history."

"I agree with this," Eldárien says as he reaches into his pack and draws forth a sheet of paper folded in quarters. He unfolds it and inspects the image of the heavily-armored king drawn upon it, very much like the statue that now stands before them.

"She gave the illustration to you?" Cirien asks in surprise.

"Indeed. I tried to prevent her but she insisted, saying that she hoped it would be for me an encouragement. For the remembrance of him, she said, awakening in me gratitude, could also stir in me a spirit of courage and of service. Those were her words."

"But why did you say that you agree with Rórlain?" Elmáriyë asks. "What makes you believe that this man lived in ages past and is more than a hope or legend for the future?"

"There are a number of indications," replies Eldárien. "Indeed, and I think Cirien will attest to this, I believe that the existence of Séra Galáptes is in no way doubtful, and neither are his noble achievements. For example, there are a number of evident indications directly before us. The inscription on the outside of these caverns is one. I believe the location of this statue is another. This king was one who joined together these two civilizations in peace and harmony, even if in after years, following upon his death, they were severed once again." He pauses for a moment, comparing the illustration in his hands with the light-bathed statue before him. "Another indication, one which cannot be seen in this small drawing but which is obvious upon the sculpture...Rórlain, can you see it?"

"Yes," his friend answers. "The design upon his cuirass is the same as was upon the amulet that opened the door to the barrow of Séra Galáptes."

"And that very amulet was found upon the breast of the ancient ruler in his entombment," Eldárien concludes. "In other words, it is evident that Séra Galáptes *was* the scarred king."

Chapter Six
Velstadeä

Not far beyond the cavern of the statue they come to the bridge that was depicted upon the cliff face—a shaft of stone arching across the great rift that descends into blackness in the inestimable depths below. Here the ceiling of the cavern ceases and the open, late afternoon sky is visible above them, mostly clear with only a few wisps of cloud moving fast in the wind. But on the far side of the bridge an archway opens to invite them into the caverns once again, as if this passage across the rift is but a breath, a sigh, in the veiled underground journey leading deeper into the heart of the mountains and closer, they trust, to the veiled dwelling of the Velási in the forest bearing their name.

The company crosses the bridge with a certain amount of trepidation, as, despite being the width of four men standing side by side, it has no guard-rail; and even if it did, since it is many ages old, the fear of it collapsing remains. The wind whistles across the chasm's opening far above them as they make their way in single-file across the bridge; but the air here, in the depths of the cavernous earth, is so still that their breathing and the beating of their hearts seem to be almost thunderous, echoing against the ancient stone that surrounds them and calling out to the abyss that yawns below them. But almost as quickly as they have begun, they reach the other side and, without hesitation, plunge again into the cavernous earth. Here they are greeted again by the glowing designs upon the walls, radiant in the light of the sun that filters in through shafts in the ceiling.

It is late evening, nearly dark, when the travelers come at last to the final opening of the caverns and step forth from hard stone onto soft soil and grass, the walls of glowing rock giving way to the silhouettes of massive trees, many ages old, opening their arms to embrace and to welcome the strangers who enter into their midst. They have a tangible sense, mysterious as it is, both of having arrived and of having only just begun; for though they have at last come to the forest that for many weeks has been their goal, their true destination lies deeper within—the hidden dwelling of the Velási. And yet in the nocturnal darkness they cannot see their way, nor does an obvious path lie before them; thus they decide to set up camp and rest for the night, waiting until morning light to continue their journey.

Physically tired from the exertion of their long journey to this place, but also held and cradled by the comfort and security of the forest itself, all of the

companions sleep deeply throughout the night and rise only with the brightness of the morning sun shining upon their faces above the rocky crags in the east, filtering through the trees as if a mother playing a game of peek-a-boo-I-see-you with her little child. They eat what little rations remain to them and hunt for no more, since each is imbued with the unspoken awareness that it is illicit to slay within the confines of this forest, even be it only wild beasts. They are uncertain how this awareness comes to them but it is alive within them nonetheless, indubitable, as if an inner command spoken in their minds and hearts.

A similar awareness also guides them forward through the thick tangle of the woods more clearly even than would a marked path or trail. Drawn by this awareness and by the very lure of the forest calling them deeper, the companions walk upon pathless trails through the dense foliage, golden sunlight streaming in through the boughs above them and dancing upon the forest floor in spectacles of light and shadow, ever changing and yet ever constant with the swaying of the leaves and the passage of the sun high in the heavens. For most of the day they walk while the sun wheels overhead, from morning's radiance of dappled light and shade and dancing leaves, to midday's brilliance as the sun shines from high above, to the lengthening shadows of afternoon.

At last the trees part before them and reveal a sight that stirs both wonder and relief in their hearts—relief because they have finally found human habitation, and wonder because it is immediately apparent that the hearts that have fashioned this habitation are unlike any that they have known or met until now. The architecture of this people appears to be at one with the very life-breath of the forest, organically part of it rather than either an imposition upon it or a foreign element within it. The buildings rise from the earth almost like trees, with gnarled and knotted trunk and richly ridged bark, topped in thatched roofs woven from grasses of seasons past and branches fallen from the surrounding foliage through storm or age or the natural passage of life, growth, and decay. And yet there are also structures of glistening white and gray stone, probably hewn from the surrounding mountains or caves, elegant in form that is neither static nor geometric but rather ornate and organic, like the very slopes of the mountains themselves or the boulders that so frequently scatter themselves across the landscapes of Telmérion. Even so, these buildings are more than mere nature, manifesting the same harmonious conjoining that the travelers already witnessed in the designs upon the walls of the cavern through which they passed: the wedding of nature and the artifice of man, of the simplicity of the world and the intricate designs of human heart and hands, which lift up and elevate this simplicity without making it any more complex, but rather even more simple in being more

unified with a sole intent revealed through the glory of beauty. And thus, even without any other information, they are confident that they have found the dwelling-place of the Velási, the abode of the ancient veiled ones who call the forest their home.

This awareness is soon confirmed as a figure approaches them, a man with long blonde hair flowing in a loose ponytail down his back, clean-shaven with bright and glistening eyes, though it is impossible to tell his age, whether young or old. Rather he appears ageless, as if he has only recently reached manhood and yet has also endured centuries upon centuries of life, and through this found not weariness but rather wonder and freshness like that of a child. Raising an arm in greeting, the white robe he wears shimmering in the sunlight as if made of some mysterious silk or from the very waves of the sea or the stars of heaven, he says, "Hail! Many ages have passed since we have had visitors in our land. You must be lightborn, for lightborn alone can find their way beyond our borders." The man's words lilt in a thick but beautiful accent that reveals he is little accustomed to speaking in the common tongue, and both Eldárien and Cirien understand immediately that this accent is formed by long and habitual use of the ancient tongue of Telmérion.

Taken aback at first and at a loss for words with which to reply to this address, Eldárien then steps forward and raises his hand also in greeting. "Hail, and well-met. We come in peace and with no ill-intent, though with much uncertainty and many questions. Lightborn I have been called, yet I know not what this means."

"Do you not indeed?" the man asks, a knowing expression on his face as he stops directly before the travelers and extends his hand. "I know not how you greet one another in the outside world, but I invite you to a clasp of arms in fellowship. And worry not to defend your intentions in coming to this place, for if you approached with ill-intent never would you have found your way here. Our guardian takes care of that."

After sharing a greeting with Eldárien in which they firmly clasp arms together (just as they do in all of Telmérion), the mysterious man greets the others likewise. "My name," he says at last, when the formal greetings have concluded, "is Eléndras. May I ask the names of our guests?"

"My name is Eldárien Illómiel, of the village of Fálstead, and these are my four companions, Rórlain Farâël of the Cára'fel Wood, and Elmáriyë Siliári, Cirien Lorjiës, and Tilliána Valésa of the city of Ristfánd and its surrounds."

Each person nods in acknowledgment when their name is spoken, and Eléndras looks at them with wonder and kindness in his eyes, and each knows without a doubt that even many years from now he shall remember both their names and their faces with perfect clarity.

"I had forgotten about the use of surnames," he says in response. "We need

no such custom here as a single name is adequate for us. It expresses all that needs to be expressed, and that is in part because we know that it can never express everything; for the deepest part of man or woman, their inner mystery and identity, is inexpressible except by the silence of the heart and the music by which all things live."

"I am sure that you are interested in hearing our reasons for coming to your land," Cirien says.

Eléndras nods but replies unexpectedly, "That is true, but not in the way that you might imagine. We have long awaited your arrival, and though we do wish to listen to the voices of your hearts, we also have much to say to you in our turn. Thus it is good that, along with the explanations that you carry, you also bring even more questions. Our hope is that some of these questions shall here find answers, or at least guidance toward the answer that they seek."

The travelers do not know how to respond to this and so simply nod silently, absorbing his words and weighing their import. Then Eléndras continues, "Let us therefore enter our habitation, shall we? Our greatfather awaits, along with the counsel of the *elementári*, and they shall speak and listen perhaps even beyond your endurance. Time passes differently for us here, and you may find the pace of our life quite an adjustment."

So Eléndras leads the five companions through the heart of the village—and village it is, though profoundly different in appearance than the abodes of men outside the confines of the forest—and to a large structure at what appears to be its center. They pass numerous other Velási as they go, and to their astonishment, they are met neither with curious gazes nor with suspicion; rather, each person who looks to them simply acknowledges their presence and their passing with a gentle yet piercing gaze and a silent bow of the head. Eléndras guides them up a wide staircase with railing in the design of curling roots of trees twisting around themselves as they emerge from the soil and coil upward to merge with the walls of the building. Two doors of similar design and make stand before them, and Eléndras slowly pushes them open and ushers the travelers inside. Here they enter a long chamber bathed in golden light that filters in from windows high on the walls and ceiling, with a smooth oak floor almost bereft of furniture save for a semicircle of eight simple chairs on the far end of the space. These chairs are unoccupied save one, in which sits a man whose youthful age, while similar to that of Eléndras, nonetheless speaks more of age than of youth, for a white beard sprouts from his jaw and chin and twirls down to his waist, and hair almost as long—with no sign of the receding so common in old age—spreads from the crown of his head down his back. Like Eléndras he wears a simple robe of shimmering white cloth, silken in texture and appearance, though thick and warm like wool.

At the sight of the travelers he rises to his feet and extends his arms in welcome, taking a few long steps forward and closing the distance between them. "You have my heartfelt welcome to the home of the Velási, children of the lightborn and your companions. You may call our abode the *velstadeä,* for so we call it ourselves."

"So you do indeed speak the language of ancient Telméric as your primary tongue?" Cirien asks.

"Yes, telmothrána has been our language for long ages, since the earliest beginnings of human speech, though I know that your people have since become accustomed to other tongues that, though derived from our own, are far different." After saying this, the elderly man, with a youthful glint in his eye, clasps hands with the travelers, one after another, receiving the names of each. Then he says, "Thank you for the gift of your names. My name is Sílion, and I am the one whom they call the greatfather, though my title is one of service and not of honor, unless honor there be also in service."

"It is a pleasure and a gift to meet you, Sílion," replies Cirien. "In my own humble part, I understand and revere the service of which you speak, as in my own lands I share a position perhaps not unlike your own."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, I am the grandmaster of the order of Nirániel in the city of Ristfánd. We come thence with grave news of impending war and death for the people of Telmérion, though I suspect, according to the words and manner of Elén-dras who welcomed us, that you already know much that we would wish to tell you."

"That is true," Sílion replies simply, his eyes passing over the group and resting on each person as if uniquely attentive to that one alone. "Nonetheless, we do not know all and have cause to wish to hear from you as much as you are able to tell us of affairs beyond our borders. But first, I expect that you are tired and in need of nourishment?"

"The thirst for answers rivals that of food," Eldárien replies quietly, "or rather far surpasses it."

Sílion smiles kindly and locks eyes with Eldárien, saying in response, "As it should. And there shall be time to speak soon enough, and indeed without delay. But allow us first to set food and drink before you, that you may refresh yourselves, for much conversation lies before us, and we would wish you to be restored before that time."

"But may I ask," Eldárien says, almost unable to contain himself, "who are the lightborn?"

Sílion laughs softly and looks at Eldárien with delight in his eyes and radiant through his face, as if a warm light pouring forth from his countenance upon the one to whom his gaze is directed. "The lightborn," he replies, "is

what we call ourselves. Or rather it is the title that we were given long ago. But I know that this answer raises more questions in the very act of being given. This is why I said that we should wait until you are refreshed before beginning our converse. Much that is new or heretofore unknown shall be revealed to you, and the trail of questions is so deep that its unraveling shall take time, and for it much time is needed."

And so they acquiesce to Sílion's request, allowing themselves to be led into a side chamber where a long table lined with chairs takes up much of the center of the room, a vaulted ceiling open to the light far above them. Within a matter of minutes after they are seated, food is laid before them in great variety, each dish being some form of natural product of the earth, whether bread, or fruit, or vegetable, or oil, or jam, or cold water that tastes as if infused with the essence of the forest itself, sweet and yet mild, sober and yet full of savor. It is a feast thoroughly satisfying and yet without surfeit, as if the food nourishes without over-filling and energizes without tiring, and the drink eases the heart without inebriating and relaxes weary muscles without dulling senses or mind. They cannot help but feel that this is the way that nourishment was always meant to be, and that some event long in the past must have changed even the very nature of food and drink as it enters the body of man, and only here, in this hidden alcove in the woods, is its true nature preserved or is its secret unlocked by those who are able to tease it out to be what it was always meant to be.

After their meal, feeling clear-headed and refreshed as from a restful sleep and yet without any accompanying grogginess in the passage from sleep to wakefulness, they are led back into the wide chamber and are seated on the chairs which are now arranged in a full circle. Sílion and Eléndras sit with them, and another woman takes the final chair, her long black locks flowing down to her waist just as does the hair of both Velási men. Her face is beautiful and serene, and they are now not surprised that they find it impossible to even begin to guess her age. In the play of light from the ceiling and walls high above, she appears to be but a girl on the edge of maidenhood, only in another moment to look to have lived the full round of life and to be at the very crown of age.

After the woman has taken her seat, Sílion introduces her to the travelers, and they in turn speak their names to her. "This is Seriyéna, my wife," Sílion says, taking her hand for a moment and squeezing it gently. "She shall be with us for our converse, as she is with me in life." Then a look of deep compassion and sorrow passes over his face as he now allow himself to yield to thoughts and feelings that have been long present but unattended as he focused upon other matters. He says, "So tell me of the grief and anguish of your people—of *our* people—for which you have come to this place. Some

we already know, but we wish to hear in full your account, with nothing omitted, that we may have a full picture."

Taking turns in the telling, the five travelers recount the events that have led each of them from their respective places into one another's company and, together, into the forest of the Velási. They make every effort to give a thorough account of each detail that may be of significance to the events that they relate, from Eldárien's experience as a knight of the Empire and the latter's policy in Tel-Velfána to his return home, to the encounter with Irilóf and their entrance into the barrow of Séra Galáptes, to the journey to Ristfánd and the battle to safeguard the very life of that city against a superior force of the combined powers of man and beast. This leads to their reasons for their journey here, seeking the origin of the light that may grant them to stop the invasion of the creatures of darkness once and for all, and also their encounter with the Lord of Mæres and his forge, in which such beasts have for many ages been fashioned. When their account has concluded with the journey through the luminous passage and their trek through the forest, their three interlocutors sit back, as if reflecting on all that they have been told and reaching deep within themselves for a response.

At last Sílion replies, "So you have had direct encounters already with the authors of this evil, the Draíon. We felt their presence and their activity but did not know that they had already revealed themselves unto men." He sighs deeply before continuing. "It has been many an age since they made themselves known in the flesh unto the children of humankind."

"What are they, these creatures of which you speak?" Elmáriyë asks.

"These creatures? They are not the same as the mindless shadows that you have fought and which have wreaked such terror and destruction in your city. No, we shall speak of those in just a moment. But to answer your question: the Draíon are beings not unlike the gods that you worship. Or rather, they are the same, created from the same benevolence and with the same purpose, though the Draíon have fallen away from the light and wedded themselves unto darkness forevermore. Anaíon we call those whom you worship as gods, and whom we too revere as bearers and ministers of the light. And their counterpart are the Draíon, those Anaíon who have willingly turned away from the original intent of their making and have become themselves darkness and minions of darkness. Nevermore shall they turn from the path that they have chosen, since their being is different than our own, not bound by the limits of time and space, and thus able to exercise both choice and act in ways that are far deeper than those of which we, in the frailty of our own limitation, are capable. Thus their choice, being more complete and total, is irrevocable, since they wish precisely for it to be so: for they are darkness. Surely you have come to feel what this means, have you not?" Sílion asks by

way of conclusion, his eyes falling again upon Eldárien.

"I... Yes, I have," Eldárien replies softly. "I felt him, the Lord of Mæres, in that place of utter blackness. I felt that negation of his being that he has embraced, and I sensed that the light of his person, which once must have shone so brilliantly, has now become a void of absence...even the absence of his own self. And this loss, this negation of his own being in the negation of all but himself, fuels his anger, his hate, and his envy." Eldárien pauses and runs his hands through his hair, lost in thought, and then asks, "Is he the leader of the forces that now assault our land?"

Sílion shakes his head and answers, "I do not know. But if you ask whether he is the leader of these beings called the Draíon, the answer is no. He is but a lieutenant, whose prior name—the one by which we first knew him, but which he has replaced with another of his own making—is Malakráth. And even that is not his original name. What his name was before that, we do not know."

"He is but a lieutenant?" Rórlain asks. "Who then is the general of his kind?"

"To speak of these beings as an army, though in many ways appropriate, is also inadequate," Sílion explains. "For their way is anarchy. Their way is power. But the one who has wielded power over all the rest from the beginning, the source of the evil that is theirs, goes by a name we wish not to utter, but which for your education I shall speak this once. His name is Igrándsil, though he was once known as Melándia. Long has he hidden his presence from the world and acted through his wicked intermediaries. But come, let us speak of other matters. We shall return to this topic later, when we speak also of the light that counteracts the darkness."

"Very well," says Eldárien. "What then can you tell us of these creatures, the vrû'ádach? What are they? They come in the forms of men, or corpses of men, and yet I do not believe that they are men or have ever been so. How then do they take form and the semblance of life?"

"The Lord of Mæres, as he has come to call himself, is a deceiver," replies Eléndras, stepping into the conversation at a nod of Sílion's head in agreement and invitation. "But unlike the ordinary mortal, he has the power to give form to his deceptions and illusions in ways that are impossible for ourselves. We can act only by way of suggestion or persuasion, by dialogue or image or art. But he himself is able to take the fabric of this world and to exert some influence over it, to mold it into shapes that are not original to it. This power he retains as the right of his creation, limited and broken as a result of his corruption, and yet lingering enough nonetheless for him to effect great evil in the world still."

"Eléndras speaks truly and in truth," Sílion kindly and firmly continues.

"The Lord of Mæres takes the memories of men and the ill fruits of their evil action and intent and fashions them into the horrors that we now battle. For he cannot create, not truly. None of the forces of darkness can. They can only steal, only twist, only plagiarize. And that is what has given rise to the vrû'ádach, indeed to all of the eötenga, of which the vrû'ádach are but one expression. They are, as you well know, and as they appear to be, but mockeries of men. As you have rightly discerned, they are not men, nor have they ever been. With what then did the Lord of Mæres work, what was the manner of his fashioning, what matter did he take in hand to fashion into these creatures? Unable to create from nothing, unable, indeed, to give life, true life, what does he do? He takes, then, from life in order to sow death. However, he does not have adequate access to the lives of the living, to those who draw breath, for they are still held in the hands of their own counsel, and their choice is free, for good or evil, light or darkness, until their dying breath. And even less so does he have access to the living human heart and body, sacred unto Eldáru and precious to all of the Anaíon. These he cannot touch, at least not in a way that would allow him to do with them what he has done in making the vrû'ádach.

"But the memories of lives, past and present, and the effects of every decision and choice—these in some way continue to live beyond the present moment. They continue indeed even after a person has died. The impress of their lives, their effects and their fruits, both good and ill—these remain like a seal impressed upon the universe, like a stone cast into water sending out ripples near and far. After a person has died, their life continues to live, as it were, as a unified whole in the sight of all the forces of heaven and earth. That person has passed on beyond the boundary of death, and yet they carry with them, be it not purged away and healed, the fruits of the ill choices of their past and pain at the darkness that they had accepted, that they had cooperated with, or that they themselves had committed. All of these infidelities to the light have enduring effects, casting ripples of evil, chaos, and disorder throughout the fabric of the cosmos. But take hope! For so too does every single act of goodness, light, or truth, however small, cast similar ripples and of an infinitely greater depth and efficacy.

"And precisely because the 'image' of life and choice and act, their impress or ripple, continues to exert an influence in this world, the master of darkness can take thought of it, can look upon it as it once happened, as if it were still present before him. And from these fruits, from the darkness present within them, he has taken inspiration and fashioned the vrû'ádach and the other creatures of darkness. They are therefore nothing but the shadows and memories of evil, the enduring ripples of wickedness, given new expression —given form—by the one who seeks to continually give birth to new evil in

the world and, in the process, to destroy or corrupt all that is good."

"So we fight nothing more than shadows?" Rórlain asks. "It is a regrettable thing that shadows can cause such evil and death."

"It is indeed," Sílion agrees. "But though these beasts are shadows, what you fight is more than shadows. You fight powers of darkness far beyond your imagining, and it is they who cause the destruction that you have so closely witnessed. It matters not what tools they choose to use, they are the true enemy and the real threat."

"In ages past they used similar tools," Seriyéna says, "and yet they also took to battle themselves and fought against humankind with the strength of their own arm."

"Seriyéna is correct," says Sílion, "though it is also true that even when they fought us directly, the flesh they bore was not their own."

"Like the one who called himself 'Maggot'?" Eldárien asks.

"Precisely. They are incorporeal beings, and that is why even if the flesh they have taken is destroyed, they themselves suffer not but the collapse of the vessel."

"There is in them no wedding of spirit and flesh," Elmáriyë observes quietly and thoughtfully. "For them, the body is but a means to an end, and they draw near to flesh not because they love creatures of flesh but because they hate them. For the gods it is different, is it not?"

"That is right," Sílion confirms. "They love both flesh and the creatures of flesh, most particularly ourselves, the center of their affection and their care. But incorporeal they remain, not only in their being but even in their operation. They wish not to take flesh to themselves as a tool or even as a guise. They may appear for a moment to the eyes of the body, in vision or apparition, but they summon us to attune our eyes to the spirit, to listen to the silent voice deeper than audible noise."

"How, after all, could a god take flesh as his own—truly as his own, I mean—without also accepting our weakness and limitation, our very humanity?" Cirien muses. "It is an impossibility. For then he would be subject to both suffering and death as if it were his own. The Draíon do so only in semblance, out of their lust for power; they take a guise of flesh not to suffer with us but to cause us suffering, to inflict evil upon us and to destroy us."

"Sometimes I fancy that one of the gods would do precisely that," Elmáriyë whispers, "drawn by the deep compassion in their heart: come to us not in power but in weakness, in vulnerability, taking all that belongs to us, all that we are, as their own. For that is the nature of divinity that I have come to know: pure love and compassion, suffering-with, atoning pain, and the boundless joy that can hold all pain and redeem it."

"Perhaps they would if they could," Sílion says, turning his gaze upon

Elmáriyë with a look of inexpressible depth and tenderness. It is as though his eyes are saying unto her a deep "thank you" far beyond the capacity of words, but also gazing upon her with amazement, and even awe, at what he beholds in her. At last he continues, "But for none of the Seven would such an act be possible. At least not as you imagine it. As great as they are, they have their own limits. Only the boundless could cross such a boundary, spanning the distance between deepest darkness and highest light..." His voice fades away as his mind carries him forward in thought.

Then Eldárien speaks, and the conversation shifts in focus, "This mystery lives in us. When Hiliána spoke to me in the cavern of the eöten, the light that flowed through me was not my own, but hers, or entrusted to her to impart to me." He sighs and allows memories of the path that he has walked to this place to wash over him now as a great wave of experience, of joy and pain, of hope and anguish, of sorrow and trust. "And in Ristfánd, with the reality of bearing, I was awakened to something yet deeper, but a gift of the same. And Elmáriyë has lived within the orbit of this 'something,' this mystery, for so long. It is precisely that of which you speak, and yet alive within us."

"And this brings us to the only true and definite way to defeat the enemy that now assails us," Sílion says, coming again to the thread of his earlier explanations. "You are touching the true nature of reality and of the conflict, of the struggle and the hope, that lies at the heart of all being. It is impossible to defeat our enemy through force of arms. This you know. For the darkness cannot be defeated head-on; it cannot be conquered by power. Not only will it emerge again under a different guise, like a many-headed beast, but to seek to defeat it with power is to attempt to conquer it with its own devices. Rather, it can only be atoned for, can only be suffered through—and this with a love so wedded to the light that it bears all of this darkness, carries it, as it were, all the way back into the embrace of the One who *can* span the distance between darkness and light. Only in this way, by being brought into proximity with the ever-burning light of infinite and eternal Love, can these shadows be taken out of the hands of the evil one, such that his wickedness can draw from them for these wicked deeds no longer. Suffused in this way with the healing light of the One, the darkness itself is purged, transformed, and healed, and yields itself to the pure light. In this way, and in this way alone, can victory over the forces of darkness that threaten the very existence of our race be achieved."

"This 'One' of whom you speak, who is he?" Eldárien asks, though his heart all but reaches out to touch the mystery whom Sílion's words indicate, as if he has always known him and yet never seen him, has always felt him and yet never grasped him.

Shaking his head sorrowfully, Sílion replies, "So much has been forgotten... It grieves our hearts greatly. For you see, even though your people forget, ours remember. It is our role to remember; it is our place. To remember and to await. It is why we are here." But then, looking at each one of the travelers individually, with the piercing and gentle gaze that is both old and young, ancient and yet new, he smiles a smile of genuine joy, indeed of a kind of lightness and happiness that is usually seen only in young children. "I spoke of our life as if it were some burdensome task, or rather I fear that you may have heard my words that way. But let me speak more truly: our life is one of ceaseless wonder and play. That, I imagine, is what you continue to see in us, but which you cannot seem to express either in thought or in words."

"Yes!" Elmáriyë cries. "You are like children, and yet also like the elderly who have found childhood again! Both together...and yet also something more."

The three Velási laugh softly and look at one another with radiant smiles. Sílion then replies, "You are very perceptive, young Elmáriyë. And it is true. Ceaseless wonder and play are our very life, and the tone and nature of this is such that in your language it would be called *prayer*. And so it is intimately for each one of us. We simply abide always as children, beloved, before the Father of all."

"But what about compassion and intercession?" Rórlain inquires. "What about care and concern for the troubles and ills of the world?"

"Have you found us lacking in these qualities?" Sílion rejoins simply, with gentleness in his countenance.

"Well, no...but," Rórlain answers, struggling for words. "You also seem to have done nothing to aid us in our struggle for many years."

"We have done what we have been asked to do. No more could be expected of anyone than this. To do more than one's allotted portion, even with the best of intentions, is an infidelity to the order of reality and can cause great harm," Sílion explains. "Yes, at times we wish that we could intervene more directly in the affairs of the world. But even more deeply, in the sanctuary of the heart of each one of us, we know that the part we have been given is the most meaningful and fruitful thing that we can do, and our wish is only to remain always faithful to it. For we are hidden, as it were, at the throbbing heartbeat of reality and are called upon to mediate, through the love, prayer, compassion, and play of our lives, the circulation of this heart to all others whom we call brethren, wherever they may be."

"But this 'One' of whom you speak," Eldárien says, "I ask again, 'Who is he?'"

"Forgive me that I did not answer you immediately and outright," Sílion replies with a gentle smile. "It was not through any lack of desire to do so. For

you have asked the most important question of all; in the end, perhaps the only question, or rather, the question in which all other questions are contained and find their definitive answer. For if I said that only from the heart of reality can the ills that afflict our people be definitively overcome, this reality itself takes its origin from one source, and reflects that source in its every part, being his manifestation, the child of his love, and meant to share always in the nature of who and what he is, in which alone is its true freedom, happiness, and fulfillment. For the essence of being is not power; it not force or capacity or even any skill or excellence. No, the essence of reality is the inclination of love, receptivity to the other, the gift of self that binds hearts together, and the unity that endures unbreaking, born of love boundless and unending, tender and sweet, ardent and profound. And with this, we conclude our converse for today. But worry not, for I leave you with the most important and central answer that I can give." Then he turns to his wife and says, "Seriyéna, if you would, please."

The woman lifts five small books from the floor under her chair, where they have lain unseen. They are small, hardly larger than the span of a man's hand, and bound in weathered leather. She gives the books to the travelers, one for each person, and yet waves her hand in a gesture that prevents them from yet opening their covers and perusing the contents within.

"These books, or rather five copies of a single book," Sílion continues, "give the account of the earliest origins of all that exists. Called the *Arechaíon*, they are the most ancient text that remains for our people or for any in the land of Irándiel. Much there is beyond this that we hold sacred and on which we meditate as the sustenance of words needed more than food for our flesh, but this is the beginning and the most important part for the answering of your questions. After you read it the following conversation shall be much easier and proceed more deeply and more meaningfully. And do not fret, for the text is not long, though it is very rich. And do not be alarmed that you see yourself looking back at you from the pages. Discovering one's very origins and the foundations of one's being can be a disconcerting experience—like standing naked and unveiled—and yet it is also the most salutary consolation and the most healing of all encounters."

Chapter Seven
The Arechaíon

I.

At the beginning of time, before the aeons of aeons, there was the One, who is called Eldáru, the Giver of all. From him all things that exist came to be; and they came to be as gift, born from the bosom of his eternal love, which is ceaseless delight and everlasting play. Thus, being the one through whose gift all has come to be, is he called Eldáru. But those whom he created before all others, the first recipients of his gift, call him by another name, which it has not yet been given to our race to utter. It was these, whom we call the Anaíon, the pure spirits of light, who knew the One most intimately from the earliest age before the ages of the world and participated in his thought and his desire.

But unlike Eldáru, they did not always exist but came from him at the moment appointed by him, though he needed them not. In the beginning, before this world came to be, they were made and were thus with him in mystery; and it is said that the substance of their life in such a state was pure and inexpressible joy. It is also said that such a life was a consummate intermingling of silence and song, of stillness and movement, of rest and activity. How this is known by the mortal human heart is a matter deeply embedded in the history of our kind, a memory of sorts of that deepest origin from which our own race has sprung. And spring from this mystery it did, for Eldáru, who had granted the Anaíon a taste of his own inner life and who had shared with them his thought and desire, wished for them to participate in his own creative generosity and in the tenderness of his care for the fruit of his creation. But Eldáru did not immediately and from the first moment share all his intentions with them. Only in stages did he reveal to them his plan for the creation of a world, which in common speech has come to be called Irándiel, but has also at times been known as Nirániel. Some have even come to believe that the name Nirániel refers to one of the Anaíon, the spirits of light, who in later ages have been deemed gods by the human race. This supposition, and the true nature of Nirániel, insofar as humankind may know it during this era of the world, will be clarified in due course.

Let it be said that, although Eldáru surpasses all things in majesty and beauty and in the depth and breadth of his wisdom, he has yet willed to make known what is precious to him to those whom he loves. He made it known to his Anaíon, the first offspring of his thought and his will, and he has made

it known to our own kind, also, from our beginning. And it is prophesied, in many places and in diverse ways throughout Eldáru's dealings with this world, that a definitive unveiling of his mind and heart is yet to come. The nature of this unveiling still remains shrouded in mystery, but perhaps some of its character may be known by looking deeply at the history of humankind and at the impress of the Creator's touch upon all that he has made.

Eternal song was the nature of the life of the Anaíon, the song which is not noise or the mere intonation of notes but the very life of the spirit poured out in vital essence. And it was in this song, sung by the One at the heart of his own life, eternal and without end, and also intoned by Eldáru into his servants and sung by them back to the original Singer, that the world too came to be. The words of such a song are not known, if any words there were, or perhaps all words that are or will be were contained within it. However, it is known that Eldáru kept secret melodies to himself, to be revealed in the latter days, a hymn yet to be sung. Indeed, the One kept the most precious part of this song to be intoned by our own race, by humankind, which is known in the ancient tongue as the lænin, the latter-born, and at times also as the sekánin, the chosen.

Eldáru made known to his Anaíon his will to bring creation into existence and to fashion within it, as a special inhabitant, the sekánin. And the Anaíon loved them, loved them in some measure as Eldáru himself loved them—and this is why the word chosen, sekánin, is so near in sound and form to the word beloved, seikáni. But some of the Anaíon, moved by jealousy and pride, hated them. The deepest origins of this hatred arose from the recesses of the heart of the highest of the Anaíon, who was known before his hatred as Melándia, the one-who-stands-beside, and afterwards came to be known as Igrándsil, the one-who-opposes, the one-who-stands-against. It was the nature of the sovereign will of Eldáru, who poured out his gifts without reserve and invited his Anaíon to participate in his act of giving, that Melándia despised. It has long been said that he did not want to share, if not with the Anaíon, even less with the sekánin. And he came to hate them, to hate our race, as the most visible fruit of the love of Eldáru; and he has hated and opposed the sekánin ever since, as an expression of his even deeper hatred of Eldáru, whom he had once, in the beginning, loved.

But Melándia, named Igrándsil, has set himself against love, as from the depths of his knowledge of the mind of Eldáru and the freedom of his choice turned to perversion, he has espoused himself to darkness and become its perpetrator throughout the ages of the world. Hearing the celestial song of the One and of the first-created who were with him at the beginning, he chose not to put in his portion with the rest, to rejoice in creating harmony in the sight of Eldáru, nor in bestowing this harmony upon the world that was to

come to be, but rather to appropriate his own portion to himself. And this he did receive as he was cast out from the presence of Eldáru—or it is better said that he fled from the presence of the Giver in hatred and arrogance—and in doing so, to the great grief of the whole of the heavens, he brought a large portion of the Anaíon with him. These rebellious spirits of light, become spirits of darkness, have come to be called the Draíon, and they ever lurk about the world seeking to do ill to the creatures of Eldáru.

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The song of the Anaíon resounded in the halls of the heavenly court as Eldáru inclined his ear to listen to the voices of his first-created, delighting to hear in them the echo of his own creative act and the beauty of his eternal song, which has resounded before even the Anaíon came to be. To each he allotted a portion of the song, a gift, which they took, each his or her own, and wove into melody according to his heart's inclination and desire. And in this desire, Eldáru was content and glad, not wishing that his creatures were mere slaves but that they freely sang their part in the great symphony of his life. And even as they sang their part—the note or melody or harmony that was uniquely theirs to sing and to expound upon—in each one of the Anaía was also a deeper desire to listen to the great music of the whole and to be immersed in ceaseless contemplation in the very ineffable origin of the music, in the one, the Giver of all, Eldáru himself. And in this singing and in this contemplation consisted their perfect joy and happiness.

The Anaíon were seven (though there are in fact many more, unnamed by our race, only known to their Maker), each singularly expressing the mind of Eldáru in resplendent, sevenfold light. Highest of them all was Melándia, come to be known in his fall as Igrándsil; he was asked to manifest the greatest trait of the One, the love of the All-Giver, which is ever communicating itself and pouring itself out, and yet he came to express the very opposite, the pursuit of power and domination. After Melándia is Neréthion, who took the latter's place after his defection. He manifests this place with fidelity and truth and yet also with the wrath of justice in the service of the deeper mercy. Such wrath was not the Giver's original intention, which was but a radiance of pure love, but it serves such love by opposing the darkness and calling forth light anew, certain in hope that his primal intention will someday be restored, weaving even the brokenness into a greater beauty. After Igrándsil's fall his habitation has now been marked by strife, and Neréthion is forever at war with the rebel and his minions, until the end of time. Neréthion thus manifests the might, power, and justice of the almighty Giver and his wrath against the forces of evil at work in both the heavens and the earth, until, at the end of all ends, strife will be no more and love will reign supreme and the peace that love has restored.

Hiliána is the Anaía who stands nearest to Neréthion; she is known as the mother of air and water and their intermingling, and in her part in the great song she was primarily fascinated by the seas, the clouds, and the seasons. Her breath has long been known to bring refreshment and peace, and tenderness most of all, to those who are afflicted. It is also said that the milk of every mother finds its origin in the spiritual breast of Hiliána, though she is now invoked primarily as the custodian of the weather and the changing of the seasons. Her wonder toward this visible world lies above all with the vigor and liveliness of the its celestial foundations, and she has these in large part in hand, for good and beauty, even though Igrándsil would seek to sway them to his own evil end. Hiliána is revered deeply by the people on the seacoasts, though everywhere suffering hearts cry out for liberation she is not far from the voice of the lips. She is oft portrayed in the guise of an aged woman, wrapped in flowing robes, and yet with breast bared and still abundant, suckling a child on her knees.

Beside Hiliána is the Anaía whose wonder-filled song was most deeply wedded to the earth, both the deep recesses of hidden caverns and the sprawling mountain peaks, and the nourishing and life-giving soil constituting everything in between, and whose name is Télmoth. It is from him that the continent of Telmérion derives its name, as the people of that land have long been close to the earth, farmers and caretakers of the land, which in its ruggedness and its harsh and cold climate nonetheless does not fail to bear abundant fruit. He is worshiped by them under the guise of a laborer with a plow, capable of bearing the weight of twenty oxen, and with a scythe in his hand, promising a fruitful reaping and abundant harvest.

The fifth of the Anaíon is Meléngthar, the god of birth and death, the two doorways of existence for all living things that inhabit the earth. All blood is thought to belong to him, as well as the seed of man. He is understood as near in the presence of suffering and pain and is invoked in the burial liturgies of many peoples. Indeed, a custom deeply revealing his nature is that of recalling the birth of children on the death of parents, remembering the day that life was given to live on, when even now it is lost in its temporal dimension. "You go, *patras*, *matra*, and yet you continue to live in me," the verses recite. These insights come from the wisdom of Meléngthar. It is even thought, in fact, that this Anaía, great in birth and death, shall be present when the two are mysteriously brought together, as a death becomes greatest birth, and a birth also becomes the end of all death. He awaits this with vigilance, standing as he does at the conclusion of the week, Meléngthia, only one day before the cycle turns anew, through Niránia, to the first-day, Eldarídia.

Mórnwyn is the Anaía devoted especially to the intricacies of human life, though she has many other interests besides, many tender loves for which she

cares deeply. She is a lover of all that lives, from the lowliest of insects to the tallest of trees. But long history attests that the greatest pleasure of her eyes and the deepest delight of her heart is the life of humankind, and in particular the love of human hearts. It is said that she loves this most because this, more than anything else, reflects the nature of the inner life of Eldáru, who has created all things and apart from whom nothing can be that is.

The seventh and final of the Anaíon is named Toróäs, who is the custodian, most especially, of rest, and leisure, and play. It is this dimension of the life of Eldáru which captured his contemplation the most and which stirred in him the deepest joy. And rightly so, for it is, as it were, that aspect of the eternal Song of the Uncreated which harmonizes all the others, somewhat as the atmosphere of air in this created world allows both light to be seen and sound to be heard. In all the labor of the Creator and of his first-created, indeed, Toróäs was fascinated by the mystery by which work remained play and play became work, just as restful contemplation birthed creative action and creative action flowed into contemplative rest. And he watches over this same mystery in the lives of each and all, until such playful work and restful action is our endless life in the ages of ages to come.

Finally, let us turn to the last of those revered as gods by humankind, one different from the rest but in wisdom deserving of reverence still, perhaps more than all the others. In the repercussions following upon the fall of Igrándsil and his interference in the world—which is still to be recounted in depth—humankind, out of a deep sense of a mystery hidden for all eternity in the mind of Eldáru, has come to revere and to pray to Nirániel. She is understood as the exemplar of feminine purity and integrity, and yet also of maternal fecundity and overflowing compassion and love. She, however, is not one of the Anaíon nor of the divine and spiritual order. What and who she may be is yet to be revealed. It is uncertain what intuition was given to mankind to birth this idea and longing in the human heart, but there is a legend of ages long past before words such as these were put to tablet or scroll: a legend that the humblest of the servants of Eldáru will restore to good all the evil wrought by the fall of Melándia, untwisting the distorted threads caused by his rebellion. In her, the dissonance of the song, which has echoed in the heart of every creature made throughout the history of the world, will be shown to be ultimate harmony and beauty, not by the work of the hands of human or Anaíon alone, but by the guiding will of Eldáru, who sings into all notes a single note, pure and holy, which brings all to order anew and indeed brings about even greater beauty for all that was threatened with loss.

II.

The Anaíon dwelt in the land that was fashioned by the love of Eldáru and by his song, into which they sang their own melodies in fidelity and in freedom. Yet they were not of this land, bearing not in themselves corporeal form, surpassing it in their spiritual nature, which was to sing the everlasting song in its divine origin, even as by love they spread their affections to the visible world born from such music. Therefore they dwelt in this creation, Irándiel, through act, care, and will, and not through bodily confine, as is the case among his latter creations, the sekánin, commonly known as human-kind. The Anaíon had not the body, passing through all things that exist in a manner more like unto their Maker: through the movement of knowledge which is bound not by time, through the movement of love which is bound not by space. But it is also said that the Anaíon are free, through this freedom, to take the guise of bodily form as they desire, in order to act within this visible creation and to make themselves known unto material creatures, thus to guide the fate of the world. Yet such bodies are of appearance only, not of essence, unlike the latter children, whose bodies are of the substance of man and of woman and no mere external appendage, no mere vessel.

But for humankind, spirit communes with spirit through the body, as is the intention of Eldáru in fashioning man and woman in the midst of the material universe. This is a marvel of his creative work, which, as has been said, the Creator reserved unto himself: the sekánin were his own special elect, his own chosen beloved, dearest to him of all because born most deeply from the intimate secret of his own life and love. The Anaíon thus had no part in the making of man and woman, even by way of mediation, whereas in the lesser works, though finding their origin in Eldáru, the Anaíon were also present and operative, melding their voices with the voice of the great Intoner. The All-Giver, in a word, designed the sekánin from the depths of his own secret and hidden wisdom and made their very corporeal flesh to be a reflection of his own nature, his own life, made present in the world fashioned from the same wisdom, and, by the integrity of humankind, by the love of their hearts returning in piety to their Maker, meant to carry this creation back to the selfsame One.

The Anaíon live in the One in continual contemplation and delight; and from this fullness they turn their gaze and affection to the world, acting within it for its good. And the sekánin live in the world, in work and activity and all the needs and cares of life, and from this they continually turn to the One who made them, in longing and desire to return unto their Source and Fulfillment. This is the origin of all piety and religion, which is the heart of man and his true measure. But it is said, too, that at the end of days—or rather at history's center, where all lines converge upon a single point—man's aspiration unto the One will be revealed as the aspiration of the One unto man.

Religion and piety thus will be revealed not so much as the longing of man and woman for their Fashioner but as the longing of Eldáru for his beloved children, who are his precious and chosen and in whom he delights.

Certainly the Anaíon, too, in their likeness to Eldáru, take delight in the sekánin; assuredly they rejoice in those who are their younger siblings, as it were, though likeness and difference persist, both, in the radically unique manner of being of each creature: spiritual and incorporeal, the Anaíon, and humankind, the sekánin, an inseparable union of body and spirit. But as has been indicated in the record of the earliest beginnings before the beginnings of the world, not all of the Anaíon persisted in the love of their foundation. In arrogance consisted their fall, and the height of their being became the very excuse of their degradation. Indeed, the defection of Melándia, become Igrándsil, was born precisely of his envy and hatred of Eldáru's delight in the material world, and especially of his love for his sekánin. For it is said from the deepest of our memories, from the wellspring before time, that Eldáru called together his Anaíon in a council around himself, and spoke unto them his plan to fashion humankind within the visible world, and told the council that he had special delight in the sekánin, reserving them as a portion unto himself. And he said also that the fate of the whole universe—the entirety of the music born from eternal song—would be tied unto their salvation and their life, and would one day be taken, all, into the inmost life and love of Eldáru, to be as he is in the inner embrace of his own being and affection.

Delight filled the Anaíon at the revelation of such a mystery, and they placed themselves at the service of the One, glad to minister unto the sekánin on their journey through what would become temporality, through the richness of the confines of both time and space. But Melándia, who concealed arrogance within himself (though nothing could be hidden from his Maker), wished for the creation of such marvels to be his own—or perhaps especially, he wished for the undivided power of Eldáru, not in the humility of gratuitous acceptance but in the arrogant control that is possession. And the wish to own the all-surpassing divine mystery of Eldáru, to claim it as his possession, corrupted him; he no longer accepted his portion, partial and yet mysteriously bearing in itself the fullness of the whole, and instead reached out to take possession of all, and not only of what was created but even of the very act of creation itself. Corrupted thus in heart, he wished to fashion alone, with his own song and his own will, without guiding and directing such action—indeed, allowing it to take its origin, course, and completion—in the gift of the One. He therefore came to hate not only humankind, the sekánin of Eldáru's heart, but the other Anaíon as well, and indeed the Origin of all more than all else. He came to brood over his own portion and wished for more. He wished even to have the portion of Eldáru unto himself. And he

went unto many Anaíon, whoever would hearken unto him, and sought to gather them together unto his cause, deceiving them with the promise of freedom and power, whereas what awaited them, in such defection, was only subjection to a corrupt will rather than the freedom found in the will of the Giver.

And thus it was that Melándia gathered unto himself an army, a legion of Anaíon, turning away from the intentions and love of the One, with which Melándia desired to create a universe, and a course of history, of his own wishes and desires. But he knew that he could not create but only change, alter, and direct, and so he waited, in secret as it were, until the intention of Eldáru was fully manifest, so that he could take it unto himself as if it were his own. He intended to appropriate it, to own it, and to make of the sekánin his slaves, to make of the visible universe his own particular domain, where he would be lord and master without question, like Eldáru is lord and master of all things that are, were, or ever shall be unto the everlasting ages.

But in this he erred, for he failed to understand that the reign of Eldáru is not one of lord and master but of pure benevolence and love, and that he treats no creature, whether Anaía or sekáni, as slave. His reign is not of power but of gift; his guidance and care not of authority imposed but of generosity given, of heart exposed. In turning unto himself and refusing to direct his gaze unto his Maker, Melándia lost the ability to see, as well, the intentions and designs of the One and of his brethren, the Anaíon. He conceived of jealousy and conflict, of a struggle of power and a clash of wills, where none existed. And through this conception, he himself brought this very conflict into being. Thus began warfare in the heavens, a conflict before even the world was made. The Anaíon who defected with Melándia waged war against the Anaíon faithful to Eldáru, and the latter fought back with the sword of the spirit, until the song of the celestial heights was filled with the clamor of war—though Eldáru dwelt always in peaceful stillness, eternal life in abundance of joy, granted unto all who remained faithful to him. But from this fullness of peace and life, he allowed himself to be moved, to be pained, as it were, by the discord among his precious creatures and companions in love, and he himself sang a song of judgment into the clamor of this war. Thus were Melándia and his minions cast out, allotted a portion far from the serenity of the abode of the Anaíon. Eldáru extended his righteous rule, his benevolent intent, and limited the influence of Melándia—whom in this act he renamed Igrándsil—to bounds that it could not transgress.

Thus the song of the Anaíon was restored and, through the very melody of the One which was sung into it, found harmony once again. And precisely in this moment, Eldáru began to create the world and deigned to enter into it himself in order to lift up from the earth, as it were, the body of man and

to impart unto him his own hidden life. Thus the life of man is the life of Eldáru, and only in Eldáru does he truly live. And man became two, as woman from man was brought forth, not two halves of a whole, or two pieces incomplete, but two wholes, two completes, that nonetheless enrich one another in a reciprocity that reflects something of the life of the One who is fashioner of both. More shall be told of this great mystery of Eldáru's gift in and to the sekánin in the second account of the origins of all, which shall soon follow—a different poem but the same meaning, a different emphasis but the same song, a different thread but the same weave.

III.

Here begins the second account of the origin of all things, the springing forth of time and space and all the multiplicity of what exists from a single creative act, and which, by this act, is guided and fulfilled. Eldáru is the Singer of the great song, and in truth the Song itself, but so too is he the Weaver of lives and destinies—not as impersonal fate but as provident care. At the origin of all things, therefore, or rather before their origin, at that moment beyond moments before any moment of time had yet come to be, Eldáru took from himself a thread, as if a blade of grass or a string of cloth, and then another, and he began to weave them together in interlocking shape. And after this he drew forth and wove yet another, and another, as delighted him, until before him was a tapestry of richly interlaced threads.

The thread came from him but stood before him, and he wove it after the pattern that he always knew. But it was not enough for him simply to weave, Artisan of time and space—as the vertical weave is space, spread out for the contemplative eye to take in, and time the horizontal weave, progressing as his work unfolds and as the gaze proceeds along the course of wonder and amazement and desire to behold. Rather, Eldáru also wished to weave weavers, to thread threaders into the thread of his own creation. And so he wove first the fabric of the first-created, the Anaíon, and taught them how to weave according to his own weaving. And so they wove, learning from him how to take in their hands the rich fabric and, respecting its nature, this nature only to enhance, dignify, and exalt. And thus they did all across the expanse of the breadth and depth of the tapestry of creation, the masterpiece of Eldáru.

He wove first the light, illumining the darkness of the void, of nothingness, and making to be what before was naught. Indeed his threads were pure light and pure light always remain. And from this fabric of pure light he wove the Anaíon, who are custodians of light and creatures of light. Then, with them as witnesses—and as the work progressed as his companions—he fashioned the world. He created the great star in the sky to illumine and guide the

progressing of days and to witness to the light that has its origin in him, and he created the lesser orb of the night, nearer but dimmer, to illumine the world even when darkness descends, in order to awaken the thirst for his light even in its refracted expressions as in its undimmed brightness.

After this primal work was done, Eldáru then fashioned the earth, down to its deep invisible foundations and up to its highest peaks, and he reposed it within the realm of light, allotting its place within the dance of the two lights he had created, the greater light and the lesser light, both important in their way, though distinct. He wove the world, as it were, into the very fabric of light and at its heart. And gazing upon it, he was delighted. He turned and invited his Anaíon to gaze with him upon the tapestry, with light and light cradling a world of light. They too were delighted, and he entrusted unto them each a handful of minor lights, as it were, ornaments of beauty to be embedded in the nascent cosmos. And they went forth, the great Seven and all the unnamed Anaíon as well, and scattered these small and yet splendorous lights throughout the tapestry of the Maker, which thus became their tapestry too.

Thus were fashioned the heavens and the earth, the heavens with all their glorious immensity of lights, and the earth a realm bathed in these lights, abiding at the very heart of the All-Giver's intent and remaining always in the center of his gaze and his will. But the earth as yet had not come to completion and the fabric was unfinished, the pattern incomplete. And so Eldáru wove in the beauty of living things, starting from the least and proceeding to the greatest, from the simplest of things consisting of few parts, to the most rich and complex, whose simplicity remained, however, on a higher level, in the depth of their being and in the immensity of their significance, unified and whole. He wove the grasses on the hillsides and the plains, dipping their roots into the fabric of the earth, and the trees too, in all their variety. And as he worked, the Anaíon watched, awestruck and amazed, and they were filled with gratitude to have such a Creator and to be allowed to witness such a work.

And beholding their awe, Eldáru turned again to them and said unto them: "I see that thou delightest in mine creation. Come, then, and impart into this work thine own desire as garnish to enhance and beautify what I have made and to draw thine own presence near to it, as thy heart may wish." But the Anaíon replied: "Naught can we create but what comest from thee, Giver of all. How then shall we createst from ourselves, to enhance what from thee is consummate?" And in response, he spoke: "I have left space for thine own weaving, deliberately in mine love, for I wish thee to delight also in the act of creating, be it only the threading together, according to thine ingenuity, what has already come from me." And the Anaíon understood and

rejoiced and, in this joy, began to weave according to the plan of the Weaver, which they were granted to see and in which they freely shared.

Hiliána, as an example, beheld the growing things upon the earth and the way that they drank from the lights of the sky, living on the light as from light they came. And she wished too that they would live also on the threads of this light as distilled into liquid form. Did water, therefore, come forth from her by her own devising, or did she only discover it, inscribed into the fabric by Eldáru, for her unsealing? Clearly it is the latter, for the conversation that they had shared made this radiantly apparent. And so Hiliána rejoiced still more, and her delight was multiplied threefold: not only to witness the work of creation, and not only to fashion within it according to what she had received, but also to recognize within it secrets planted by the Maker, and to unseal these secrets which he had willed precisely for her, that through her they may fully be as he intended them to be.

Télmoth, too, for his part, took a special delight in the earth, in the abundance of the soil, and in the life that flowed through the hidden interior of each living plant, from the smallest of grasses or flowers to the largest of trees. And there awaited him, not unlike for Hiliána, a discovery. For by his creative intuition and desire, he found that many of the trees and plants began to bear fruit, to distill their life, as it were, into succulent artifacts which were not only sweet and beautiful but also carried in them seed, the essence of life, to bring forth yet more living things from those that already were.

And in this cycle of growth and birth Meléngthar began to delight, and he took this deeply to heart, though his dearest creation and the predilection of his eyes was yet to come. For him the passage of time, the cycles of life, held special interest, and he consulted with Hiliána concerning the beauty of her fashioning. "I seest the beauty which thou hast unsealed, my sister," he said unto her. "Thou hast joined the intangible rays of light together such that they distilleth into substance, poured out tangibly as drink for living things. I wish also to see this same substance and the life of these things cycle forth —a movement from life unto life unending and abundant—not only in the seed given from the fruit but in the very living endurance of each thing. Let there be a dance upon heaven and upon earth, and between the two unceasing, that life may ever spring up anew." And so, at Meléngthar's suggestion and with his counsel, Hiliána discovered—and thus unsealed—the cycle of the seasons, from Spring, to Summer, to Fall, and finally to Winter, and thus unto Spring again. An extension of Eldáru's creation of the two lights in the sky, in their perpetual dance of day and night, the seasons further marked the passage of time, the weaving of the tapestry of the cosmos as it progressed forward to the joy of all.

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The interweaving fabric of creation thus progressed, following upon the making of living plants, trees, and vegetation of all kinds, to the glorious blossoming of the cycle of seasons, and of the falling of rain and the rising up of water from the earth, and of the mystery of life-begetting-life in the fruitfulness that springs from the abundance that all living things bear within. After this Eldáru again took the initiative in the work of creation and brought forth by his own activity, his own weaving—by reaching deep within himself and drawing forth from the beauty of his own life—the living creatures that walk upon the ground or fly in the sky or swim in the depths of water. Thus came to be the animate creatures that move within the richness of creation, living things both great and small, each manifesting beauty in its own way, each reflecting some part of the glory of their Maker. From the majestic freedom of the eagle's flight, to the elegance and strength of the horse, to the radiant beauty of the butterfly, to the humility of the rabbit, the wonders of Eldáru were made visible in the living creatures born of his act.

And yet this alone was not enough for the All-Giver, for such creatures, while manifesting his beauty in themselves, each uniquely, nonetheless could not enter into knowing, enter into loving, which is proper to persons alone, and thus could not fully experience the joy of their Creator and join in his life in the manner that Eldáru, in his generosity, wished to bestow. For he wished to grant participation in his inner life not only unto the Anaíon, first fruit of his thought and his love, but also unto persons who would be in the body—enfleshed within the world nestled in the fabric of light—and yet would be in themselves spirit too, living spirit in the flesh, and flesh joined to spirit, and precisely as such would share consciously and freely in the life of the One, and in the joy that is his. For this joy, this endless life that has been proper to Eldáru from eternity to eternity without end, is both their origin and their goal, their source and their destiny.

To do this, Eldáru took up the strands that were to be found in the created world, the threads of all things—the earthiness of the soil, the elegance of the celestial lights, the hardiness of the trees, the splendor of the mountains, the dance of the flowers, the fruitful capacity of seed, the heartbeat and breath of living animals—and wove it into something that came from himself alone, something, indeed, deeper and more interior to himself than anything else that he had yet given. And by this gift, this thread of his inmost love, he gathered the entirety of the created universe and caused it to converge upon a single point, to be woven as into a single thread: in the beauty and life of our own race, the sekánin, the chosen and beloved, in whom and through whom the fullness of creation shall return at last, at the end of the ages, into the life of the One, the All-Giver, once again.

And thus man awakened upon the earth, bearing the very impress of El-

dáru and made like unto him—made like unto him by the very intentions of the One who imparted himself in the gift of his creative love, in the gift of life and existence. And though it is true that Eldáru gave himself in every act of his creation, that every thing that exists became a manifestation of his gift, nonetheless the sekánin became the greatest of his gifts, the center of his visible creation. All gifts, as it were, became summed up in this one gift, and it was man's part to allow all things to be gathered up in himself, and in this way to be carried thus, in him and through him, back into the loving embrace of their Creator, the Creator of all.

And it was precisely this predilection—this divine delight and this intention of Eldáru to sum up all things in humainty—that stirred Igrándsil, the highest of the Anaíon fallen to the lowest, to envy and hate, as has been said in the first account of the origins of all. He thus intended to tear the threads from the heart of man, to rip him to pieces, so that he was no longer unity but rather division, no longer harmony but rather discord, no longer integrity but rather dissolution. Rather than being the convergence of all things, the weaving together of diverse strands into a harmonious fabric of love, Igrándsil intended rather to make of man the point at which fissure entered into the cosmos, the point at which the first tear in the seamless tapestry of beauty was made. And he could only do this by tearing man from his Creator, by seeking to sunder that one thread upon which all the others depended and without which all would come apart, until torn utterly to pieces.

But there is yet another dimension of the life of the sekánin that has yet to be touched upon before coming to the moment at the beginning of our own history—the tragic moment—that has scarred not only our race but the entirety of the cosmos. For what was that ineffable mystery at the heart of the life of Eldáru that was granted unto the sekánin to live, born of his predilection for them and sealing this love upon their very being, such that the Anaíon themselves inclined unto humanity in reverence and awe, as to siblings entrusted with a special gift, by which they were stirred to love and care, custodians of something sacred? In this age of the world, we know not the fullness of such a gift, lost as it was in its purity at the origins of our history, even as we bear the remnants of it still, crying out within us for wholeness and restoration. But it was, as indicated earlier, an inmost thread of the very everlasting life of Eldáru granted unto man as the center of his own life, creating a unique bond between creature and Creator, a special relation, whose nature is yet to be rediscovered by us and even further yet to be restored.

But we know that man was, of all creatures, restless. He was full of longing and aspiration, even in the paradisic existence granted unto him; he was full of expectation for something still more—and this longing was but a correspondence, in him, of a promise of Eldáru made in the very act of his creation.

Unlike the Anaíon, who were granted the fullness of being and life in abundance from the beginning of their fashioning, and who from this fullness freely turned unto the visible creation in love and affection, and unlike all creatures lower than man, content to live and exist in their own sphere, manifesting that part of the mind of Eldáru from which each was formed, man stood in the visible world and yet yearned beyond it; he stood in himself and yet aspired to be more than himself, or rather, to find himself fulfilled in what could only come from beyond him.

Thus he was a promise that the tapestry of the world woven by the great Weaver would return hence unto the Weaver again, not to be dissolved or to be unspun, but rather to be woven into the very fabric of the Weaver of all, who has never been woven, nor can be unwoven, but who weaves all things unto perfection everlasting. The whole world was thus unto the sekánin as a home, and yet not a definitive home; it was unto him as a gift, but also a hope, a gift of hope stirring in him the desire to weave as he is woven, to weave within his own weaving, as the Anaíon themselves had been spontaneously and freely awakened to song before the origins of all, in the experience of their own selves being sung forth from Eldáru and hearkening unto the sweetness and beauty of his eternal song.

And indeed the sekáni, man, being whole within himself, alone, and longing unto his Fashioner, was also not made to be alone in the world. To the delight of Eldáru and by his will, man was opened in his inmost flesh such that from one came two, and in two, unity. For from man was fashioned woman, her threads woven of the same substance as he, like unto man and yet distinct from him: sekáni still, beloved and chosen, like man in every way and yet different. Thus was constituted, in its earliest origins, what has come to be called the human race, two threads each unique, whole and entire in themselves before the Maker of all, and yet also intertwined with one another, and aspiring ever upward together in a ceaseless dance until finding rest in the home of their Origin and Consummation.

And Igrándsil despised the sekánin with a complete hatred; he recoiled before what man and woman were, and he hated the dependence, the longing, and the aspiration that they bore within themselves, which he saw as weakness, a fault in the Maker's plan, not understanding that it was but a promise of greater works still to come. Or perhaps it was precisely these works which, when glimpsed, Igrándsil despised more than all else and which stirred him to such a frenzy of envy and such a lust for power and control that he conceived a plot of unutterable wickedness, the likes of which have already in part been seen.

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The Anaíon looked upon the majestic tapestry of creation woven so per-

fectly, so fittingly, and in joy joined their song to the song of Eldáru. And the sekánin, too, shared in this delight, in this song, and in the beauty of this weaving. Delighting in them who delighted in his creation and delighted too in their Maker, Eldáru gave them a special home in the heart of an island of beauty, a land cradled between shimmering seas, with roots reaching deep into the subterranean earth and glistening peaks reaching up toward the sky. And Télmoth, beholding the craftsmanship of Eldáru in fashioning this island as a special home of the sekánin, rejoiced, and he spoke unto Eldáru: "I beseech thee that I may come and dwell near unto thine chosen and may watch over them in thy name, all who come to live upon this land." And the All-Giver replied: "This request delighteth me, and it is verily also my wish. Thou shalt be a special guardian of all that occurs upon this island throughout the ages of history, from now and henceforth. But I shall always be near too, both through thee and with thee, for they are, after all, my creation, mine own chosen and beloved."

The other Anaíon heard this converse and wished too to care for the sekánin in a manner not unlike Télmoth; but they bore not the particular love for this land that was granted uniquely unto him. Thus they offered themselves in different manners with diverse consequence and fascination, but all together with one intent. Thus Meléngthar cared for the fruitfulness of man and woman and delighted in their capacity to bring to birth new life —which as yet, nonetheless, was a capacity still in seed, and which had not come to full expression and realization. He awaited this with joyful expectation, gazing with rapt attention upon both Eldáru and the sekánin, until the word, spoken from the Maker, would stir man and woman to their own most profound participation in the work of creation, in the weaving of new children in the womb of a mother by the seed of man. So too Hiliána saw the breasts of woman and knew what purpose they would serve: she saw the beauty of this mystery of life pouring unto life and life nourishing. For her it was not unlike the fascination she knew in the outpouring of the heavens to nourish the growing earth, and yet was even more profound.

In like manner the other Anaíon cherished the tapestry of beauty, with the world at its heart, and at the center of this world that island of harmony and life made as a dwelling-place for the sekánin. But Melándia too, named Igrándsil, also beheld the work unfolding and knew from prior councils—in which the Anaíon sat together in the presence of Eldáru and listened unto his plan of creation, insofar as revealed to them—the intentions of the Maker regarding his chosen. And he carried a plan of his own devising hidden deep within his heart, until the moment came for him to enact it. Already he had fallen from the grace of the One and from the harmony of the Anaíon, and he dwelt in an abode apart, and from this place he looked upon the work of

creation, upon the tapestry woven, though he was forbidden any part in its making. And this stirred his hatred still more, and a fire burned within him: the desire to take as his own what he was not allowed even to touch and, once it was his, to corrupt it and turn it to his own twisted ends.

But Eldáru abode in patience, and he continued undeterred along the path that he had chosen in his infinite wisdom and love. Thus he drew near to man and woman, the sekánin, who lived joyfully—without aging, pain, or death, and in radiant clarity and harmony of mind and body—in the midst of the land that he had given unto them, and he entrusted unto them a gift. He took a thread of pure and uncreated light and wove it into a glittering gem of magnificent beauty, a crystal that shined from within a holy radiance, which he named the Illûstra. "I entrust this gift unto thee, my chosen," he said unto them. "It is thine to cherish and protect, thine to love. Indeed, it is a vessel of sacred beauty which contains within it all that thy heart desires and which is allotted to thee as thy portion. Or rather, it contains within it thy longing, thy vigilant expectation, which shall keep thee alert, filled with wonder, play, and hope, unto that fulfillment of all desire, that long-expected gift which thy heart awaits, and which shall come unto thee at the proper time.

"Do not, therefore," he continued, "seek to open the vessel until it unseals itself of its own accord. Thou art to wait in patient longing—free of pain and strife and yet reaching out to what is to come—until I myself shall come to thee, in my visitation, and definitively reveal the light unto thee." Man and woman received these words and accepted them, seeing the wisdom of Eldáru and his goodness, and they longed with ardent yet peaceful expectation for the moment that the gift would be fully revealed. And they gratefully received this precious entrustment, this gem housing uncreated light, and placed it within the recesses of a living tree, large and glorious, which had a space in the trunk as if designed precisely to be a fitting resting place for such a sacred thing. When so held within the living embrace of the great tree, the gem poured forth beauty, until the entire forest surrounding became bathed in light unknown to man and woman until that moment. And in this light they rejoiced.

But here Igrándsil's plan reached its time of commencement, for which he had long waited. He came unto them, his horrendous nature hidden under a pleasing guise, and spoke to them. He told them glorious things about the life of the Anaíon, about their proximity to Eldáru and their governance over the whole tapestry of creation. Being unable to lead them astray through their pure and holy wonder in and longing for the gifts that Eldáru had given them, he instead tried to stir their desire for things that had not been given. He gradually led them, through subtle insinuations, along the path to a desire for things which were not meant for them, to a desire for the life that was proper

to the Anaíon, a life which came to seem to them enviable beyond all things. But not only this—no, not only this—for he told them that the life of an Anaía was enviable only because it was like unto the life of Eldáru, and yet Eldáru wished not for them to be fully like unto him, withholding from them his most precious secrets. And had he not withheld even more in regard to themselves, the sekánin? For if he had withheld from the Anaíon, he withheld tenfold more from the sekánin, who were given such a pitiful gift: a gift of longing and of hope, whereas they should have been given utter abundance from the start, if Eldáru were such a giver of all good things, as they had imagined him to be.

"It is a mockery of gift," Igrándsil said unto them. "See ye not? He giveth only to indebt ye unto himself. He giveth that ye mayest be his slaves, and so that he may require from ye the homage which otherwise ye wouldst be free from giving. What good doest it unto ye? See ye not? Never shall this precious thing be thine. No, it is a feign hope, a hope which shall never reach fulfillment, but which shall keep ye ever in thrall to one who insists on having power over ye." They hesitated in response to his words, uncertain of their truth. And so he spoke still further: "If ye need an illustration of this truth, it is not far from hand. For many of his Anaíon came to the same realization. Together we turned away from his unjust yoke, and we waged war to free ourselves from his illegitimate dominion. I come to ye now only to warn ye, to grant ye the same freedom that I myself have come to know. Shalt ye refuse me? Shalt ye decline the greatest of gifts simply because it comes second in place to the mock-gift of the supposed All-Giver?"

IV.

The sekánin turned their gaze unto the gem of light, the Illûstra, and were struck by its beauty and its desirability. Yes, how could a thing of such beauty be withheld from them? They realized then the absurdity of the command given unto them by Eldáru, in which he spoke of the Illûstra as a gift of longing and of hope. Should not rather a gift bring satisfaction and fulfillment, the surfeit of all desire in desire's consummation? And was it not there before them, the fulfillment of all their desires, if only they would reach out and take it for themselves? And so man and woman were persuaded, and they approached the tree in which the Illûstra was embedded. They pulled it forth and held it in their hands. But the holding was not enough, for it was only within the glowing gem, hidden within it, forbidden unto them, that what they wished for was concealed. And they thought to smite it against rock, or to fashion some tool, some device, that would break it open. Yet while they debated between themselves how to achieve this, they heard the voice of Eldáru echo through the woods: "Why seekest thou to appropriate a gift which

was freely given? It is not locked. It is not sealed. If thou wishest to take it, nothing is hindering thee. But beware! The gift cannot be had in such a way."

They took to heart that part of his words which they wished to hear and ignored the rest, and they laid hold of the gem and tore it open effortlessly, and the light burst forth. Or rather the light fled. It fled from the Illûstra; it fled from the forest; it fled away to the furthest reaches beyond their grasp, and immediately man and woman realized their mistake, and the deception of Igrándsil was laid bare. And at this realization they turned upon one another in argument; man blamed the woman for the fault, for not seeing through the deception, and woman in turn blamed the man. But their argument was halted as darkness descended upon the land far different than had ever been before—not the darkness of pure and holy night radiant with moon and stars and innumerable nocturnal sounds, but the darkness of terror and fear and loss. And yet this darkness was less even than the darkness that fell like a black curtain upon their own hearts and which estranged them from one another and from all that was beautiful, or good, or true.

They fled in terror from the wood and sought refuge in the mountains, even as Eldáru sought them out. He appeared to them as they fled, and he spoke to them of the consequence of their foolishness, or rather of their infidelity, but they heeded him not, their hearts being filled with such fear of his splendor and glory. Pained by their choice and yet not discouraged, Eldáru did not withhold from them what his plan had allotted, and even as they fled, he unsealed within them that final part of their nature, which until now he had held in himself until the proper moment. Thus as they came into the mountains they began to bring forth children like unto themselves. In this manner, under a dark shadow and the pain of loss, the race of the sekánin was begun.

And grow it did, from generation to generation, until a large part of the island was inhabited. All of those born of woman retained a memory, deeper than memory, of what the island had been before the Illûstra had been forced open, and yet all bore, too, the profound weight of darkness that had fallen upon the land and upon the very depths of the heart. And the Illûstra, now bereft of light, still remained enshrined in the great tree, in a grove that was considered sacred and forbidden, one of the last remaining vestiges of reverence for Eldáru when all else had turned to darkness. As the decades and centuries passed, groups began to make pilgrimage to the forest and to draw near to the tree, not to touch it, not to enter into the sacred grove, but as it were to reach back, through proximity, to that memory deeper than memory. One of them, however, who went by the name of Gálrid, drew nearer than the others, even unto glimpsing the dimmed Illûstra embedded in the trunk of the great tree. And he thought that perhaps there may yet be some

semblance of light left, hidden deep within the stone. Yet remembering the prohibition made by his people, he withdrew and departed from the wood. But this was only for a time, as thence he returned again in a year, and with a large company of men. And he passed through the wood like a searing fire that burns what stands in its path: for those who witnessed him saw the fierce determination in his eyes and they feared what would come of the hunger that blazed within them.

There was a wise old sage, one of the earliest children of the first man and woman, the parents of the human race whose life had endured beyond the limits of ordinary sekáni, though they had long since died. This sage had witnessed Gálrid and his company as they passed into and through the wood. Stirred at once by what he beheld, this sage, whose name was Iliónis, took to following them, and he hid among the trees as the company entered into the sacred grove. "What I understand not," the sage heard Gálrid say in a loud voice to those who accompanied him, "is why we have gone back on the way of our ancestors. Do you not see that our race was begun with an act of freedom? It was begun with a rebellion against the unjust prohibition placed upon us, the knowledge of which has been passed down to us throughout the years. And yet look what has become of us! Now we are enslaved not to prohibitions of creatures that would wish to be our superior; no, we are enslaved to prohibitions of our own making. And I declare: no more of this!"

And thus Gálrid turned unto the Illûstra, and he reached forth his hand, not knowing that, truly, nothing good awaited him in such an act. Witnessing this and dreading such an act of disrespect and desecration, Iliónis leapt forward from the trees and revealed himself. "Stay your hand!" he cried, and he sought to prevent Gálrid. But the flame burning in Gálrid's eyes only flared forth, and he pounced upon Iliónis and pinned him to the ground. When the old sage resisted and sought to speak words of wisdom to sway him from his folly, Gálrid only became enraged, and he grasped the sage's throat, hindering his breath until at last he was no more. Thus occurred the first loss of human life at the hands of another. By man was the life of man taken for the first time, though it would be far from the last. And yet Gálrid cared not, and rose to his feet with a growl, and grasped the Illûstra in his hands, seeking to tear it from its place in the tree.

But try as he might, he was unable to dislodge the Illûstra from its place. Enraged, he turned to his companions, and after a moment he spoke: "Brethren, hearken to my words. If we cannot take the Illûstra for ourselves, we shall instead take the forest, and the tree, and the crystal within it. No matter what comes, we shall not renounce it to anyone. We shall stand our ground, and fight if we must, to the end." And so it was, for stirred by Gálrid's lust for power—veiled as a desire for the light supposedly still contained

in the Illûstra—other tribes gathered and waged war against the company of Gálrid. Four tribes there were in all: the Galrídi, the Hyréli, the Erulári, and the Silióni. The Hyreli and the Erulári waged vicious war against the Galrídi, and the latter fought back with even more violence, falling into a frenzy of bloodlust that augmented, deepened, and expressed their lust for power. The Silióni, however, drew back and took refuge in the mountains, not out of fear of death or unwillingness to face conflict, but rather out of reverence for the Illûstra and refusal to engage in a war of such a kind and for such a purpose.

The war was fought for three-hundred days before the land was drenched in blood, and the woods surrounding the Illûstra, and the nearby lands, were covered in burial mounds of the fallen dead. There was so much death for a race so young! During a lull in the fighting, Gálrid turned to his closest companion, Arûnis, who had a heart almost as black as his own, and he said: "I suspect the Silióni. They have withdrawn beyond our reach and hide themselves in the mountains. And their reason is clear. They wait until the three armies are in a weakened state—and especially our own—and then they shall attack and take the crystal for themselves. But the crystal is ours, and the woods, and so shall be the rule." To this Arûnis replied: "What is your suggestion, my lord? Or wish you to hear what I think?" "I suspect," Gálrid said, "that our plan would be much the same. Take three-hundred men tomorrow and make for the mountains. When you have found the hiding place of the Silióni, encamp in concealment through the depths of night, and with the first light of day, slaughter all without mercy." "As you wish," was Arûnis' response. "It is as I would have wished as well."

And so the company of slaughter set forth, with intent of great sacrilege against human life and against the Creator of life. But Eldáru saw the pure intent of the Silióni, and especially of Sílion the Wise, leader of the tribe and oldest living of the sekánin. And he saw the evil in the hearts of the other tribes, and their twisted will, and their terrible deeds. Thus he spoke unto Neréthion and Hiliána, the highest of the Anaíon, and said unto them: "I send thee this very night unto the abode of those who call themselves the Silióni. For tomorrow awaits for them a great and awful slaughter, and yet I wish not for it to be. Rather, I have plans for them of great importance and beauty, not only in the present age but for ages yet to come." The two Anaíon replied in one accord: "What thou wishest, we wish as well, for the wisdom of your words is truth indeed and deepest benevolence." "Go then and shield them as the sun rises over the earth. Lead them out, and they shall escape." "Where shall we lead them?" Hiliána asked. "Lead them into the sacred grove," Eldáru explained, "to the very place that has become the center of so much strife. It is my will that they inherit it, and that it be their special habitation for the rest of their days, from generation to generation."

"What shall we do with the company that yet remains in the grove?" asked Neréthion. "I know that I have fought much against the armies of Igrándsil, and I fear not to fight in thy name. But this is different, as human life, since its fall from your grace, endures not forever, but is ruptured upon death, and the body goes to the dust while the spirit goes to rest until the appointed time." "Thou speakest with great understanding and compassion, Neréthion," Eldáru said. "I wish not for any of my Anaíon to slay my chosen children. No, simply bring to the grove those who are faithful to me, and I shall arrange all things for their protection and their inheritance." "As thou sayest," said both, with gladness in their faces in gazing upon Eldáru and with compassion in their hearts for the strife fallen upon the race of the sekánin. And they went forth with haste and appeared unto the Silióni, who looked with rapt amazement and grateful awe upon the glorious faces of Neréthion and Hiliána—incorporeal persons made visible in some manner to mortal eyes. "We come unto thee in warning and in care," spoke Hiliána. "For this very morning, at the rising of the sun, comes a force seeking thy destruction. But fear not! We have been sent, and we have come with desire, to protect thee from all who would harm thee. We shall hide thee in the shadow of our presence, and then we shall lead thee forth to the place appointed for thee by the wisdom of the All-Giver."

"The All-Giver!" cried Sílion. "All praise be unto the highest of highest and the origin of all. He has not forsaken his children!" "Indeed not," Neréthion said. "Never has he, nor shall he ever do so. It is not in his nature to withdraw his love once it is given, and it is given freely to all that exists. Thy part is only to trust in him and to walk in the path he marks out for thee with simplicity and joy." "We do not walk unto death?" a companion of Sílion asked. "Assuredly not," affirmed Hiliána. "Thou walkest unto life." "Without hesitation," Sílion said, and with emphasis, "we shall trust and walk."

And so it happened. The Silióni were veiled from the presence of those who would destroy them, and were led by Neréthion and Hiliána through the mountain trails and into the woods, unto the very sanctuary of the sacred grove. As they approached they saw the remaining company of Gálrid encamped near to the Illûstra. But as they looked on, behold, the very earth began to groan and shift, and the tribe fell into a panic, and they began to flee to the east, out of the grove, and even further, to the plains that lay beyond the woods. And as they fled a wide chasm opened, separating them from the grove and from the Illûstra within it, a rift in the earth henceforth impossible to cross except by those chosen by the heavens.

"Now the All-Giver saith unto thee," began Hiliána, "that this place, this sacred grove, shall henceforth be thine habitation, until the end of your ages

upon the earth." In this manner the Anaía addressed the sekánin, speaking to them all simultaneously and yet using a singular pronoun, as if singling out each with incomparable attention and unique responsibility, born of an irreplaceable love. She continued: "Thou art now called, for all the time before you, not the Silióni, but the Velási, the 'veiled ones,' and also 'the ones who veil.' Loved and protected as thou art, thou shalt also love and protect. Thou shalt be the custodians of the sacred stone and of the lands which its presence hath hallowed. Indeed, Eldáru grants unto thee a special gift fitting to thy fidelity, but born of his own boundless and preordained generosity: he grants unto thee life in the face of death. Whereas other men shall come to the grave in short expanse of time, thou shalt live on for many years. This is his gift, and it shall also be thy joy and thy pain; for it is thy part to keep perpetual vigil in this place, awaiting, as man and woman were meant in the beginning, the time of visitation. For the promise Eldáru made at the origin of your race has not, on his part, been broken, even if from his children he found betrayal. So stand then, all of ye, in the joy of his love, in the hope of his coming, and in the expectation of his countenance."

"Yea," Neréthion said, taking up with his voice the train of her discourse, "not only shalt thou live for ages in expectation of the Giver's visitation, the fulfillment of his promise—and only at this time find your life come to peaceful and joyous conclusion—but thou shalt also feel and know more than do other men. Thou shalt feel the darkness in the heart of every man as if it was thine own, and thou shalt suffer for it, but thou shalt also feel all the rays of light woven into this world with ardent intensity. Thou shalt know and hurt for the ugliness of a fallen world, and thou shalt know and rejoice at the beauty of the goodness that still liveth within it. Thou art henceforth custodians of the light, keeping vigil in the darkness of this world until the dawning of the definitive day, when the Dawnbringer shall come unto the earth."

Chapter Eight
Forgotten and Found

The early morning sun shines through the dense trees in the east and glistens on the elegant buildings of the velstadeä as Elmáriyë sits on the porch of their dwelling, her hands clasped upon her lap. Late in the evening of the previous night Eléndras had shown them to a structure not far from the council of meeting, a home that was quickly put to use as a guesthouse for the five travelers. Though he had not said as much, it was clear to them all that this was Eléndras' own home, though where he would be staying in the meantime they did not know. Perhaps any place in this little sanctuary of a village could be home to anyone, and Eléndras, after dwelling in this house for perhaps hundreds of years, could easily yield it to his guests for a short period of time. Elmáriyë still feels overwhelmed by the thought that these men and women, humans like unto themselves and yet granted a unique gift, have lived for hundreds or even thousands of years. The gift, however, is not for their sake alone, and she wonders if it brings with it pain as well as joy, sorrow as well as gladness. Indeed she had seen as much in the countenance and the eyes of their interlocutors the night before.

Amazement still moves her heart at the thought of them, and indeed at the atmosphere of this place, this hidden home in the heart of the woods; but what stirs amazement in her heart more than anything else is the One whom she had discovered in the late hours of the night and into the early morning hours. And she has found it impossible to sleep after this encounter. But then again, it was always he alone whom she worshiped throughout every day of her life, and the orbit of his gaze within which she lived. The gods that she revered and served spoke for him and served him, messengers and servants as she, and yet greater, and deserving thus of the honor given to them, even as all light came from the One and to him returned. He is, and has always been, the light behind the stars. But how could she know him unless he was revealed to her, unless his face was made known and his activity revealed? And now that this gift has been given, she can never forget, nor would she wish to do so.

The sense of his closeness is tangible now, but also the profound and gripping awareness of his all-surpassing mystery. It is so deep, so wide, and so all-pervading that everything that she sees and feels has profoundly changed. The whole world is different now, even if very much the same, different because bathed in a light purer, deeper, and more intense, which has always been there pouring forth freely upon all things, but to which now she has

been granted, far beyond her own deserving, a new and deeper sensitivity. Elmáriyë rises to her feet and steps down from the porch onto the grass, wet with dew and glistening in the morning light. The air is chilly but not bitter, and the garb she wears, devoid of cloak and yet warm in itself, is enough. Slowly and thoughtfully she walks along the winding paths of the village, a tenor of quietude and rest surrounding her on every side and penetrating through her every pore. Even the sounds of early morning life—the echo of human voices, the chirping of birds, the crunch of feet upon soil, the sound of a spade against hard earth—do not disturb this all-enveloping quiet. The air is still, almost unmoving, and a white mist hangs about the village like a veil, giving fitting form to its name: velstadeä, the veiled home. The slightest sounds echo widely in the stillness, but so too does the silence draw them up into itself and hold them. Here Elmáriyë encounters the same solitude that she has always known and cherished, the silence that has burned in the depths of her heart for as long as she can remember, and which drew her to Ristfánd and to the temple of Nirániel. But here it is both deeper and wider, like a flowing river carrying all things forward in a gentle onrush of longing and hope toward the inexhaustible light deeper than every light, and the repose beyond every rest, and the fruit deeper than the product of every toil.

To her surprise, she sees a child run across the path a few yards ahead of her, laughter echoing from her as she chases a little bird with brilliantly colored feathers. Elmáriyë did not know that there were children here, or that the Velási still bore children and raised them. The child, perhaps eight years in age, though it is impossible to tell for sure, looks up at Elmáriyë as she draws near, and with a smile, she says, "You are a visitor to our lands?"

"Yes, I am," Elmáriyë replies, and then she hastily corrects herself, "I mean —we are. There are five of us."

"Five visitors," the child replies, in a sing-song voice. "You are the first for me."

"We are the first in many ages, I hear."

"Many ages indeed, though I haven't lived for even one!" the girl exclaims with a smile.

"How old *are* you?" Elmáriyë asks, hoping that the question is not inappropriate.

"I am nineteen."

"Nineteen?" Elmáriyë repeats in astonishment. "But you look only to be eight or nine years old. How nineteen?"

"Oh, I forget how you count years on the outside," the girl replies matter-of-factly. "My mother explained it to me. For us, we count the years from conception, not from birth."

"But that only adds nine months," Elmáriyë sighs.

"For you maybe!" the girl says, laughter lighting up her face and dancing in her eyes. "But I need to go. I am sorry to end this conversation so abruptly, but there is somewhere I must be. Maybe we can see each other again?"

"I would like that," Elmáriyë replies sheepishly, surprised that she feels so uncomfortable—or rather so exposed—in the presence of a child.

"Great, see you then!"

"Wait!"

"Yes, what is it?" the girl asks, turning back to look at Elmáriyë, her deep blue eyes glistening with wisdom and understanding beyond her years.

"May I ask your name?"

"I think you just did," the girl says with laughter again in her voice. "My name is Relmaríndë."

"Relmaríndë," Elmáriyë repeats, savoring the beauty of the word on her tongue. "It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Elmáriyë."

"Wonderful," the child exclaims. "Well then, see you soon!"

And with that she skips across the path and disappears behind a house to the right.

After standing in awe for a moment as she tries to make sense of the encounter, Elmáriyë moves forward again and continues her slow walk through the village, drinking in the sights and sounds with hungry eyes and ears and with heart yearning more deeply than it has in years, stirred to longing by the very beauty that comes to meet her and, touching her, awakens her to yearn yet more deeply and more widely. Soon her attention is captured by a song echoing in many voices far to her left. Attuning herself to the sound, she follows it through the trees to a clearing in which stand almost three-score of the Velási, all of them with faces turned toward the rising sun, brows blazing with golden light. On their lips are the words:

Eldáru, arás nu moën ya yahë kalén,
svas arécha passá menéris en sordá
ya heilla kalasteía sení kordá,
asáng tua seánga daréng surána noän,
ya tan galémi enna torvéla kallá tua,
ya en ane kallá, ka'éleng a ya en noän,
noë hyrá kallá noën, tan sama,
onys onánda, seïkáni,
fyris ka'eat alaíe
dia tan Ona qua eliáru.

Eldáru, origin of all and their final end,
sweet beginning beyond memory and strife
and blessed consummation without end,

your song sung forth has given us life,
and the echoes still reveal to us your name,
and in this name, spoken to us and within us,
we hear our own names too, the same,
each unique, beloved,
because spoken eternally by the One who loves.

After the song has concluded the congregation disperses, though Elmáriyë stands rooted to the spot, watching them go. Eléndras, who has been in their midst, notices Elmáriyë and turns to drawn near to her.

"May joy and blessing be upon you this morning," he says to her, clasping her arm for a moment in greeting.

She nods, opening her mouth, though unsure of what to say.

"Ah, forgive me," Eléndras laughs softly, "you do not know our traditional salutations. It is no matter."

"We usually just say 'Good morning,' but I would like to know: what is the response?"

"The response is: 'And may joy and blessing redound upon you'."

"Very well," Elmáriyë replies with an awkward smile, "then may joy and blessing redound upon you."

"Verily may they," Eléndras says, smiling as well. And then, placing his hand upon Elmáriyë's shoulder, he adds, "Will you walk with me?"

"I would be glad to," she says.

They return to the paths of the village and make their way slowly back toward the guest house, with the council chambers nearby.

"I do have a question I wish to ask you," Elmáriyë begins.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Why do you have no statue to represent the object of your song?"

"Perhaps in future ages it may be so," Eléndras replies simply, "but in the current state of the world the One whom we address remains unseen, and to safeguard among all the awareness that he is far different than the lesser gods, his servants, we do not depict him in any form of visible art or tangible representation. That does not, of course, mean that he is not seen or felt with the eyes and affection of the heart. A heart that loves cannot but know him, though the ways of experiencing his presence are many, and even in intangibility his hidden succor and support is always present and at hand."

"I see," responds Elmáriyë, thinking this over in her mind and heart.

"I suggest you pose this question to Sílion when we are together," Eléndras continues. "It shall be a good starting-point for the converse that lies before us."

"Then I shall do precisely that," she says.

"Good. We shall speak immediately after lunch, which shall be served at

midday in the same place as the feast from yesterday evening," explains Eléndras. "A bell shall be rung, so there is no need to worry about the time."

"I find it difficult to worry about anything in this place," whispers Elmáriyë.

"Worry, indeed, has no place here," says Eléndras, "though pain, sorrow, and compassion, and even the anxious care born of these—you will find that we bear and experience all of this in great measure."

"I believe it and glimpse it already," Elmáriyë replies, "but it is somehow different, both lighter than I have ever known and more serious as well."

He looks at her with a glimmer in his eyes and says, "I understand," and with this he bids her farewell and turns away down the path, leaving her standing before the door of the house in which the travelers are staying.

† † †

That afternoon, following another hearty and yet simple meal, the five companions gather together with the same three Velási with whom they had spoken the previous evening. But to their surprise—and particularly that of Elmáriyë—the young girl, Relmaríndë, is also present, sitting in the last remaining chair. Noticing their questioning looks, Seriyéna says kindly, "It is a custom of ours to allow the youngest into the counsels of the eldest. Relmaríndë shall be joining us for our converse today, as she is of age to understand the realities of which we speak. She also desires to know our guests more deeply," she adds, with a glance toward Elmáriyë, "with whom she has already become acquainted, at least in part."

"Very well," Sílion says, with a look to all present. "Where shall we begin?"

"Eléndras suggested that I pose a question to you," Elmáriyë says softly. "It is one which I posed first to him. Perhaps it shall hold and in some way manifest the deeply personal responses that each of us has had to that which you entrusted to us at the end of the evening. Such things, anyway, would be difficult to talk about in themselves, at least until one is acquainted with giving voice to such realities."

As she says this, her eyes meet Eldárien's, and she sees the deep understanding in his gaze, and he nods gently to her.

"I agree with that way of proceeding," Sílion says with a broad smile, leaning back in his chair and folding his hands across his stomach. "So what is your question?"

"I asked why it is that you do not depict the One in any images or other forms of artistic representation. In the temple of Nirániel, and in all other temples as far as I understand, we seek to give expression to the nature of the divinities by visible forms. Nirániel, for example, is depicted as a woman both receptive and generous, and Télmoth—actually, I recall that it was also in the text you gave us—he is depicted as a farmer with a plow. And so it is for the

others."

"And I suppose that Eléndras gave you a satisfactory answer, but he wishes to use the question as a point of entrance for today's conversation?" Sílion asks.

"You understand entirely," Eléndras answers in his own right, chuckling softly.

"Then let us speak of this," Sílion says. "I shall answer with gladness." After clearing his throat, he continues, "We do not depict the One in images of any kind, nor have we ever done so. For though the Anaíon have come to humanity at times, clothed in guises visible to flesh and to heart, the One surpasses all of them infinitely. And even beyond this, his nature is simply deeper and wider, infinite and boundless, whereas they have but a small portion of his life and thus are more amenable to representation. In fact, there is more likeness between the gods and ourselves than there is between the gods and the One; for he is God beyond the gods, the creator of them all, just as he is the creator of everything that exists both in heaven and on earth. The Anaíon are close to us, even as they are so much greater, mysterious, invisible, ineffable, superior in strength and intelligence; and yet they are only servants of his own kindness toward us. He, however, is further transcendent, hidden, veiled even more than the Anaíon are veiled, and often forgotten even when they are remembered. And that is a great sorrow to us, since he it is whom every heart knows before it knows anything else. For he alone *is.* All else comes from him, freely and without necessity, by an act of his own sheer generosity. And without him, nothing is that has ever come to be. And it is impossible for him not to be, for he is the Source of all things, their true Origin, and also the goal to which all things tend, yearning to return to their long-lost home and to the repose that their restless being seeks.

"The Giver of all, he is called Eldáru, hidden and inaccessible, and yet not therefore far away. Rather, our people, living so hidden ourselves, veiled by his own presence for ages upon ages, have come to know his perpetual closeness, his presence in the very sanctuary of the beating heart, in the feeling and thinking and yearning spirit. He is our center, the very living heart of our heart and the being of our being, though he is not us nor are we him. But we stand always before him, bathed in the light of his gaze, which, by looking at us with love, makes us to be who we are, and without which we would immediately cease to be. Yes, and this encounter, maturing over generations, over countless ages, has led us in the secrecy of our hearts to call him by another name. For the name Eldáru, to us, is not fitting enough; it is not adequate. And so with a simple exhale of breath, heard only in the deepest silence where he meets us, we dare to call him 'Ta'."

"Ta? But that is the way that a small child addresses her father!" Eldárien

exclaims softly.

"Precisely," Sílion says simply, "and there is no better address, no better name to express who he is for us. And yet," and now his face is clouded over with a shadow of inexpressible sorrow, "and yet we know that this name will be little known by many throughout the ages of the world. For we are granted to know, in both memory and expectation, what shall be granted all humanity to know only in future ages. And even then, so few shall truly believe, in heart and flesh, the truth of his fatherhood; and so few shall know its real depth and intimacy. For he is Father, and yet he is not an earthly father. He is Father, but not in the way in which we now know fatherhood to be. And our relation to this Father is broken and obscured, lived and experienced by us far less than he would wish for it to be. But we Velási have memory of an ancient promise received at the very origin of our people, of our kind, in the wake of the terrible events that sundered our world. This is a promise that the Giver of all shall someday draw so near to us, shall reveal himself so fully and so deeply, that he shall truly be for each and all the Father, the Father not by analogy only but in fullness of truth deeper than any truth that we have ever known. And in that day, too, all the ills that the malice and folly of both man and spirit have inflicted shall find their cure, and man, enslaved for countless ages to the fruits of his own wickedness and loss, shall be redeemed from this bondage and find freedom."

After Sílion has finished speaking, Relmaríndë raises her hand as if she wishes to say something.

"What is it, little one?" Sílion asks, turning his gaze to her.

"I just wanted to add a child's perspective," she says.

"By all means. It may be the most important perspective of all," Sílion says, with a wave of his hand gesturing for her to continue.

"Well, it is not much," she begins. "I just want to say that we see him in our loves, and in our deepest desires, and at the heart of our imaginings, and in every tree and flower, sunset and sunrise. He is everywhere with a thousand images, countless visible signs, and yet he is more than all of them. I would not want to try to represent him with an image or with a thousand, unless he himself gives me the means by which to represent him and see him. I would rather see him everywhere and nowhere, until he himself grants me to see him both everywhere and somewhere. Otherwise I fear that I would not see him at all."

After she has fallen silent again, Sílion places his hand upon her head, and a beautiful smile is shared between them. He then says simply, "Well spoken."

Now Rórlain begins to speak and says, "In the light of all that you have shared with us—and indubitable light it is, almost too bright for my frail eyes—what are we to make of the conflict between the Anaíon and the Draíon?

The account you shared showed forth their creation, that they were born of a single song and, at the origin of time, sang together in harmony. But why would the prime Singer of the song allow those he himself has sung forth to change the tune, to alter the melody in the effort to fashion a song of their own making?"

It is Eldárien who attempts to respond to his words, his voice gentle and yet full of emphasis, "I believe that this question too finds a response in the very words of which you speak, and it shall take a lifetime, and more than a lifetime, for us to progress unto the heart of their meaning. Or rather to live in that heart ever more deeply with each passing day."

"You are faster than I, Eldárien," Rórlain says, without anger or regret, but with a touch of sadness. "You have asked many questions and suffered many things which I have not. And in order to find the answers, one must first be intimately acquainted with the questions. Be patient with me, as I will follow as best I can, and at my own pace."

"I expect nothing else, my dear friend," Eldárien says, his voice one of humility, affection, and gratitude. "Indeed, I expect nothing at all. It is not for us to expect anything of our fellow men, for we all stand under the same light and the same judgment. Let us rather help one another along the way. I will support you with my frailty however I may, and I ask you to support me, too, when I am weak and faltering."

"That, I will try to do," says Rórlain, laying his hand on Eldárien's shoulder, while the latter grasps this hand for a moment and holds it. After a short while, Rórlain leans back in his chair and looks around, saying, "I think I understand a little. It is for the same reason that a parent would allow their child to make a mistake. One cannot learn everything by command alone, and without the freedom to choose, neither right nor wrong, neither love nor hate, is possible."

The others nod, and a moment later Tilliána says, "That is true, but as Sílion said before, the choice of these beings, these Draíon, is absolute in a way that our choices in this life are not. Thus the force against which we must fight is a freedom that has hardened into hatred and ossified into anger and envy."

"That is the risk faced by creative love in imparting freedom to his creatures," Sílion says quietly, "and perhaps it would be the same for us, were we to persist in such evil beyond the boundaries of our temporal life."

"A sorrowful thought," Eldárien says. "But how are we to fight such wickedness, such evil, when it is so far beyond us both in intelligence and in raw power?" He sighs and adds, "I know that you spoke of this yesterday, but I feel that our conversation never reached its finality. There is yet something in which my heart has not found rest and clarity."

"That is as it should be," Eléndras replies, "for there is yet much to be revealed today...much, indeed, that shall touch close to the very sinews of the heart."

"That has already been done a thousandfold," Eldárien answers with a soft laugh, "but I suppose that I am ready for more."

"Let us hope that your words are truly spoken," Sílion says. "Let me therefore commence where we left off. I said that the creatures that assail our people—and now you know that, despite the differences that distinguish us, we *are* one people—are but the tools of invisible forces, instruments in the hands of the fallen gods, we can call them."

"Yes, you said something to the effect that we fight the very shadows of our own darkness and the darkness of our brethren, given form by the forces of darkness. Am I correct?" Tilliána asks.

"That is close to the truth," Sílion explains. "You fight not the shadows themselves, but rather the evil that such shadows have allowed to grow and to flourish within this world, given flesh by the original perpetrators of evil, whose only wish is to oppose all that is light, and good, and true. You fight the fruits of infidelity to the light, the shattered scars of sin inflicted on the cosmos, taken up by one who is filled with hatred of humanity, and who takes this disorder and fashions it into a weapon with which to assault us. And that is why the only solution is not direct confrontation—at least not with power against power—but only the purity of love that suffers to purge the darkness without in any way compromising with this darkness."

"But how could any man or woman possibly do such a thing?" Eldárien asks. "No one person can carry so much."

"In that you are correct. The definitive answer lies not in human power and must come from above, from the origin and source of all light and good. And yet in this present time, in our dire need, the light has shone forth and anointed chosen ones to be bearers of this light, to be, as it were, harbingers of the true Dawnbringer who is yet to come. Their part is only a hint of what he shall do, only a preface or preparation; it is like a sketch of the final painting or a draft of the complete story. And it takes all of its meaning from the latter, even as, in this meaning, it is fully true and enduring in its own right, precisely because of the image that it reflects and the light that, in proper measure, shines forth into it and through it."

"You speak of the one who has been addressed as 'Lightborn'?" Elmáriyë asks. "You speak of Eldárien?"

"Yes, I speak of Eldárien, but I also speak of Elmáriyë, his sister," Sílion says, a mysterious twinkle in his eyes, full of understanding and full of love.

"His sister?" asks Elmáriyë. "Yes, of course. You speak of the bond that we share. We both feel it and know it, yet we understand not all that it means.

This common choice and calling has united us, has it not?"

"I do speak of the bond of the common gift, yes," replies Sílion, "and yet I also speak of the bond of blood. For you are siblings not only in the spirit but in the flesh." Seeing their expressions, he smiles compassionately and adds, "Be not alarmed. All shall be explained. But it is true: you are both children of the Velási, children of the chosen of the One, born in exile beyond the veil that hides us, and in forgetfulness of your origin. But precisely in your place of exile you have received the gift and task that falls upon none of us who dwell here in the velstadeä, but has been entrusted uniquely to you alone."

"But how is this possible?" Eldárien asks. "I was raised from the beginning of my life in the town of Fálstead. And I knew both of my parents, and my sister…another sister."

Sílion simply nods in response to Eldárien's words, and then he looks at Elmáriyë, who sighs deeply and says, "This makes sense of so many things, though many also remain unanswered. My unknown origin, my adoption in a place of death, and the 'something' that has lived inside me all of these years. But how do you know this? Do you speak only from the evidence, interpreted rightly or wrongly? Or do you speak with first-hand knowledge?"

"Allow me to recount the story of your origins," answers Sílion, "and I trust that my tale itself shall put most of your questions to rest. How does that sound?"

"You know the circumstances of our birth and our beginning?" asks Elmáriyë. "Both of us?"

"Indeed I do."

"I would then hear your words," says Eldárien, his voice strained and uncertain and yet revealing, despite this, the openness and curiosity of his heart.

And so Sílion begins.

"There was a woman of the Velási, Hælia by name, who bore great compassion and love for those who live beyond the borders of our land. Of course we all bear such compassion within us as a gift from our origin, and yet in her it became a restless fire. Born a little over a hundred years ago, as she grew to full womanhood she felt a tug upon her heart to travel beyond the veil of the forest, to explore other places and to walk among her brothers and sisters. She spoke with the council of the elementári to request our permission and our blessing for this endeavor, but at first we were resistant. Our allotted place was clear. But as time passed, as I closely observed her, I began to think to myself that perhaps she had a special path unlike our own, or rather an expression of the same path manifested in a way singular to herself, for some great purpose which I did not know.

"As I said before, it is not right for any one to embrace more than their allotted portion, for we each stand in the place ordained for us, and we live

according to the wisdom that guides all things. But neither should another be forbidden from following their way if it differs from one's own. There are many paths along the single journey. The essential thing is to look deeply into the one truth that unites us all, the one will that directs and cares for all things, and to find the unique trails it marks out for every one of Eldáru's children. For there are many paths that would claim to be true and valid but which are born either of the deception of error and of self-will, or from a despair of the existence of a single truth that guides and unifies all thing, or from the loss of hope that such truth can be definitively known by the searching human mind and heart.

"No, the broadness of mind and sensitivity of heart of which I speak is far different, born precisely of the expansiveness of the one truth and within it. Thus I immersed myself in this truth, and contemplated and asked, sought and inquired, and came to the conviction that the path that Hælia discerned before her was a true one. And thus I besought the council to consider again her request. I myself would give my consent, and I asked the others to reflect again upon their own. To simplify the account, suffice it to say that she was given permission to depart, and she eventually did so, when her own heart was ready. Now, from this moment on, the details are not as clear to me as the things I have shared henceforth. For Hælia never returned to us. What we know, we know only from that inner vision that is given to us from the gift that we have received, the same vision that allowed us to know about your existence and about the fact that you would return to us, unaware of who you are and of your origin.

"And so Hælia departed, and she walked among the men and women of the world far and wide. But it was nearby, in the small village of Criseä to the northeast of this place, that she at last ceased her journeys. Something happened there that has not happened for all the ages of the world. She sang alone in the woods of that region, giving voice to the ancient songs of her people—for even if she had departed from us in body, she remained one with us in spirit and in life. And a man happened upon her in these woods, and upon hearing her song and seeing her dance, he witnessed what from most human eyes is concealed: he saw the radiance of humanity in its glory undimmed. Even if for only a moment, he glimpsed our race as it was meant to be, that living flame of beauty that lives still in all of us, despite the scars and wounds that we have received.

"And he drew near to Hælia and conversed with her. Many years now had she spent among men, and she was neither startled nor afraid. Rather, she received him willingly and answered his questions about the song and where she had learned it, as much as she thought fitting. This was the beginning of a communion of man and woman, of two hearts, the likes of which has never

been and perhaps shall never be hence until the end of the ages. Eventually they were wed, and they lived happy years in the village of Criseä. But to their great misfortune, and to the sorrow of us all, the powers of darkness discovered this union, and despised it. Their first child was but an infant when they were forced to flee from the village and to take refuge in the mountains. But even here they could not escape, and now for perhaps the first time in centuries, the beasts of which we have already spoken emerged again from the earth and sought them out. We know not how, but they were separated, though very much against their will: the man was forced to flee in order to save his son's life, while the woman, with the unique light that she bore, fled in the opposite direction, fending off the creatures as best she could.

"We felt even here the anguish of these two hearts as they were torn away from one another, and yet we also felt their bond that nothing, no distance, no pain, not even death could tear asunder. Moved by this compassion and this awareness that is limited neither by space nor by time—which I know that the two of you also have been granted to experience in your own lives, part of the gift given to the Velási at the beginning—I departed from the forest, and my wife with me. I then traveled to the north in search of the man and the child, while Seriyéna moved south in pursuit of Hælia and her pursuers. I found the man in the woods of Galas Basin, and I drew near and spoke unto him. I counseled him to take the child and, for the present, to conceal his identity. I told him to hide himself in the village of Fálstead and, even if it caused him great pain, to entrust the child to the care of another family. He said that he did not want to be separated from his own son but rather to remain always to watch over his growth unto manhood. I replied that I did not intend such a separation but that the boy's identity alone should be concealed and the necessary measures taken to that end. And this he did, allowing the boy to be raised by a family in the said village, and remaining himself as the mentor and companion of the boy's youth and adolescence. What happened after that, you already know." Sílion pauses and directs his tender gaze upon Eldárien, who on receiving this information finds it difficult to breathe, his heart hammering madly in his chest.

"The man..." he whispers at last. "The man's name was..."

"Æyden," Sílion replies, "though I believe the spelling was changed when he made a new life for himself in Fálstead."

"How was it spelled prior to this?" Eldárien asks.

"Æ-y-d-e-n."

"Then what you said is true. For I was taught to write his name A-é-d-i-n," Eldárien says, overwhelmed by the awareness that the man who throughout his youth had been such a father to him, and whom he had lost in the destruction of their village, had been his father not only in act but in bodily

truth as well. "He...he loved me very well. I miss him dearly, and I always have. Father or no, he was always a father to me, just as the man whom I thought was my father, even if he be not the father of my flesh, remains a father to me still."

"You are correct in thinking so," says Sílion simply. "Despite the unfortunate circumstances that surrounded your earliest years, and whether our decision to conceal you in such a way was right or wrong, you have been granted two fathers, both of whom loved you deeply."

"Yes, and I shall never come to the end of being grateful for that," Eldárien sighs, his pounding heart quieting but his chest continuing to ache with emotion. "I only wish that I could have known the mother of my flesh as I knew also the mother of my heart, the custodian of my youth." He turns to look at Elmáriyë and their eyes interlock for a long moment, many unspoken things passing between them to which they shall seek to give words later, at the appropriate time. Then he turns his gaze back to Sílion and asks, "What happened to her, to my mother? And what about...my sister?"

"Unfortunately, I was unable to find her in time," Seriyéna answers in place of her husband. "She was caught and imprisoned by the powers of darkness, kept in some dark and horrid place, the location of which we still do not know. There we were unable to sense her presence clearly, though we still felt her pain, and her life...and the life that was held within her. Yes, for when Hælia and Æyden were parted from one another, she was with child."

"But that would make Elmáriyë almost the same age as myself, would it not?" Eldárien interjects.

"It would seem that way, surely," Seriyéna replies. "But in fact, the time of gestation for the Velási is different than that for ordinary women. And even for those with half-blood, which in all of history is only the two of you, as such a union has never occurred in our long memory, the time in the womb is the same. Ten years you remained within the body of your mother; ten years Hælia held you and loved you, sheltered you and bore you, until bringing you forth into the world. A beautiful mystery and a wondrous gift this is to us from our Maker. For these years are a time of profound communion between mother and child, in which the child grows in so many things that can be known only by the proximity of hearts, by the sharing of life, even if only after birth do they begin to learn what can only be taught through experience and speech and life itself."

"So I had been alive for ten years, or more than ten, rather," Eldárien says, "before our parents were separated?"

"That is correct," Sílion replies. "So Elmáriyë is twelve years younger than you are, just as you had thought. It is only that each of you is ten years older than you had supposed yourself to be."

"That thought will take some getting used to," Eldárien says with a soft laugh.

"But it also explains so much," Elmáriyë adds, looking at him. "There is in me, as I am sure there is in you, a kind of 'memory before memory,' a well-spring of contact, of presence, and of love that lies at the foundation of my life before I even learned to speak. Here I knew the presence of love, of my mother, and I knew my own self in relation to her. From this intimate space shared by her and I, and from the love that united us, all the rest of my life has never ceased to spring."

"Yes," Eldárien says, at first hesitantly, but then more firmly, "but I think that is in fact the case for all of humanity, for every person ever conceived and born into this world. We were only granted a deeper and more prolonged experience of the same."

"Again you speak with wisdom and clarity," says Seriyéna, a radiant smile on her face. "Such is our deepest memory not only of the love of a mother, or even, by extension, the love of a father—who is surely present and felt as well—but even more of the One whose love is at the heart of every love and whose relation to us is even more fundamental and primal than the relation of parent and child."

After a prolonged moment of silence, Elmáriyë at last asks, "But what of my mother and myself? What happened?"

"She protected you and cared for you in her captivity, enfolding you in love and sheltering you from the darkness and pain that surrounded you both," Seriyéna explains. "But when you were born into this world, she realized that she could protect you no longer, at least not in the way that she had done before. And this spurred anew her efforts to escape from her imprisonment. Suffice it to say that she did so. After fleeing from whatever place held her captive, she joined with a caravan of travelers headed for the city of Ristfánd. Unfortunately, her pursuers, alerted to her escape, were not far behind. They assaulted the caravan and killed all of the travelers. But—wonder of wonders!—sometimes the littlest and most innocent are invisible to the eyes of evil and darkness, and the magic of a mother's love is more incredible than we often realize, and thus the infant Elmáriyë remained concealed within the arms of her deceased mother.

"She was found alive by another passing traveler, and...well, you know the rest of the story, do you not?" Seriyéna says, looking at Elmáriyë. "This kind man and his wife adopted you as their own. When we at last traced the trail to your home in Telónis, we decided to allow things to remain as they were, for we could think of nowhere where you would be safer than where you were then. We also did not wish to interfere with the course that things had taken, for we saw in it plans deeper than our own."

Chapter Nine
Confluence

"I have been bereaved of my parents twice over," Eldárien says when the account has concluded, "and yet I have also found a kin whom I did not know, and a home deeper than memory, untouched by evil or by harm."

"That is indeed true," Seriyéna says, her countenance touched with tender compassion as she beholds the response of these two exiled children to the words of her husband and herself. "And we understand that your hearts must walk a journey in order to understand and accept the truth that has been revealed to you."

"A journey of the heart lies before all five of us and before each one of us uniquely," Cirien says, looking at his companions. His gaze falls intently not only Eldárien and Elmáriyë but also Rórlain and Tilliána, who have been silently present throughout this conversation. "But none of us shall walk alone, for we shall accompany one another through everything. I think in this I can speak for all of us. And we shall most especially walk at the side of these two children of the Velási, come what may."

"We appreciate your presence and companionship," Elmáriyë says quietly. "We cherish it. And all the more precious shall it be as we walk into the unknown, into great mystery, some of it bathed in immeasurable light and radiant beauty, and some of it replete with anguishing darkness and evil."

"May the light sustain us even through the darkness, and may we pass through even the darkest of darknesses unto light deeper still," Tilliána says, and the others turn their gazes to look at her. Until this moment she has been mostly silent, but to their surprise and also their gratitude she appears visibly moved by all that has been recounted to her friends, almost as if it was said unto her.

"I do wish to ask another question," Elmáriyë says, turning back to the Velási after a long moment of silence in which the five companions speak to one another without words. "I wish to ask what the implications are of this truth. You speak of a journey, but it seems to me that, even if it calls for a great deal of...how can I say, adjustment...the words you speak to us offer a destination and not a journey."

"They offer a destination insofar as truth is the home of every restless heart," Sílion replies, "and the Love that has made all things the only true and enduring security and rest. It is also for you, I trust, a destination in the sense that now you know the people of your origin, your kin, as Eldárien has said.

But it means something else besides, to which we have not yet adequately given voice."

"What might that be?"

"I explained that the gift you bear, this gift of compassion beyond the normal confines of human feeling—though it is in reality accessible in some measure to all men who love in truth—comes from the mystery of your birth. The same can be said of the gift of channeling the light of the One which Hiliána has entrusted to you. But let me speak more precisely now: the gift of compassion comes through your mother, but the gift of channeling the light comes through your father."

"Through Æyden?" Eldárien asks, not understanding. "How is that so?"

"Before the destruction of Fálstead, there were three surviving families in whom the blood of the ancient king Séra Galáptes still flowed in some measure," Sílion explains. "One was the Illómiel family, who adopted and cared for you as their own son; the name Illómiel is a distant memory written in language of the light that the king once bore in his days of glory. The other family was named the Maldrenás, all of whom were slain by the brigands who laid waste to the village. The final family was that of Æyden Galteä, the most direct descendant of the ancient line of kings, and the most rightful heir to the throne of the Galapteäni, or to speak more precisely, of the whole of Telmérion."

"Æyden was a descendant of Séra Galáptes?" Eldárien asks. "How do you know this?"

"We have attentively followed the line for many generations," Eléndras says, breaking his long-held silence now that they have returned to matters of which he can again more directly speak. "It has been my special duty and pleasure to do this. And thus it was a great sorrow to me to witness the destruction of this line...save, that is, for yourselves."

"Eléndras speaks truly," Sílion affirms. "But now you also see why the two of you, Eldárien and Elmáriyë, were under the particular attention of our gaze and our care, even though there was very little we could do for you than to trust you to the providence that guides all things. And now we see that, even through much anguish and sorrow, we were not disappointed. For you are not only the sole surviving heirs of the high king of Telmérion but also the sole conjoining of mortal father and Velási mother. It is in the confluence of these two gifts that lies your path and the service that you can offer to the hurting people of our age."

"If our lives were so unique and irreplaceable," Elmáriyë asks, "why did you not take us into your custody and raise us to adulthood here, in the velstadeä?"

"A just question," Sílion says, "though of course every life is unique and

irreplaceable in equal measure, in that boundless value that lies deeper than every gift or task, every role or relation, in the relation of love that gives life, meaning, and security to all of us. But the answer to your question is simple: we were not allowed to do so. It became apparent to us that the risk we were being asked to make was to allow you to grow up, each uniquely, in the midst of the anguish and trials of our age. This, in fact, has been more difficult for us than anything else that we have been asked to do in the many centuries that we have followed the line of rule since it was first sundered. But our gladness is all the greater now, having made that act of faith and of trust, to see the two of you rejoined and sitting now before us, the more mature, indeed the more beautiful and compassionate, for the path that you have walked."

Eldárien nods and closes his eyes for a moment. When he opens them, he says quietly, "I am surprised at the response that comes to me now, a response that I never thought I would give. But I can say truthfully that I am glad that it has been this way. Despite the anguish of my journey and the profound and repeated loss, and even the mistakes and infidelities that I have perpetrated, I would have it no other way. I see now, inscribed into the lines of my own life, the reality which you call providence. I see the hand of Love, and this, despite my enduring frailty and fear, gives me the courage to walk forward into whatever may await us in the future."

Elmáriyë, placing her hand momentarily on her brother's hand, says simply, "I agree with everything that he has said, and I feel likewise."

Sílion laughs heartily to this, a laugh of deep mirth and lightheartedness saturated in gratitude, and he replies, "You truly are marvelous, both of you. I know no better way to say it. You bring such consolation to my heart that has weathered centuries upon centuries of strife and pain in the path of suffering that our people have walked since the beginning of time."

Bowing his head humbly, Eldárien says, "But we still do not know what this means for our path, nor is every question answered."

"Nor do I expect it to be," Sílion replies.

"Why ought the ancient kingship be reestablished?" Eldárien asks. "That is my first question."

Nodding in understanding, Sílion answers, "For the same reasons that the people still ardently await the coming of the one called the Scarred King."

"And why is that?"

"Because they know that only one anointed by the light can bring together in harmony their people torn asunder by sin and strife."

"What do you mean?"

"The grace of kingship encompasses you, Eldárien. This none of us doubt, for we all witness it," Sílion says, while the other companions nod silently in

agreement. "Were you to seek the kingship for yourself, something would be profoundly amiss. The choice could never rightly be your own alone. Rather, for such a ministry you must be chosen, and the people have long awaited such a choice, and hoped for it, even if of such a longing you have been largely unaware."

"The longing was there," Eldárien says quietly, touched by the gazes that are directed toward him, and yet feeling very small, very inadequate, before the contours of what is beginning to emerge before him. "It was small, hardly more than a spark still alive under ashes. Yet we did yearn, as a village and as a people we did yearn, for the return of the kingship and the reunification of our scattered peoples."

"And you will find that west of the mountains the longing is stronger tenfold, even a hundredfold. Of this, through what we Velási have seen, we are certain," Eléndras says. "Indeed, many hold the wish that the man named Wýgrec Stûnclad may prove to be a ruler to unify the people. This is a large portion of the fuel that drives the conflagration that is the civil war—an aspiration that is true, if misdirected both in its choice and in its methods."

"But I do not wish to be king," Eldárien says simply.

"Nay, not for yourself would you wish for this," Sílion replies, a mysterious fire kindled again in his eyes as he looks upon Eldárien. "But you also know that your love for your people would drive you to it, and in this you would find both peace and joy. And when I spoke of the grace of kingship, your heart resonated within you: for you know that you have been called and chosen."

Eldárien opens his mouth to respond but, finding no words, he closes it again. He knows that Sílion speaks the truth.

"There is one final aspect of this that we must mention," Sílion continues. "I have spoken of the blood of the ancient king, and I have spoken of the dual gift that comes from the mingling of this blood with the blood of the Velási through Hælia, your mother. This part of your heritage, too, is of great importance. But in order to understand this, it is necessary to recall the gift of the Velási: our task is that of remembrance and that of expectation. So too, you are to be the people's living memory, when all are tempted to forget. For we know that the days of the Velási, though long-lived far beyond the span of mortal man, are limited, and they shall draw to a close. We live as enduring memory and as vigilant expectation: as memory of the revelation of love that has given rise to our belief and our conviction, our life and our worship, and as expectation for the future revelation that shall bring all partial knowledge and imperfect relationship to fulfillment, even as it carries history forward through its final stage to its definitive consummation. But in the intervening time, when we have passed away and the final consummation has not come,

many shall forget, and they shall be glad to forget. But then their children and their children's children, no longer knowing the revelation of our origin and our foundation, shall fancy for themselves what they shall believe, reaching out blindly for the One whom they once knew but have forgotten, and yet whose face every man cannot cease to seek with his whole being.

"Indeed it shall be a temptation for humanity throughout history: for a man to believe what he wishes to be so rather than what has been revealed unto him. Many men shall still turn away, choosing to worship the objects of their own making, or even their own liberty and self-made freedom, rather than the Author of all things and the gift that comes from him alone. They may even worship the powers of darkness, falling to their seductions in the lust and blindness of their hearts. And yet before all of this, can you not cast your gaze upon your people, upon the aching land of Telmérion, and wish that the light of the All-Giver would shine full and undimmed upon them, bring the light of truth and the gladness of love?" He fixes his gaze anew upon Eldárien and Elmáriyë, and his eyes are alight. "Such is the gift entrusted to you both in atonement and in kingship, in confronting the powers of darkness and in the luminous custodianship of love. For you, in whose veins flows the blood both of Velási and of mortal kind, shall be the living memory of the children of Eldáru. Be then the living continuation of our hope and our expectation. Give enduring voice to our longing, our remembrance, and our future."

"But even be I the sole heir of Séra Galáptes and a child of the Velási," Eldárien protests, "how shall men accept me as their king?"

"The unity that Eldáru wills is universal," Sílion replies, "but your part in that is smaller and but for a time, an intervening step in a long journey. Yet that part shall be important enough in its own right, and indeed it is irreplaceable. All I can say to you is this: do not doubt the longing in the hearts of your fellows nor their memory of the times that have been lost. Many still remember the Scarred King and look forward to him as a future hope, even as they recall him as a past hero. I say it firmly: let the blood be revealed and the rightful ruler be crowned."

"What then are we to do?" Elmáriyë asks. "What path are we to walk?"

"What path indeed?" Sílion sighs. "It is not an easy path, nor does it have safety in human measure. What I see now is that your company is to travel to the city of Onylándun. There you shall find the next steps that you are to take." An inscrutable expression passes over his face and he adds, "There is one more thing to say. You have received the authority to exorcise the powers of darkness, and the light given to you has saved you and your companions in the face of certain death. And yet this light was not given to you for war but for redemption."

"This much my heart tells me," Eldárien replies. "And yet what precisely do you mean? What is this redemption of which you speak?"

"I mean that the light does not operate by using power against power, might against might. Or rather, it does not *save* in this way. It may repel the darkness by its purging might, but its truest and deepest work goes far deeper."

"You speak of what we call bearing?" Elmáriyë asks. "That is the most intimate work of the light, healing the inmost recesses deeper than any touch."

"Yes. Liberation from the assaults of darkness alone does not make a man, or a people, free," Sílion explains. "For example, say that your friend has been taken captive by bandits, and, after many months of anguish and torture, you finally manage to rescue her. You slay the bandits and destroy their camp so that they can be a threat to no one any longer. Is your friend therefore free?"

"My immediate response would be 'yes'," Eldárien says, "but...no. Not only are there other bandits elsewhere who can threaten the world, but the heart of my friend, through the anguish that they have endured, has changed."

"That is correct."

"In both of these matters, resistance alone is not enough," Eldárien says, giving voice to his inner thoughts in speech. "There must also be a cure that goes to the root. It must heal that ill which stirs men to banditry, but it must also heal the wounds that have been inflicted by their evil in human heart and life."

"That is exactly right. Most important is that you speak of a 'cure.' Reflect upon this, and your heart will come to understand, as much as it is able: what is needed is not merely to push back against the darkness, to overcome it, but to find a cure for it, to heal it."

"My heart already knows and tells me so, though the contours of this awareness are obscure," Eldárien says, turning to look at Elmáriyë and then adding, "We both feel it."

"That is true," she says. "It is an awareness that has accompanied us mysteriously through every day of our lives and has only grown with the passing of the years. It is the conviction that though darkness can be resisted with power, with might, it can only be healed by suffering love that through such suffering brings atonement."

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Eldárien and Elmáriyë walk together under the canopy of trees in the fading evening light, the words of the previous conversation filling their minds —or rather, the events unveiled by those words, events that lie at the origin of their own existence and also bind them together as brother and sister. They think of their parents and of the love that united them, and they sense, even

at a distance of so many years and with no memory of their faces or their form, the depth and sacredness of what lived within each, and even more so the sacredness of the love that knitted their hearts and lives together, and that bore fruit in their children.

"Our lives were born from profound love," Elmáriyë says, "but also from deep suffering and immense loss."

"That is something I have known for a long time, though not in this way," Eldárien replies. "Suffering and loss have been the cradle of my life since the day I left the ruins of Fálstead behind. But what I did not expect was also to find such light and such beauty, in the womb from which I was born and the begetting from which I was conceived. But knowing this, I grieve the more; I grieve at the loss of our parents. I grieve that I remember not my mother and was never able to say unto my father, 'Ta,' the true address that I felt in my heart."

"They gave everything, and indeed sacrificed everything, that we might live," Elmáriyë whispers. "And now we are asked to do similarly, that our people might have life in the face of death." She inclines her head and looks tenderly at her brother. "I keep turning over in my mind and heart what our mother must have suffered in that terrible imprisonment that she endured, and to what lengths she went to protect me and eventually to deliver me from that place that I might have a chance at life."

"It lingers in my heart too," says Eldárien, and he takes Elmáriyë's hand in his own as they walk together through the trees. "I think of those ten years at the beginning, held in her womb, and of what she communicated to us during that time. And yet I was borne within her during the time of joy, when she and our father lived together in peace and serenity, and you were borne within her during the time of pain, when she was alone in the crucible of anguish and loss and captivity."

"But your joy turned to anguish," Elmáriyë replies. "You lost all that you loved and endured a pain perhaps not unlike hers, whereas I was taken from that place of pain and welcomed into a life of peace and joy, into a family that lives unto this day. So I think that our paths have been not unlike, in joy and pain both, and most especially in the same love to which we owe everything that we are."

"Elmáriyë," begins Eldárien, turning to face her and looking into her eyes, "the way that Sílion spoke of love...it is unlike anything I have ever known and yet, in a way, it is something that I have always known. The love of which he speaks is not a mere trait of being, or even an act or disposition of human hearts toward one another. No, the love of which he speaks is real and alive, active and intelligent, present and personal. It is present in all things and yet surpasses them all, their origin and the goal toward which they tend."

"You feel that you have always known him?" Elmáriyë asks. "I have."

"I think that we all know him, even if we are not yet consciously aware of it or do not acknowledge it to ourselves, for he is our deepest memory underlying every other memory. The awareness of him cradles every awareness, like the air or the light in which all is seen, like the atmosphere in which alone anything else is visible, and beautiful, and good."

"The Imageless who is revealed in a thousand images and yet surpasses them all, who transcends every hope and imagining and yet is more intimately close, as the fulfillment of every slightest wish or desire, than we could ever have expected him to be," says Elmáriyë. "Yes, he fulfills every sigh and every prayer, their true object, and gives rest even as he enkindles in the heart the longing for the great journey that has started from him and in him alone finds its destination and its consummation." Then she takes a step toward Eldárien and lays her head against his breast, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Let us speak no more for now," she says quietly. "I want to allow the silence to enfold us: the silence of this place, the silence of this world, which is filled with echoes of the original music vibrating through us still, as it flows on unhindered through every discord and strife toward the harmony that awaits us all."

Eldárien responds simply by drawing her fully into his embrace and holding her close.

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The days pass almost timelessly while the company remains in the velstadeä, each moment lingering as if a minute is an hour and an hour a day, and yet with no fatigue, surfeit, or impatience. A sunrise which in the surrounding world would burst forth with beauty and color for a few moments, enrapturing the heart and yet quickly passing on into other hues with the ascent of the sun into the sky, here in the velstadeä abides for a time that seems almost to endure as long as the contemplating heart itself remains present to it. And the capacity for such contemplation itself is prolonged; an attention which is usually distracted or wearied here feels carried by some mysterious presence and continues to breathe forth, continues to spread abroad its fragrance throughout the heart, far beyond its ordinary limits and beyond the frailty that marks it in this broken world. So it is with the unique beauty of each moment of the day, be it morning, midday, afternoon, or evening, or even the depths of night.

During this time, the companions notice that the fatigue and sorrow that they have borne from their travels and their loss are eased, and they find in its stead rest of both spirit and heart. Each person is also often drawn, by a longing beyond their understanding, to a grove that lies in the midst of the village, circled about with trees more ancient than they have ever seen and

untouched by any of the artifice of man, be it however beautiful. In the center of this grove lies the eldest tree of all, and embedded in its trunk the crystal that, though now bereft of its original light, nonetheless serves as both memory and hope and as the sign of the vigil that the Velási keep unto this very day.

Sílion makes a point of speaking also, one to one, with each of Eldárien's and Elmáriyë's companions. For though the confluence of blood and destiny of which they have spoken may not be theirs in the most specific sense, nonetheless they share in the same journey and in the same goal, and in the kinship, struggle, and sacrifice that this entails. Sitting on a bench at the edge of the village, the autumnal air warm and the woods glowing with their perennial light, Rórlain and Sílion speak together, and the questions that the former carries within himself are able at last to find full voice. Among the many things of which they speak, Rórlain questions Sílion about the reality that he came to understand in the darkness of the black castle—which he learns has been called for ages the Carotách, and its bowels the *aïnónnun*—and Sílion does not seem at all surprised by his question.

"The squire of the knight," Rórlain says, "that is what was said and given unto me. The words are mysterious and yet full of meaning."

"As they ought to be," Sílion replies. "They express a profound and beautiful reality, one which I suspect your heart already knows more deeply and intimately than your mind alone."

"That is true. Long have I felt that my life was meant to be caught up in some greater cause and placed at the service of a mystery that is not my own, and yet in which I participate."

"That is the case for all of us, my friend. No man, no woman, was fashioned in order to serve himself alone, to seek only his own interests and affairs, wishes and desires. He truly comes home to himself, therefore, when he goes out of himself to another. But that is not just *any* other, mind you, but the Other in whom his own self adheres and from whom it is ceaselessly born in an act of ineffable kindness and tender generosity. How, in fact, could you extend yourself outward in love in such a way unless the Origin of your being has first extended himself outward to give life and being to the universe and to you within it? All that you are and all that you do is but a response to this prior gift, to this prescient act of love. Or rather, what you *are* is the love he has for you: you are seikáni, beloved and cherished. This is your being, your life, your identity...as it is uniquely and unrepeatably for each one of us. For like the light of day, the love of Eldáru shines upon all equally and yet upon each as if for him alone. But unlike the sun, it never dims or sets, and it penetrates into the heart of even the darkest nights."

"I slowly begin to understand that of which you speak," Rórlain says in

hardly more than a whisper, "but there is much in me—much indeed—that resists it. For so long, and in so many ways, I have sought to give meaning to my life by my own efforts, by this or that thing to which my heart has clung. And ever since I was released into the very heart of the light like an arrow from a bow, I struggle to keep up with myself. And the only way to proceed, the only way not to get bogged down by questions, fears, or the desire to control, is to simply surrender myself, and to live henceforth with open and empty hands that, while receiving everything, cling to nothing."

"Your speaking thus shows that you have begun to learn the first lesson of being a child," Sílion affirms with a smile, "a child of the All-Father who cares for every moment, however small, in the lives of his children. And this consoles me greatly. For if you saw the light that has touched you only as a task or a burden you must carry, however fitting and however desired, you would be doomed to fail. For the first lesson of life is the realization that every act of giving springs from a prior receiving, and every movement of love is but a response to love received."

Rórlain nods in silence to this and then says, "And the receiving itself is the greatest gift, and sustains every other gift. Is this the origin of the wonder, the play, and the light-heartedness that so deeply and mysteriously pervades this village and the men and women who live herein?"

"Yes, it is the knowledge that one is loved and held, seen and cared for, and that one's life, one's every thought, desire, and act, springs forth from and within this all-enfolding love at every moment, and shall return to it again at the end. And so it is for the whole universe," Sílion replies, his smile spreading across his entire face and causing it almost to glow with warm light. "That is it in short, though an eternity of life shall not be enough to catch up with the depth and breadth of its beauty."

Both men lapse for a while into silence, and the stillness of their tongues lends to the singing of birds in the woods around them, and the soft harmonies of the wind blowing in the boughs of the trees, and the chorus of their own breathing mingling with the breath of the air all around them. At last Sílion speaks, "I am a song sung forth in love by the great Lover, and my whole life is a song sung back to him, or rather, sung by him in me. Thus to turn my whole being toward him, to gaze with the eyes of the heart upon his face, is to find myself in truth. It is to be what I have always been, and to find fulfillment in unsealing the song within me, that it may echo forth and join with the song that is his beyond all other songs, and yet within them, and which shall be the song of eternity in which every song lives, and is fulfilled, in the one great Music."

Rórlain nods and then replies, "And yet the song we sing now passes through pain and strife, anguish and loss, war and death. I wish it were not

so."

"As do we all," agrees Sílion. "The discord of Igrándsil, and of all the infidelity that has followed upon that first act of rebellion, mars the beauty of the music unto this very day. And yet here in our sanctuary, and indeed in the stillness of our hearts, we come to understand something that the Anaíon have always known. However seriously and gravely they understand evil and mourn for it, they know that the very discordant noises sown into the fabric of the universe, even these, are being incorporated into the one Song. They are already being made into something new, not as a mar upon its beauty, but as a proof of the Song's glory and its victory, a theme that yet enhances the melody that carries it unto endless consummation without the least shadow of darkness or discord." Then Sílion turns to look deeply into Rórlain's eyes, and, with genuine sorrow upon his face, he says, "But sometimes a glimpse must be enough, and then enduring trust. In the darkness, at times the cacophony of voices, being so loud, so raucous, seems to be all that there is. And we must endure what may come with trust in the greater light, the wider harmony, which sustains the heart even when it falters."

"I do fear," Rórlain says. "I fear faltering in the face of what awaits us. And I...I fear the suffering and the death of those whom I have come to love, and for whom my heart bears great affection. I care for them, for each one of them, and I wish not to lose them nor to witness their destruction."

"And grief and fear indeed await you on your journey," Sílion answers, "no matter how much I wish I could spare you of it. I cannot offer you any assurances of the future, for I myself do not know all that it shall hold. In this as in all other respects, I am as poor as you—as empty of hand and of heart, only to receive and to give without clinging. But I know that, whatever the future may hold, he shall be there. Never shall we be bereft of the presence of the One who made us, who holds us unceasingly in his love, and who shall carry us forward unto the destination that awaits us."

"And in that I must find my security," says Rórlain. "I understand. It is not in assurances of the future, or even of the present, that I may find security, but in that which, while beyond time, holds all of time. Yes, I glimpsed that, felt that, in Hiliána's touch in the darkness. And ever since then my heart has not been the same. It is impossible for me to forget that touch and that presence. I shall ever yearn to be in contact with it again. I only hope that this longing, and the impress of that touch, however intangible, shall carry me through everything that awaits."

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Only a week passes before they are summoned again to the council chambers, though it feels much longer in the timelessness that holds them. Here they are greeted by the full council of the elementári, the elders of the Velási,

who sit in the semi-circle of chairs as in audience. The five companions stand before them, and the room is filled with an aura both heavy and light. Sílion speaks and says unto them, "You leave upon the morrow. Therefore, before our parting gifts and our final farewell, I wish to ask: do any questions remain on your hearts to which you now wish to give voice, in the presence of the council, before you depart?"

Elmáriyë replies, "There is indeed one question which preoccupies me."

"What is it, child?"

"You have said to us that the time of the Velási is limited, that you shall not always be here as the memory and the hope of the people. And yet in the Arechaíon that you gave us to read, it says that lasting life was promised to you, to 'live for ages in expectation of the Giver's visitation, the fulfillment of his promise—and only at this time to find your life come to peaceful and joyous conclusion.' How are we to reconcile these two statements? Does that mean that such a visitation is near?"

"I understand your confusion. There are many visitations, some more evident and some more concealed, but the visitation of which you speak is many centuries hence. We know not the time, but we know that much still humanity needs to be taught, and much must happen, until the soil is prepared for the seed, and until the heart of man is prepared to accept."

"Then shall you not remain here until that time?"

"We know not the fullness of the One's future intentions concerning us, but we are confident in his promise. He has promised his presence with us, and our endurance in vigil until the definitive revelation, but little more than that can we cling to for security, nor is it necessary to do so. What awaits us in the centuries between then and now, we know not. But whatever it may be, we trust that it is held always by the One who has promised to keep guard over us in the shelter of his presence."

"You stand within a great mystery," Elmáriyë remarks simply.

"That is true for all of us," says Sílion. And then he asks again, "Are there any other questions?"

A long moment of silence follows and Sílion is about to speak again when Tilliána says, "We have found here both questions and answers in abundance, like the start of a great journey—the greatest journey of all. But it feels unfitting to give voice to these questions now, as the path they mark out is not one that grasps for immediate clarity but rather opens yet more deeply into mystery, into trust, and only thus into knowledge both intimate and true."

"Does Tilliána speak for all?" Sílion asks, looking kindly upon the travelers. They all nod or gesture in agreement, and so he says, "Very well then. I am consoled, for she speaks with wisdom and understanding. We shall therefore proceed." With this he turns to another of the elementári, a man

whom they have not yet met.

This man steps forward and addresses the five companions, "You have already spoken of your next destination. This Sílion has explained to us. You go to Onylándun, and there you shall find war and bloodshed. There, too, you shall have conflict with the beasts fashioned by evil craft from the bowels of the earth. And so we offer you, we seven elementári, the blessing that we bear from ancient days, that it may go with you and give you strength."

And the Velási who sit before them then stand and, raising their hands in blessing, sing a song in rich harmonies that fills the room—indeed as it were fills the entire village—with its music. It permeates not only the ears but the whole body, saturating it with its melodies and its chords, as voices rise and fall and interweave, playfully dancing about one another and melding together into unity which does not quell uniqueness but rather unseals, deepens, and affirms it. And the blessing does strengthen the hearts of the companions, anointing them as an oil that brings vigor and life, taking up abode within them, whatever it may be; perhaps it is the music itself.

When the song has concluded, Sílion steps forward and says, "I knew the man Séra Galáptes. As did many of us who dwell here. He was the last mortal man to set foot within the veiled space of the Velási and to be acquainted with us directly. He was a just king, and merciful, and he held many peoples in peace and harmony for numerous years. Our hopes and prayers now rest with you, in the desire and expectation that you shall become as he was, perhaps more, and shall bring about a similar harmony. For the land of Telmérion, indeed all the ends of the earth, are crying out for such unity and such peace. Do your small part, for that is all that is asked of you. As others have come before, so others shall follow after. And in all things, we wish you to live in the place deeper than all, in the depths of the sanctuary of the heart, enduring and unchanging, where kings neither come nor go, nor does strife and division mar, but the one King rules over us all, and from this place to find the strength, the wisdom, and the lightness of heart to walk the path before you, and to become forgers of peace and harmony."

At this Seriyéna joins him and stands at his side. And they give unto the five companions gifts fitting uniquely to each. To Rórlain they impart a great shield etched with the seal of the Galapteäni of old, which was also in its day the ensign of the unified peoples of Telmérion; large but light, it is plated with the same metal, myéllion, of which the lightbringer was forged, with a strap by which it may be slung onto one's back for easy carrying during travel. "This shall deflect any blow or stop any arrow," Sílion says as he places the shield in Rórlain's hands. "You are the squire of the knight, and may you also be his shield. May you indeed be the shield of all the defenseless and the protector of the weak. For though a squire you be, you are also this day knighted,

a warrior of the light."

Unto Cirien they give a thick book, bound in faded leather and tied with a clasp. With a knowing smile, Seriyéna says, "To assuage and yet to deepen the wonder and curiosity that you bear within. Much that you have long sought you shall learn in these pages, and the history of your people and of our own you shall discover from those whose memory is not marred by forgetfulness." Cirien, upon receiving the book, bows deeply in thanks, and the two gift givers pass on to the next in line.

To Tilliána they give a leather-bound diary with thin and delicate pages, accompanied by a quill and a bottle of ink protected within an ornate wooden box. "That you may cherish and remember," Seriyéna says with gentleness, "both the past and the present, and indeed the future as well, a future which you had nearly lost but, through love, have found anew."

"Eldárien, Eldárien," Sílion says, standing before him. "You carry a great weight, but it is my hope that you may you carry it lightly. For that is how Eldáru holds the world, and we can do no other than share in his love, his life, and his creativity. Like a young child's nursery games, so is the world to its Maker. And yet he also loves and cares for us with a deeper seriousness and gravity, with an immense tenderness and compassion, that is yet freer, happier, and more playful than we yet know. That is my prayer for you, and my heart's desire: that you may know the lightness of the One even as you share in his compassion and in his care, and in the suffering that channels healing light into the darkest of places." He then draws forth from his robes a bundle of brown cloth neatly folded. "This tunic is both light and warm, and shall not burden you in the heat while still providing surprising warmth during the chill. It is one of the unique artifacts of our creation, unknown outside the confines of the velstadeä. I hope that you find it of great use."

To Elmáriyë, last of all, Sílion speaks. "And what can I give to the daughter of the Velási, who already wears her mother's ring?" And at her expression of surprise, he smiles and laughs softly. "Oh yes, though we did not speak of it, I saw it upon your finger. You knew and did not think to ask: it was hers. I hope you take solace in its band around your finger, and in her blood flowing through your veins."

"I do," replies Elmáriyë, "but I also wanted to ask: what is the tower that is upon the design?"

"Metalworks are rare among us," answers Sílion, "for we wish not to depart from the garden sanctuary that is ours. If necessary, not far from here is a small quarry, still hidden by the forest, and at times some of us have gone there, drawn by the longing to witness and to fashion beauty also in stone and in precious metal—though for us even a pebble along the path is equally precious in its own way. The ring that you wear was fashioned by one

such...by Hælia's father, in fact, though that was many years ago. With the full womanhood of his daughter, when she thought of departing from our land, he bestowed this ring upon her as a gift, a sign of his paternal love and of his intimate trust in her heart and in the song that it sought to sing. So before answering your question, then, I say this: wear the ring likewise, in remembrance of the love with which it was both wrought and given."

Elmáriyë smiles to this and nods in agreement, though she is too moved for words.

Sílion continues, "Now for the answer: the tower etched upon the ring is the ancient citadel of the king, Séra Galáptes, high in the Teldren Mountains, long abandoned and even forgotten by men, but remembered still by us in all its glory. It is fitting, thus, that you wear its design upon your hand, for one day you may stand again among its halls, restored to former beauty."

Then Sílion takes a step back and, looking at both Elmáriyë and Eldárien with a playful glimmer in his eyes, he says, "The final thing I wish to give I cannot give to one of you alone, but I must give it to both of the siblings, brother and sister alike. I would like you to meet Meldáris and Martínia, the parents of your mother. I believe you call them grandparents. They shall give each of you a parting token, and then we shall grant you time to speak together to your hearts' content."

Chapter Ten
Onylándun

Elmáriyë and Eldárien speak with the parents of their mother until late in the night, sharing with them much about their own lives, though their grandparents seem to know a great deal of it already. They also receive tales of their mother in her youth, and their hearts are stirred with wonder and gratitude to see the visage of their progenitor, of the womb of love from which they sprung, arise before the eyes of their minds. It feels indeed as though Hælia comes alive within them, taking up her place of abode within the inner recesses of their being and there becoming a source of consolation, counsel, and strength. This is the greatest gift that they receive from Meldáris and Martínia, though they are also given tokens whose significance lies not in being useful as much as in being meaningful.

To Eldárien is given a tabard with a matching cloak of cloth and fur, the dye used on the cloth of each a dark red like that of the last light of day descending into night or the first light of day breaking night's darkness. On the tabard's front, upon his breast, is woven in silver strands the same design that

the ancient king wore engraved in his own armor. And this Eldárien dons with humble trepidation and with gratitude. To Elmáriyë is given a lantern of crystal glass encased in intricate bands of dark ebony metalwork, delicate in appearance and yet not in any way fragile—hard, rather, as diamond—and no more than the size of her hand. "We think that it shall serve to channel the light that you bear in a similar way as does the sword of Eldárien, though to illumine and not to smite," Meldáris says as Elmáriyë holds it in her hands and looks upon it. "The Creator has made us bodily for a reason, and sometimes a simple object can summon forth in the heart things deeply buried, so that even when all seems to be darkness a glimmer of light may yet be found. May it prove both an aid to you in clinging to this light always and also a remembrance of the love from which you have sprung."

As parting words, Martínia says, "It is a joy and a delight to behold the features of our daughter alive in the faces of her children—even more so because, unlike the great majority of the Velási, she has already passed beyond the barrier of death, and we shall not behold her until we meet again in the mystery that lies beyond the grave, hidden in the promise and the intent of Eldáru."

"And we find great joy in meeting the parents of our mother, to whom our very life is indebted," replies Eldárien. "In your faces we are perhaps allowed to see something of our mother, whom neither of us can recall with waking eyes."

"I believe that you do see her," Meldáris says, "for she looked much as we do. In fact, among the Velási both the resemblance to one's progenitors and the uniqueness of one's own beauty, the irreplaceable nature of one's features, is heightened. We look, in other words, both more alike to one another and yet also more distinct in our beauty."

"Then we shall take what we see of her," says Elmáriyë, "and bear it always in the thought and affection of the heart."

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In the morning, shortly after dawn's first light, they take leave of the Velási and depart again into the woods to the east. Their hearts are immeasurably lightened by their time among the Velási, bathed in the radiance that seems still to linger in abundant measure even though the Illûstra has during this age of the world lost the full radiance of its light. And as they walk further and further from the abode of the Velási, their hearts grieve at the departure, even as the mystery and the love and the knowledge given unto them continue to hold them and to carry them.

It feels almost too soon when they come again to the edge of the forest and enter the caverns of passage that shall lead them to the other edge of the Stïeka Mára. Each one of them feels a profound desire to remain, to abide always in

the embrace of the light and in the veiled playfulness that throbs at the very heart of all life and love. But they know that they must fight and suffer to protect precisely this reality, even as it remains their goal, their true destination, and their final home. In fact, how else can they fight, how else can they stand strong against the barrage of powers of darkness inconceivably deep and wide, which threaten to engulf their entire civilization, except to stand in the lightness born of trust and in the play of being held? Perhaps this, in fact, is the true test that lies before them, or the foundation on which all else is laid, as a house is built upon rock and a civilization built upon truth, beauty, and goodness. But for the heart that has been wholly ravished by the light, wholly taken by the radiance of being, such lightness is not a goal that is consciously sought or an object impartially scrutinized, but a reality lived in the meekness that is hardly aware of itself, born of primal wonder at all things as on the first dawn of creation.

The unspoken awareness resides among them all that Elmáriyë, uniquely touched as she is, already abides deeply in this place; and her companions find solace and encouragement in her presence, as quiet and unassuming as it is. But toward Eldárien, too, there is kindled a fire in the heart of each, a fire from what had been a spark before, as if placed there long ago and awaiting only the right breeze to ignite it. King. The word remains with each of them, and they cannot dismiss it, as impossible as it seems of realization. What the people of Telmérion need more than anything else is precisely a lighthearted king—in both senses of the term—a king whose heart is bathed wholly in the light and who, from this light, lives in the lightness that sets the spirit free to see, discern, and live in every moment and circumstance according to the wisdom beyond the world and yet concealed and active deep within it.

With these thoughts and many others they pass through the caverns and trace their way around the mountains to the south and west, more or less retracing the path that they had taken to this place. A light flurry of snow meets them as they turn their faces full west at the southern end of the Teldren Mountains, and they pull their cloaks tight around them to shield as best they can from the bitter air. Two weeks in full does it take them before the city emerges into sight, nestled as it is at the foot of the southernmost Teldren Mountains as they yield to the wide plains that descend gradually toward the sea many leagues to the south.

The city of Onylándun appears before them encircled in age-old stone, weathered and worn and stained by time, though the roofs of many houses, some wooden and some thatched, appear younger, as the inner precincts of the city climb upward to the crown of a hill at the base of the mountains, where a great citadel is built, its bastions and battlements dark in the fading evening light. As they pass near to the gates of the city, they find them barred:

wooden doors closed and reinforced, and the portcullis lowered, its iron bars glistening softly in the light of large lamps that burn nearby. They have hardly a moment to stop and think before a voice addresses them from upon the wall. "Where be you travelers from, and what be your business coming to our city at the brink of night?"

Eldárien raises his eyes, though in the darkness he cannot see his interlocutor, and replies, "We come from the city of Ristfánd, survivors of the battle that was waged there a few months past."

"Many have come from those parts in the last season," replies the man, "and the city is swarming with them. But as with the rest, you will find it little shelter and even less comfort."

"Why is that?" asks Rórlain.

"Oh, you shall see. Though I am surprised that word has not spread far enough yet for you to have heard of what goes on in these parts."

"What do you...? Never mind, I suppose we shall learn soon enough," Eldárien sighs. "But perhaps we can be of assistance. We come not seeking shelter but seeking rather to offer our aid."

"And what aid could you give to us?"

"We have among us two warriors who have weathered battle and wish to protect the innocent and defenseless, and there are also in our retinue two clerics of the temple of Nirániel. Surely they may be of assistance wherever they be, and in all circumstances."

"Aye, that be likely, and such are needed here. More the second than the first. A blade is worth little in Onylándun these days, but healing and prayer may yet do some good."

"So we may enter?"

"We have command to shut the gates at dark and to allow none entrance."

"It is not yet full dark, correct?" Rórlain asks by way of persuasion.

"That is true, I suppose, but near enough to it. And the gates are closed already," the man responds, as if his answer is definitive.

But at that moment another voice sounds from atop the wall and says, addressing the first, "Come, Féndra, let them in already. Orders are orders, sure, but when we're standing right at the edge of night, the judgment is ours. I cannot bear to force these good people to remain outside the city walls for another night."

"Fine, fine, Rícktë," says the first. "Raise the gates and let them in." And then, addressing the travelers again, he says, "You had best find a place to stay the night quick as you can. No good will you find elsewise until the morning comes."

And then Rícktë adds, his voice more distant now as if he has withdrawn a ways in order to raise the gate, "I recommend that you seek lodging at the

Whistling Willow. It is not far down the main thoroughfare and should be easy enough to find in the darkness. Just look for the colored lights. You cannot miss the music and the voices, either. Cheapest place you can hope to find, with plenty of rooms."

"Aye, that's your best option," Féndra agrees, "though I hope the clerics among you find it accommodating enough. Not much of a friend of silence, that place."

"It shall be well enough for one night," Cirien remarks kindly.

And with this the gate is raised and they pass into the city. Immediately it is closed again behind them, creaking loudly on its bars, and the vast wildness of the night is shut out. Nonetheless, as they step deeper into the city, chuckling at the humorous manner of the two gatekeepers and relieved to be sheltered again in a human settlement, they are surprised by the sense of heaviness, of dread, and of fear that envelops them. It is tangible in the streets of the city, as if a sludge oozing from the cracks in the doors and windows of the houses, or a bad odor lingering from those who had walked about on its cobbled streets during the daytime hours. There is also another odor which surprises them—this time bodily in nature—and it takes them a few moments to identify it: sulfur. The smell of burning lingers about the streets as if the very stones have been singed by fire or the roofs lit like torches only just as quickly to be doused and extinguished. But now that night has fully fallen upon the city, it is impossible for them to make any fruitful efforts to unravel these riddles, and they proceed quickly down what is obviously the main thoroughfare that runs along the center of Onylándun, rising steadily with the slope of the land.

Their destination is indeed unmistakable, as the sound and the color greet them simultaneously at the very moment their faces peer over the crest of a steep rise in the cobbled road. Light dances in a multitude of colors from paned windows of tinted glass, playing upon the tall half-timber houses nearby and across the street. And accompanying the color, as if its inseparable companion—a duo of mirth seeking in some way, however weakly, to dispel the heaviness that lays over the rest of the city—is the sound of music, conversation, and laughter. As they come within a few feet of the entrance to the building, a heavy wooden sign hanging over the doorway gives final confirmation that this is their destination: etched upon the wood is a flute with musical notes proceeding from it, and over it the gaudy letters: *The Whistling Willow*.

As they pass through the doors and into the taberna, they are greeted by a dense cloud of pungent smoke and the strong smell of hearty food and bodily odor intermingled with it, and the tune of a whistle and a lute that rises and falls above the dull hum of many conversations. Stepping fully into the

building, they find themselves in a room lined with tables full of persons engaged in conversation, debate, or games of chance or skill. Few eyes look up as they enter. They are, however, greeted by a barmaid who, with a toothy smile and a broad wave of her hand, says, "Welcome, ye travelers, to the tastiest taberna this side of the Téldrens. Would you like to find ye a table and have some food and drink? And what about a room for the night? Despite all the goings-on, we still have some vacancies. I'd be happy to help you in whatever way ye find works for your wishes, though I got other customers to attend to as well, you know. But feel free to call at any time, and I'll come as fast as me legs can carry me. You can always talk to Bérthold the Barkeep, too, if yer wanting a faster response, or one of a different sort, though he's busy dispensing drinks and preparing the food for the feasting, if you know what I mean. Anyways, what can I get ye?"

These words pour out of the woman's mouth in such a steady stream that it is difficult to discern where one thought ends and the next begins. After the woman's profusion, the terse and yet kind response of Eldárien sounds almost discourteous. "Thank you for your welcome. We shall be having just a meal and a room, if it pleases you. And may I ask your name?"

"Aye, I can do that for ye, though I'm surprised ye ask for me name, as most folks round here know it already, and known it for years." She cocks her head to one side and looks at the travelers with a curious expression in her eyes, and for a moment her words are replaced by silence. But then she continues, "But in fact there are many wanderers from the wild wallowing through here on their way to the west. Or they just set up camp right here in our town, though the winged reptiles and the rumors of war are more than enough to set them on their feet once again as soon as they begin to get settled, if you know what I mean."

"We actually do not," Rórlain begins, interrupting her. "To what are you referring in the latter?"

"Oh, ye don't know? Well, I'll want ye to know that I'm not the best person to ask: just a humble barmaid, I am. Bétta Bjórin is me name. But I really need to tell you: you are welcome here. Make yourselves at home. But I do need to be on me way to attend to the other customers. Have a good night!"

And with this she is off, making her rounds throughout the room, words still streaming from her mouth this way and that as she responds to requests all around or engages in converse with the patrons of the taberna.

The companions walk further into the taberna and approach the bar, where the barkeeper greets them with a great deal more tact and measure, his face beaded with sweat over his grisly beard and his eyes glistening both with exhaustion and with keen perception.

"My apologies for the barrage that Bétta brings. It is usually overwhelming

for new customers," he says. "You are travelers from far away, am I correct?"

"You are correct," replies Eldárien. "We are looking for a simple meal and a room for the night, private if one is available. And if we could take our meal in our room, that would be appreciated. The road has wearied us. Otherwise, we are not averse to eating in the common room."

"A private room is indeed available, and a meal in said room shall be no problem at all," Bérthold says. "Be glad, though, that we have some space for you, particularly of that sort. We are almost full up. And that is an unusual thing, since we own rooms along nearly the entire block from Brûchost to Teldvále."

"We are glad indeed," Cirien remarks.

And without further ado they are shown to their room, far down a hallway to the right, and the door is shut behind them. The conversations and music from the taberna are now almost inaudible, no more than a distant murmur, and the silence that envelops them instead is almost tangible. While they wait for their food to arrive, they speak quietly to one another about what they have both felt and heard since entering the city of Onylándun.

"Winged reptile," Tilliána says with a sigh. "That probably explains the smell. Do you think it is truly attacking the city?"

"It seems the most reasonable explanation," replies Cirien, "though if it assails them in earnest, then I am surprised that they have withstood it for this long."

"Perhaps there was only a single attack or they have begun only very recently," suggests Elmáriyë.

"It is possible." Cirien rubs his wrinkled forehead with the pads of his fingers, as if trying to ease out some clarity of thought from his tired mind. "Only daylight shall tell, and probably converse with the people of the city."

"I think we should speak with those in the governance of Onylándun, if that is possible," Eldárien says. "The clan leader has his seat here, does he not?"

"That is right," replies Rórlain. "And I imagine he already knows well what happened to his fellow in the seat of Rhóvas. The news of events in Ristfánd has surely traveled here and much farther to the west by now. It should not be difficult for us to learn much with the coming of day."

"But there are other things I suspect it shall not be so easy to learn," says Elmáriyë. "For I sense much under the surface of this city that will not be immediately apparent to the eyes, nor freely spoken."

"I think we all feel it, at least to some degree," says Tilliána with a nod of her head. "There is fear and dread dripping even from the walls, and filling the air."

"That is true, but it is something more than just fear and dread that I feel

here," says Elmáriyë. "It is also malice."

"I feel it too, like a fume that makes it difficult to breathe," replies Eldárien. "But I know not whence it arises, nor its true nature."

"Malice?" asks Tilliána thoughtfully, and after a moment's silence, she adds, "Yes, that is precisely it. I could not name it before. That sense of wrongness...that loss...that oppression as though someone filled with hatred wishes to blot out my very ability to think, to breathe, to live, to blot out the very light of the sun, if they could. Is this what it is like to bear, as you have done?" she asks, looking to Eldárien and Elmáriyë. But before they can answer she responds to her own question, "No, there must be much more. This is something almost at a distance, anonymous, nameless. Or rather, I know not the individuals from whom it arises, nor does it assail me directly or take up abode within my heart. It is just there—or rather here—like an atmosphere, like a stench that will not go away."

"You are perceptive, Tilliána," says Eldárien with a gentle smile. "The evil is the same, and to feel it is a mark of great sensitivity on your part." And then he adds, his smile sobering but remaining genuine nonetheless, "But to bear it is in some way to make it one's own, to feel it as if it were part of me, as if it were my own malice—or to feel the assaults of the darkness, from whatever source, as if I were the sole object of their malintent, the aim of their destructive tendencies. It is a painful thing that I would wish upon no one."

"But however much darkness one may be asked to hold," Elmáriyë says, picking up on the train of Eldárien's words, "one holds it within a greater light, which holds all things. This alone, in fact, makes the bearing possible and allows it to be a joyful, light, and hopeful thing, however strained at moments such hope may be, and however heavy the lightness."

"Aye," says Eldárien, "but we should not speak too much of this. It is something lived truest in silence and trust, with confidence and security placed not in myself but in another. No heart, however mature or however pure, could do this except by a greater gift and as a vessel of a deeper compassion. We can only...how shall I say?...we can only lean into it, and let it be done in us and through us, at the very heart of our poverty and need."

"I think that I am beginning to understand a little," Tilliána replies, "and your words help to further clarify things within me. So, thank you." She lowers her eyes for a moment, in deep thought, and when she looks up again she says, "But I am torn between fear and desire. What we encountered in the Velási forest, or rather *who* we encountered, has lit a fire deep within me. And this draws my heart onward with longing. But there is still so much fear within me, and hesitation, too. I feel divided, torn right down the middle, as it were. How can I fight for the light when, along with the yearning that I bear in my heart, I also bear so much darkness? And how could I ever

hope to benefit my fellows, to suffer and love and act and rejoice for their sake and on their behalf, when I have not even confronted and conquered the evil within me?"

After allowing these words to echo in the silence, and receiving them in the way that silence alone will allow, Eldárien replies, "Your question is just, and your feeling right. This is a question that has pierced my own heart for many months, indeed for many years, born of the anguished awareness of the darkness within me and of the evil that my own hands have inflicted or allowed. And the way before you, I cannot tell you. Only in the depths of your own heart shall you hear the answer, the answer unique to you alone, spoken by the voice that, however many times it speaks and even says the same words, never repeats itself. My words can do nothing but point you toward that deeper voice."

"But the answer is the same, is it not?" Tilliána asks. "I mean, there is only one truth for all of us, binding us together, as there is only one world born of a single creative intent?"

"That is correct," says Eldárien, "but the voice of this truth, to truly be your own, to touch your heart in the way that it needs to be touched, cannot come merely through another human voice. In the sanctuary of the heart: this is where the drama plays out in its deepest truth and its inmost mystery. But I will simply say this: the interior conflict within you and the exterior conflict outside of you, the battle between light and darkness within and the battle between light and darkness without, they are one and the same. The victory of the latter depends entirely upon the former, more deeply than words spoken depend upon the thought from which they are conceived, or a child brought forth into this world depends upon the womb in which it grows and from which it is born."

"But how can I know that I am walking in truth, that I am following the path toward the light and not in fact seeking my own self instead?" Tilliána asks.

"Let me tell you a story of a young man who was filled with all kinds of desires and aspirations," Cirien begins. "Having grown up in the countryside, working day in and day out on his family's farm, he came to the city to join the temple of Nirániel. Part of him was restless for more than his current life offered and part of him was impatient with the normalcy in which he felt trapped. But part of him also truly aspired for something that he had glimpsed—the beauty within every beauty and yet beyond it, the goodness for which his heart thirsted, the object of his faith, drawing him even in hiddenness. And being accepted into the temple, he embraced enthusiastically all the rules and regulations set before him, and more: he sought for every little hint or suggestion in the books of the order that could lead him closer

to his goal, and he put them into practice with vigorous effectiveness. But not yet knowing the deeper truth of the heart that informs and gives meaning to all rules and to all actions, the logic that they express and which they serve, he nearly destroyed himself in his striving.

"The moment came when he had to surrender control, to let go of his so-called achievements, however hard-earned, and to find in all that he had sought, in all that he had learned, not directives for self-attained perfection, but rather a loving face gazing upon him and inviting him, and arms stretched out to embrace. In seeking the divine, he had sought, sad to say, very much his own self. He came to learn a precious lesson: no man or woman can act in truth unless he acts out of longing for his Beloved, and in pursuit of the Beloved's face. And sanctity of heart and life, too, is not the result of human striving but the fruit of the hidden activity of the Beloved at work within us unseen and unfelt, molding us every day of our lives in mysterious ways. You see, this young man learned that every act can be an act of love only when it is born of the heart's longing for the face that gazes out through every thing as an alluring mystery, a gentle presence, a call both elusive and intimate, so near that it is never far from us and yet so deep, so wide, that it cannot fit within our grasp but rather holds us in all our struggle and striving, in all our reflection and our rest.

"It is, I suppose, simply part of the nature of this broken world, of the wounded human heart, that most of us start out from the self and seeking the self, however subtly, and only over a long and painful journey come to seek the Other truly and purely. And then a marvelous thing occurs: in him we find ourselves more deeply and more truly than we ever could have by seeking ourselves. For the Beloved whom we seek, we come to realize, is first of all the Lover, and the Lover first. We can seek, we can long for the vision of his face and the embrace of his love, only because by him we have first been seen and held, and are held at every moment in that glance of the eyes, enduring, that makes us to be the very person whom we are. But the beautiful thing is that, looking back from his old age now, this young man now weathered with many years sees the entire process of the journey, its every moment, as meaningful and beautiful. Even the imperfect beginnings bore seeds of beauty that sprouted later, and the later fruit healed and lifted up the earlier strivings. So to answer your question as best I may: do not trouble yourself too much with fears of seeking your own self. Just fix the eyes of your heart again and again upon the One whom you seek, and for whom you long, and he shall stir up, deepen, and purify this longing in the way that only he can. And if you cannot even look, cannot even long, then only consent to be approached, to be wooed by the kindness and love devoid of all violence and force. From the experience of being loved, all else shall blossom."

"I think I understand your words, you young man now weathered with many years," replies Tilliána with a glint in her eye, understanding clearly that Cirien speaks of his own person and experience. "It has not, however, yet come to touch and pervade my heart...at least not as deeply as I wish. But that face of which you speak: I have glimpsed it. And that changes everything. This I believe." She falls silent and turns to look at Eldárien and Elmáriyë for a long moment, her expression touching and yet inscrutable. Then at last she says, "You are to be memory and hope. This is what was said to you by Sílion. And yet I too feel drawn to remember and to hope. For I also know what it is to forget, and to lose hope, and to see what is not true in the murkiness of one's fears and one's pain; and I too want to stand in a place of remembrance, just as I want to witness before others to the memory that so many have forgotten, but in which alone we find life and joy undimmed and undying. Sílion's words truly touched something deep within my heart. I became aware, gradually, as if a sun was rising within me shedding its rays over what had so long lain in darkness, of the true nature of the Ineffable One." She falters for a loss for words, clasping her hands together and lowering her eyes for a long moment. When she looks up again, she continues, "But it is not like ordinary knowledge. For it is easier to know what he is not than what he is. He is not what so many imagine him to be, in the shadows and clouds of their projections, whether these be good or ill, from parents who loved us either well or poorly, or from ideas that we have conceived to help us cope with life, to try and find our way amidst its questions and its tasks, its trials and its joys. At best these give a small and frail glimpse of him, of some aspect of him, but he is so much more.

"He is not one being among many, a mere limited individual like any other person whom I know. Rather, he is person in an infinitely fuller and richer sense, and thus love, goodness, benevolence, kindness, and tender presence that is ever upon me, ever enfolding me, indeed deep within me, even more interior than I am to myself. Thus to speak to him is not to address him merely as one addresses another person in this world. He is more than that, not less of a person but more so. I cannot be apart from him, for he simply *is*, and all that is, though not him, exists only in him and by his gift. And the personal presence, the personal being that he is—utterly ineffable, boundless in a fullness beyond all that we can conceive—is turned upon *me*, an attention that is full of love and overflowing with tender kindness.

"Thus I need not seek him in one particular place, wherever I imagine that may be; for he comes to me in every place and speaks through every thing and every moment. It is all in him, and he is revealed through all of it, and yet he is *more* than all of it. He is the joy in my heart at the beauty that I encounter, and he is the beauty itself in supreme measure; he is the one whom

I address when my heart cries out in gratitude or in pain, in longing or in hope, but he is also the one who beyond my addressing nonetheless hears every ripple or echo of the heart; he is, yes, he is the one who addresses me ceaselessly before I can even begin to formulate a response. To pray is thus not to talk to some imagining in my head or my heart; it is simply to *be* in him who always is, who upholds me ceaselessly and whose very gift, continually flowing forth like a torrent unquenched, makes me to be who I am, and carries me back in response, even unto consummation, just as it does everything that there is, was, or shall ever be."

After these words no one speaks for a long time, and the intermingled silence and sound holds them as if a tangible presence: the silence of the room in which they together sit, filled with no sound but their own breathing and the soft crackling of a fire in the hearth, and the noise of voices, clattering dishes, and muffled music at the other end of the hall. They meld together, distinct and yet united, each important in its own right and in its own place: as if all sound springs from a deeper silence in which it is held, and which, however imperfectly, it expresses, even as it stirs up in the heart the longing to return to this original silence—a silence not devoid of meaning or music but rather full of it in abundance—and in this to find rest and fulfillment.

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During this time food is brought in to them and, famished as they are by their journey, they gratefully welcome the nourishment. Little do they converse while their meal is still before them, not so much because they are occupied with eating as because the fatigue of their travels and of the burdens and anxieties that they carry at last catches up with them. It is as though they had outrun it while they proceeded westward around the mountains and nearly left it outside the city gates; but somehow it found its way in and, in their idleness, sneaked in and sat down beside them. By the time their plates are empty and the server comes in to clear the table, Tilliána is already nodding off to sleep where she sits, and Rórlain too props his weary head against his hand while resting his elbow on the table. Elmáriyë and Eldárien, while clearly fatigued and worn, marvel anew at the sleeplessness that seems to be their continual companion. But at least now its source is revealed: to need little sleep is in their blood, inherited from their mother, Hælia, and from the ten years of profound repose that lies at the origin of the life of each one of them, ten years in which they were held in most complete security and seclusion in the warmth of her womb and her love. They are consoled by the thought that she lingers with them still, even in death, in something as concrete as the way in which they experience fatigue and rest, just as it shall be—they realize now, though Sílion spoke little of it while they were in the velstadeä—in their experience of life and aging. In other words, since they bear

within them the blood of the Velási, they can fully expect to live for a longer span of years than the sixty, seventy, or eighty (or even more) allotted to those who have not received such a gift.

But as with all gifts it is a responsibility also, and they wish to live it—to live every passing day of their lives—as a gift that has been given to them to be given back to the Giver and given also to all of the hurting people whose anguish and aspiration are inscribed upon their hearts. Thus gratitude and responsibility, wonder and responsiveness—indeed the lightness of playfulness and the heaviness of compassion—intersect within their hearts. To live is a gift, to live at all, even for a single day, an unmerited and yet marvelous gift. And yet to die, too, is a gift, a mysterious blessing even if often resisted, much abhorred, and causing fear in all of the fallen children of men. Which, after all, is to be more deeply desired, and which more deeply feared: life or death? To Eldárien and Elmáriyë they both seem fraught with wonders and with dangers, with beauty and with pain, with loss and with finding. To live without death would be to abide always in the antechamber and to never pass beyond the door in order to find the great mysteries that lie beyond, mysteries frightful in their unknowing and yet also, through the glimpses that they have been granted, wondrous and desirable. But to die without life is an impossibility, for death is but an extension of life, even as it seems to be its mysterious termination. As the time of the child's gestation in the womb comes to a close in great mystery, and its passage through the birth canal, though it seems the end of all security, in fact leads only into a more expansive and rich life, so too is the terror and the hope of death and what lies beyond.

And is not every sleep a little death and every waking a little rising to life? With these thoughts in their minds, Eldárien and Elmáriyë look at one another and, for a moment, clasp hands under the table. Has their communion of heart truly progressed already to such a degree of intimacy and intensity that they feel one another's thoughts even as they have them, or is this a rare and unusual circumstance, a moment of special intuition? They are stirred from all of these thoughts and feelings by the sound of Rórlain's chair scraping the floor as it is pushed back from the table.

"I say that it is time for retiring, at least in my regard," he sighs. And then, reaching out his hand and placing it for a moment on Tilliána's shoulder, he says tenderly, "And I think for you as well."

She rises to her feet and both of them retire to the back part of the room, where there are five beds—though little need do they now have of beds after so many weeks sleeping on the ground in the wilderness. The comfort of a soft bed, be it only of straw, feels like a luxury now, though they accept it gratefully.

Cirien, for his part, is lost in thought, gazing into the fire, its orange light

glistening in his eyes and playing upon his face. After a long moment he rouses himself and turns to look at Eldárien and Elmáriyë. "So what think you about our plans for the morrow?" he says.

"I have truly gone no farther in thought than I already indicated," replies Eldárien. "I think we ought to address ourselves to those in government over the city. But I know little else than that."

"There is a temple to Nirániel in the higher portion of the city, near to the great citadel," Cirien says. "I have been there a few times. I wish to visit this place tomorrow, whether alone or with others, not only because I am the grandmaster of the order but also in order to gauge the situation of the city through the words of those whom I can trust."

"That sounds like a wise and prudent idea," affirms Eldárien.

"I would like to accompany you," Elmáriyë adds, "though you could probably guess as much."

Chapter Eleven
The Cycle

The day dawns bright and clear, with the rays of the sun reflecting off the buildings opposite the inn and taberna and sending rays of warm light through the thin curtains of the window of the room in which the companions rest. However, whenever they emerge into the street and step forth into the daytime air, it is apparent that the short autumn is already passing into an early winter. The whole city is encased in ice after a hard freeze the night before, a freeze following upon blowing sleet and flurries of snow that had been teasing the onset of winter over the previous days. Despite the cold and the difficulty of walking on streets whose surface is a glistening sheen, they cannot but acknowledge the beauty of the city in this state: like a massive pavilion of crystal, bluish white in the radiant light of the early morning sun.

Cautiously and yet with eyes continually captured by the beauty of their surroundings, they weave their way through the narrow streets of the city, upward toward the height and the center, where the mound of land upon which Onylándun is built crests at the great citadel of her ancient rulers, surrounded itself by the oldest and most weathered buildings, centuries old, in which live the wealthiest family lines and the officials of government. Here too are most of the temples of the city, with the exception of the shrines of Télmoth and Meléngthar, which are lower and further out, toward the poorer and younger sectors of the city. The companions approach the temple of Nirániel first of all, its stone face peeking out at the end of a narrow street

of cobbled stone with the fronts of houses overshadowing it from either side, north and south, while the sun itself is just at this moment cresting over the roof of the temple and crowning it with a halo of golden light.

They pass through the heavy wooden doors, which creak as they swing open, and find themselves almost immediately in the sanctuary of the temple, looking toward the altar raised at the center of the apse with light falling upon it from windows situated upon the wall high above. Though the sanctuary itself is comparable in size to that of the temple in Ristfánd, the temple complex is considerably smaller, with only one hallway off to the right through which is access to a few rooms. Cirien explains to them that, unlike in Ristfánd, there is no large community gathered here, but rather only a few clerics, all men, who tend to the needs of the temple and to the ailments of those in the city toward which the gifts and attention of the devotees of Nirániel are particularly directed.

After a moment's pause for prayer in the sanctuary, the companions pass into the hallway and soon come face to face with the man who is the object of their visit: Rûmdil Fýrrum, the leader of the Onylándun temple. He extends his arms wide and raises his eyebrows in surprise when he sees them, saying, "Cirien Lorjiës? Is it truly Cirien Lorjiës? It has been years, my old friend."

"Yes, Rûmdil, it is I," replies Cirien, clasping the man for a moment in an embrace. He then introduces him to each of his companions, and they to him.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, all of you," Rûmdil says. "But tell me: why are you here, and in such number? I have heard rumors of trouble in the east, but things also fare ill here just as they do there. In fact, the whole of Telmérion seems aflame with strife, conflict, and death."

"Your guess is accurate," answers Cirien. "We come from Ristfánd, where we were present for a siege in which much life was lost, though word has also come to us that the conflict has spread now far beyond the confines of Ristfánd and touches people all across the lands of Rhóvas. Is this true?"

"It is indeed, unfortunately," Rûmdil says. "We hear much of the horrors occurring across the mountains—both east and north—but are so occupied here at home that we can give hardly a thought to it."

"Both east and north," Eldárien remarks. "What do you mean?"

"The Empire has begun to turn the tides of battle, not only in Rhóvas, but in the lands in which the rebellion first arose. Or at least that is what we hear."

"You have then heard of the beasts that fight at the side of the Empire?" Rórlain asks.

"The beasts? Yes, I have heard. I know not if such creatures have yet appeared west of the Téldrens, but many of those who have fled hence from the

east bring word of creatures like the living dead, arising as an army from the very darkness and wielding weapons and armor from they know not where. But that is not all," Rûmdil sighs and shakes his head sorrowfully. "We have a beast of our own to deal with, and it is more than enough to bring anxiety and fear all the inhabitants of our city."

"You speak of the—" Cirien begins, but Rûmdil finishes before he is able to say more.

"Dragon. I speak of the dragon. I do not know what has changed such that now, after ages without even a rumor of such creatures, they have now emerged from ancient myth and become present as living flesh and flame. But it is doubtless true. We have beheld it, and the marks of its attacks still scar our city."

"How recently did this dragon appear?" asks Eldárien. "And does it still besiege the city?"

"Two weeks ago it first appeared in the skies above us, though only as if teasing us, as if a hawk scrutinizing its prey—circling overhead but not descending to draw any nearer. Then, four nights past, it attacked, though most of us were asleep when the attack occurred. A few guardsmen were slain, and the marks of flame scored the streets of the city, and perhaps half a dozen houses caught fire and needed to be extinguished. Each night since, some similar attack has occurred in a different sector of the city."

"According to what you say, the attacks are surprisingly restrained," says Cirien, "though I do not understand why. If it could attack during the day, why does it not do so? And if it could raze the entire city, why does it single out only small sectors to be victims to its fire?"

"Perhaps it is indeed teasing us," Rûmdil replies. "After all, if it needed to hunt it would not leave its prey bloody upon the battlements. Not a single man or woman has been taken in all this time. The slaughter is gratuitous. The fire and death seem ordained to scare us, and to scare us precisely in the night. I do have to admit though that we also carry such fear in the daytime hours, waiting as we do for the terror of night to become terror of day."

"The dragon can move about during the daytime?" Tilliána asks. "Are you certain he does not attack only at night because that is all that he can do?"

"I am certain. We first saw him in the skies during the daytime. It was nearing twilight, but the sun was still in the sky. If he was inimical to the sun, he would not have been airborne at such a time, the rays of light reflecting off those wicked scales, those spread wings almost like the blackness of night creeping into the domain of the day."

"You saw him with your own eyes?" Rórlain asks. "Your description indicates more than hearsay."

"Indeed I did," Rûmdil replies. "I have seen the dragon himself, and with

every passing day I have seen the harm that he has caused. Indeed, I intended soon to depart from the temple to find the scene of the most recent attack, assuming that he has continued his course last night as he has the previous nights."

"Would you allow us to accompany you?" asks Cirien. "There is also much more that we would wish to share with you about this dragon and about what we may be able to surmise of its manner and its motivations."

Rûmdil at first appears surprised, but then he nods and agrees. And so they leave the temple precincts and begin again to navigate the streets of the city. Now Rûmdil leads them—and straight to the great citadel, or rather to the main barracks of the city guard that lies opposite it in a wide courtyard of weathered gray stone, cracked and discolored by ages of contact with the goings and comings of men, massive slabs clearly cut from the mountain long past and carried, by some ingenious means, to be used as the foundation stones and paving stones of a city intended to stand the test of time.

While they walk, the companions do all they can to explain to Rûmdil their own encounter with the dragon and its birth—or its emergence—in the depths of the castle of darkness. They also explain why they fear that the "teasing" of the dragon may be precisely that: a preparation, an entree before the full meal, when creatures of darkness in far greater number shall pour forth upon the city, seeking its destruction and its downfall.

"We have already long feared these living dead," Rûmdil says in response, "though we have taken some solace in the thought of them being occupied in the east. I know it is a petty consolation, to find relief that your neighbors are besieged by evil while you yourself are, at least at present, left untouched. But with word that many more such creatures—and ones of different kinds and more dangerous—emerge from the very bowels of the earth, such consolation is dissolving as dew in the brightest sun. Is the world truly turning inside-out such that the underworld walks above ground and seeks to bury in the earth, in death, those who for so long have called the earth their home, and the light of day their security and their companion?"

"What troubles me is that, provided these fears are true, the creatures of darkness target this city and not another," Eldárien muses. "For it is not a relevant target in the conflict between the Empire and the rebels."

"In that you are entirely correct," agrees Rûmdil. "We are neutral through and through. If any in Telmérion are such, it is we."

"That would confirm a suspicion that we have had from the first day we encountered these creatures," says Rórlain, "namely, that they are only using the Vælírian Empire for their own purposes. And now, if they act independently of the Empire, it would seem confirmed that their goals are much broader, and more complete, than simply the end of the civil war and the

subjection of Telmérion once again to Imperial rule."

Their converse is interrupted when they come to the entrance of the barracks and, with an expression that he does not wish to delay any longer, Rûmdil pushes open the doors and leads the companions inside. The bitter cold of the morning follows them into the building, though it meets a wave of warmth that washes over them from a large hearth burning in the center of the room in which they find themselves. It is a long hall that seems to function as an antechamber, with many doors lining its walls, and benches surrounding the hearth upon which perhaps a dozen men garbed in light armor sit, the sound of their muffled conversations mingling together with the crackling of the fire. Rûmdil does not stop to greet them, but passes by on his way to an arched door at the far end of the chamber. He knocks and an eager voice almost immediately calls from within and bids them to enter.

"Clearly I am expected," Rûmdil remarks.

As they step through the doorway, the companions find themselves in a rœdra cluttered with books as well as with arms and armor. A man rises from a desk at the back of the room and approaches them, his aged faced lined with worry but also touched with surprise at seeing that Rûmdil does not come alone. "I have anxiously awaited your arrival, Rûmdil," the man says. "There was another attack, as expected, but this time much worse."

"I am surprised I did not hear it."

"The dragon attacked a low sector of the city, very near to the outermost walls. There the buildings are mostly of wood, and many we were unable to save. I have been awake most of the night. But please, tell me who your companions are and why they are here. There is little time to spare."

Rûmdil introduces them and quickly summarizes what they have shared with him of their own encounter with the dragon and the other creatures of darkness. In turn they learn that the man's name is Sénfyr, and that he is the captain-vicar of the city guard.

"You witnessed the emergence of this terrible creature?" Sénfyr asks, his face and tone revealing both incredulity and alarm.

"Yes," Eldárien replies, "and we also witnessed the pact made between the leader of the eötenga and the Imperial forces, though a tenuous pact we believe it is."

"Why you, of all people?" asks Sénfyr. "Surely it is not only fortune—whether good or ill—which led you to be in such places where men do not tread, and at such decisive moments in the history of our people and of our mortal enemies."

"Fortune it was, I believe," Rórlain says, "though neither anonymous nor random. Our path has been marked out before us, and we find ourselves here by no mere chance. If we have witnessed in the place of its very origin the

nature of the evil that assails our land, that is only so that we might bring warning and aid to those whom this darkness would threaten."

"Warning comes a little late, I think," Sénfyr retorts, "since we already suffer its attacks."

"We fear much more shall come," Cirien explains. "That is the import of all that Rûmdil has shared with you. If anything, the dragon is a harbinger of a malevolent gaze directed upon your city. He is a vanguard of darkness, and more shall follow in his wake."

"We shall speak more of this later," Sénfyr says after a moment's thought. "Indeed, we should bring it directly to the hæras and his counselors."

"That would indeed be our wish," confirms Eldárien.

When Eldárien speaks, Sénfyr turns and looks at him for a moment, as if scrutinizing him, and then the captain-vicar says in response, "You look familiar. Have you been in Onylándun before?"

"I have not," replies Eldárien.

"Odd. I could almost swear that I have seen you, or your like, in the past."

Rórlain chuckles softly and places a hand on Eldárien's shoulder, saying to Sénfyr, "There is much also to be said of that, though it too will best be said in the presence of the leaders of the city."

"Very well," Sénfyr answers with a puzzled expression. Then, turning to look again at Rûmdil—though his glance and his words take in all of them—he continues, "Before anything else, however, I wish to go to the place of the attack. There is something that I wish for you to see. And a man of religion shall be the best judge of such matters."

"Then Cirien shall be a better judge than me, though neither shall I refuse my judgment," Rûmdil answers. "He is the head of my order."

"What curious travelers you are indeed," Sénfyr remarks. "So be it then. Let us all go without further delay."

† † †

It takes over half an hour for them to reach the sector of the city that was the focus of the dragon's latest attack. And when they arrive it is impossible that what they witness not stir memories of the fire in the ghetto of Ristfánd, which touched their hearts and lives so deeply, that of Tilliána in particular. The sector of the city itself is poor in nature, the abode of those with little means, lined with streets more of dirt and mud than of stone, and with buildings of weathered wood and thatched straw that appear, in many cases, inadequate to keep out the elements. And now perhaps two dozen of these houses lie in ruins, no more than empty shells, skeletons of what little remains of their structure after the fire that consumed them was doused. At the far end of a narrow lane, however, a much greater sorrow is in evidence: three-score bodies lie in a row, wrapped in shrouds of white cloth stained red with

blood. Numerous members of the city guard and of other organizations ordained for the assistance of the people mull about, passing to and fro about their business, causing the deathly heaviness of this ruined portion of the city to buzz with anxious activity even as it groans in lament and loss.

"As you see, this attack is much more grievous than the others," Sénfyr explains with a wave of his hand. "But that is not the primary thing I wished to show you. Come here." With this he leads the group to the center of a courtyard nearby—which during normal days would be a busy market at the heart of the lower city—and gestures to the ground. Inscribed upon the earth, clearly in blood, are symbols which few of them have ever seen: a large circle in the likeness of a serpent devouring its own tail and, in its center, a runic letter in a language unused by men. Also drawn around the circle of the serpent are other smaller runes.

"Do any of you know what it means?" Sénfyr asks, tension in his voice. Even if he does not know its true import, he can sense—along with all of the companions—that the origin and the nature of this symbol is evil and ordained wholly unto evil.

To everyone's surprise, Cirien speaks almost without hesitation, "It refers to the Cycle. This is very disturbing indeed."

"What do you mean, 'the Cycle?'" Sénfyr asks.

"Well, what we see before us is a symbol used by men to summon the spirits of darkness and to make a pact with them," Cirien explains, his voice pained. "And it is done by blood sacrifice. It seems that they are calling the dragon here, although I cannot understand their reasons. Nor did I know that such a cult was still practiced in this age of the world."

"Such a cult?"

"Yes. For man has not only the capacity to worship the One who is his Creator and his Origin, nor the other divinities who are messengers of goodness and light, the guardians of our world, but also to turn his gaze, his obeisance, and his worship unto the forces of darkness. In past ages of the world this cult of darkness flourished, to the detriment of many. For if the worship of man toward the powers of goodness is obedience to what is right and just, the cult of the man who makes deals with the darkness is more like a dirty transaction aimed toward results favorable to each. But in fact, in the end it may prove favorable only to the evil spirits and bring about the ultimate downfall of the man who presumes to treat with them. That is the lesson of history."

"I knew not that the spirits of darkness were more than myth and legend," says Sénfyr.

"Oh, they are very real," replies Rûmdil, "as real as the Seven—though they be their opposite as night is the opposite of day or death the opposite of

life." He pauses and sighs and then adds, "Or rather, more so. For we know the Seven because they were revealed unto us, and because they have been active throughout our history, in both more hidden and more evident ways. But they force themselves not against the resistance and forgetfulness of man, and if a man or woman continues to deny them, their countenance shall be less visible, and their voices harder to hear. In such a day man may descend wholly into the worship of the forces of darkness, who, because their voices are so loud and raucous, and their promises so apparently subservient to the slightest whims of human selfishness, continue to be heard and believed even when the good divinities are forgotten. Woe betide to man on such a day, when good is forgotten and darkness is embraced. Woe betide to man on such a day, when he prefers to believe in the imaginations and wishes of his own heart rather than to base his faith upon encounter, upon reason, and upon revelation."

At first the companions are at a loss in response to the vehemence of these words of Rûmdil, which differ so widely from the ever-tender manner of Cirien, who even in speaking of darkness and evil does so with kindliness, compassion, and hopefulness of heart. But at last Tilliána speaks and asks, "What would cause our culture to descend to such a place?"

Elmáriyë turns to her and says, "Forgetfulness of the original Song. In that Song lies all meaning and purpose, all truth and beauty, gathered together in abundant fullness in its origin; and all that exists in our world can be traced back to that primal plenitude, that song which is but the fullness of Being. Indeed, even when the human heart forgets the Song it cannot but seek to rediscover it. And even such forgetfulness, as long as the heart continues to desire, to search, to reach out, is filled with hope, for it is still open to the light. But it is sad indeed when a person, and even more when a society, no longer believes that the Song can be heard and discovered, nor that its voice can be discerned, for then such a society begins to believe what it wishes to be so rather than what is revealed to be so. A world in which the divine is mute: that is the sorrow of which we speak. And when the divine—knowable, personal, and real—disappears from the stage of history, how sad indeed should we be, each reaching out to the untouchable and trying to give voice to what ever eludes us. It is true that he is ever close to us, but for this presence to take full effect, we too must know this closeness and believe it, and let it distill into experience and life."

"What a sorrow it must be to the Creator that the world has become so opaque to his presence for many, and that he must weave himself again into the lines of history that we might know and trust him. And this takes time, even ages upon ages, that even in drawing near he respects our freedom and our thought, and comes not to overpower or violate but to address and invite

with gentleness and care. And in the midst of this world shattered by the original fracture, that forgetfulness and loss of which Rûmdil and Elmáriyë speak can indeed exist in great measure; and it is in such a state too that a man may begin to believe and act as the spirits of darkness suggest to him in the night of his own blindness and insecurity, where he is defenseless before the mysteries of life and grasping for some semblance of safety," concludes Cirien. "Be glad therefore that the Song has been revealed unto you. And pray that all may hear its consoling strains."

"You spoke of the Cycle," Rórlain begins. "What precisely does that mean? Nothing that has been said until now has exactly answered that question."

"Perhaps not explicitly, but toward it precisely our words have gestured. Long has it lain in the darkness, all but forgotten," answers Cirien, "and it grieves me greatly to see its symbol appear now in the light of day. It grieves me greatly indeed. For the Cycle refers to a system of belief and practice by which a man seeks to return the world to its pristine state by accelerating the 'cycle'—hence the name—of death and rebirth. Such a viewpoint has been born precisely of that forgetfulness of the Song of which we have been speaking—that Song which reveals the story that is our life, that is the very history of our world, from beginning to end. In this other belief, however, the story has been replaced by a cycle. The meaningful and irreplaceable lines of a drama, a path through time and space rising and falling as it progresses toward consummation—including in its journey every single human life—has been supplanted by an impersonal wheel going ever round and round, until it ceases to go at all and comes eventually to complete rest, not in fulfillment and fruition but in nothingness. There is no need to enumerate the details of this philosophy here, for its complexity shall indeed make one's head go round until it almost feels that it is either to spin off into absurdity or to grind itself into the abyss. That was my experience in studying all the extant texts that we have from this cult, something that, though I am grateful for it, I would not wish to relive a second time.

"The memory and hope that we all bear within us from the beginning of our lives, as threatened as they may be by so many forces, are more accurate and more right: that we are part of a great story, and that this story is, for lack of better words, *going somewhere*. There is a destination, and if our ineluctable yearning is anything to go by, the destination is both glorious and everlasting. Why else would we bear such a yearning innate in our very being, down to its most hidden recesses, except that it corresponded to a promise inscribed in our being, except that the object of our desire truly exists and awaits us? That is what Elmáriyë meant by the Song: it is Origin and Consummation both, the timeless beginning and timeless end that cradles both ends of time and all the moments of its progress in between. But when the

world closes itself off from this and instead becomes its own origin and end, or rather becomes a never ending cycle that goes on and on, then man finds himself under a shadow both in death and in life, and there is no redemption, no salvation, but in two options: to call this broken world itself 'god,' or some mysterious 'something' hidden behind its faltering guise, or to escape into nothingness."

"You say that this is what this—what did you call it?—cult of the Cycle believes and practices?" Sénfyr asks.

"Yes, though there are different nuances depending on the historical moment in which it has found expression," answers Cirien. "It is, in a sense, the only true alternative to the faith which we profess. What I mean by this is that the underlying choice and goal of such a life is the inverse image of the faith that is born of the divine revelation and activity within this world. Ours is a faith born in history, a faith which is the very story of history from beginning to end, in which the One who made us also writes our history, and even writes himself into our history; and no matter how broken and lost we may be, we are all a part of this story, the littlest and most ordinary just as much as the great. But the other is a worldview that moves in the opposite direction, that seeks to break beyond the bounds of the world and history, or to plunge instead to its secret immanence, in the hopes of touching some ultimate meaning or final escape. And thus it also tends to be only for those who can meet its many requirements—the great, the elite—an esoteric flight into the unknown and inaccessible. It is a path not of history, but of the escape from history; it is liberation from the confines of time and space, and of the mortal body, into a mystical freedom in which subjective experience—or the annihilation of experience—is given priority over historical life and reciprocal belonging; this view is defined above all by the conviction that nothing truly can be known about the Creator, that he is beyond all words, images, and knowledge, nor is he personal or capable of relation in a dialogue of love. Rather, the goal is not to know him as he is, to enter into a reciprocal relationship with him as with a partner in dialogue—to hear his voice and his word and to follow the path he marks out, the path of righteousness in love and integrity of being. Rather, it is to dissolve into him, into it, or even to discover that I *am* it, this divine entity...that we all constitute it. This approach has had a million different shades throughout history, but it is distinguished precisely by its way of relativizing all these distinctions and claiming that they do not ultimately matter. They are thought to be the mere surface of unreal distinctions, whereas under the surface all approaches are equally valid as they all meld into indistinguishable unity. In this view, all multiplicity is unreal, only apparent, and the goal is the unity of identity, melding into oneness. Whether we call the One it or he or us, and whether it is absorption

into 'all' or 'nothing,' it does not matter; what matters is mystical experience, the inner subjective contact with the 'divine' or whatever we may call it, in the hidden depths of my being.

"But, on the other hand, the goal of our religion is different, and in being different it in fact embraces and includes all that is good in the other approach, while correcting its errors and aligning them with the truth: the goal of our faith is not absorption into a nameless and imageless unity that dissolves all distinction; rather its goal is the full blossoming of interpersonal relationship that establishes a higher and deeper form of unity, a unity of knowledge and love in the mutual belonging of persons. This is a unity that creates oneness without destroying duality, that forges intimacy without absorbing the individuality of persons. Rather, this union, precisely as a communion of love, affirms this individuality as precious, beloved, and desired, consummated in the embrace of Love that unites individuals and fulfills them, not of an impersonal oneness, but in the joy of intimacy where 'I' and 'You' and 'We' are forever harmonized and united."

"Your words are deeply illuminating, Cirien," says Eldárien. "I see the lines traced on the page of history, and I feel the tension between the two ways of viewing the world and its underlining meaning. But what you say of the former way seems to be not merely darkness, but aspiration, and a good aspiration, of the hearts within this world toward the mystery that lies hidden from sight. It is only that this aspiration, this yearning, has yet to be illumined by the historical revelation of the One who made the world, and of his Anaíon who speak and act in his name. What then is the connection between this longing, as incomplete and even erroneous as its expressions may be, and the worship of the Draíon and alignment with the forces of darkness?"

"Forgive me if I gave the impression of aligning the two," replies Cirien. "I did not intend to do so. Granted, whenever the human heart opens itself blindly to unknown forces, there is no telling what powers may influence it, whether light or dark. But you are right: there is another step beyond this longing for the unknown, and this path need not occur, nor has it always done so. Whatever conceptions it may bring to bear concerning the nature of the world, a spiritual life that is aspiration and longing, even for the imageless and unknowable, is much closer to our own faith—and thus can find fulfillment in the revelation granted unto the world—than what has come to happen among certain practitioners of this way. For such yearning is open to the gift that will come from the outside, the gift of truth and relationship, unexpected but deeply desired. But as we witness here today, among certain men there has come to be an alliance with the powers of darkness, the Draíon, which inverts a longing for the light into a fascination with darkness. The hearts that have unmoored themselves both from reason and from revelation

find themselves standing defenseless before creatures—of much greater intelligence and spiritual power—that would lead them astray. And the danger is then that the innocent longing of the heart to return to the origin of meaning and to escape from suffering—estranged from the song at the origin of the world, and blind to the radical incompatibility of light and darkness, of good and evil, of a personal or impersonal conception of being—collapses into the search for and worship of self, and the grasping for power and for the security that it gives. For here, as said earlier, the Draíon love to present themselves as eminently pragmatic. They 'get things done,' as it were. Being nearer to us because of their fall from the light, they are more than willing, I think, to interfere in the affairs of our world and to portray themselves as our immediate allies, even though in truth they are our greatest enemies."

"I think I understand that," says Eldárien with a nod. "And these realizations, in the current context, are disturbing indeed. But your words also give me hope and stir compassion in my heart, for it is as though I see opening out before me a vast panorama of desire and longing, of search and aspiration, in which all the children of this world are reaching out for the One whom they have lost and whose face they do not see. And we cannot find our way back to him unless he himself intervenes, entering into our history to bring us back to himself. And I want to serve that meeting, to witness to that light, in whatever way I may. I wish to be a custodian of this mystery, as weak and little, as broken and frail as I may be."

"After what we encountered in the Velási forest, I do not think it could be otherwise for any of us," says Tilliána, looking intently at Eldárien with a depth of meaning glistening in her eyes.

"But come, let us speak no more of any of this here and now," says Cirien at last. "The discovery of these symbols bodes ill for the city and for Telmérion itself. We need to act as soon as we can."

"There is one question, Cirien, that I still have," Rûmdil says. "What say the runes? I too know something of the dark cults that have emerged throughout our history, since part of our training in the temple included not only listening to other traditions of thought and practice but also learning of the darkness that stands over and against the light that we have chosen to protect and to promulgate. But these runes mean nothing to me, nor have I ever seen their like before."

"Unfortunately they mean nothing to me either," Cirien replies. "I can, however, read the runes of darkness and even understand the language, but this is only a summary of sorts. The runes here do not form words but only symbolize them—perhaps the first letters. But I do not think it is important, and I have no wish to pursue their meaning further. We know all that we need to know."

"And what we need to know," proffers Sénfyr, "is that there are forces within the city that would seek our downfall, making pacts with the very creatures who would destroy us?"

"Precisely," says Cirien.

"Then let us leave it at that and make it a point to speak with the hæras as soon as possible," Sénfyr adds.

"I agree," Rûmdil says, "however, I may have some leads as to the identity of the members of this cult. I did not know it had progressed to this degree, but I have been well aware of similar currents in the city for a long time. Perhaps we should discuss what I know first, before bringing it to the attention of the hæras?"

"I suggest that we do it all at once," Sénfyr replies. "It will be easier and swifter that way."

"Swifter perhaps, but not necessarily easier," says Rûmdil. "Indeed, preparation beforehand oft makes the act swifter in execution, for it is less subject to the delays caused by confusion."

Sénfyr pauses for a moment and looks at Rûmdil, reflecting on his words, though it is obvious that he does not wish to delay. He shakes his head and opens his mouth to speak, but just as soon closes it again. When he does at last speak, he says simply, "No. Let us go to the chambers of the hæras and his counselors now, with haste, come what may."

In response to this Rûmdil nods regretfully, having no choice but to accept. Cirien too regrets not being able to discuss matters beforehand, but he understands that Sénfyr alone can grant them an audience with the hæras at such short notice, and that this boon is not one to be passed up lightly.

And so they proceed back in the direction from which they only recently came, climbing the slope toward the center of the city. In the full light of the sun the ice on the streets and on the roofs of the houses has now melted, though it still lingers upon walls facing north and west and in places bathed in deep shadow. The air is clearly still below the temperature of freezing, and all of the companions look forward to returning inside where they can warm their bodies by a fire and escape from the chill wind—soft though it is—that descends upon them from the mountains to the north. But even deeper than the cold that grips their bodies, and which is so easily remedied, they feel a bitter cold grip their hearts at the dawning awareness of the great evil that lies under the surface of the city of Onylándun—not unlike what had existed in Ristfánd, only immeasurably worse—and also of the threat of violence and death that stands before the inhabitants of the city like a driving storm-cloud rolling in closer and closer with every passing moment.

They enter the citadel and follow Sénfyr through a long vaulted hallway and up a flight of stairs until coming to the council chambers of the rulers of

the city of Onylándun and of all the people in the clan-lands of Onylándis. Immediately after stepping inside the room they halt, and Sénfyr speaks with one of the guards on duty, learning that the council is currently in session meeting with someone—they are not told whom—but shall be available to receive them afterward. They then seat themselves on a low wooden bench along the wall, looking about at the massive chamber that is hundreds of years old, perhaps even more than a millennium, as light streams in from colored windows high above them and the sound of voices, indistinct but audible, echoes widely through the breadth of the chamber. They make no effort to distinguish words in the sounds of conversation, but it is evident that numerous different voices rise and fall in succession, as if exploring some matter in deliberation or debate.

After perhaps a quarter of an hour the voices return to silence and the company is summoned to approach the council that sits on the other side of the chamber, hidden from sight by barriers that have been erected partway across the room. For Eldárien in particular the experience is radically different from his visit to the palace of the hæras in Ristfánd, even ignoring the fact that the one pulling the string behind the counsel of Gléndas Medóra was in fact one of the Draíon, who called himself Maggot. What is most immediately different about the court in Ristfánd and that in Onylándun is the sense of *community*, for here the hæras, a man by the name of Brýma Káldvek, sits with three others on either side of him, three men to his right and three women to his left. Thus is constituted the council of the leaders of Onylándis.

"Hail to you, jarl Brýma," Sénfyr says, raising his hand in greeting. "Hail to you, counselors. I bring in my company travelers from Ristfánd, though these are unlike the other refugees who have poured into our city in months past. With me also, as you see, is the good cleric of the temple of Nirániel, Rûmdil Fýrrum. In fact, this man here," he gestures as he speaks, "is the grandmaster of their order all across the lands of Telmérion, a man by the name of Cirien Lorjiës. And these are those who travel with him, warriors and persons of integrity who have stood both against the violence of the Empire and against the creatures of darkness. They have known directly, in the flesh, the conflict about which we have only heard distant rumors."

"Hail to you, and welcome," says Brýma in response, with a nod of his head and a gesture of his arm. "Today is a sorrowful day indeed on many accounts, and we are not much disposed at present to prolonged speech. But let me ask you: what word or aid do you bring to us in this time of strife?"

Cirien takes a step forward and says, "There is much that we bring in words, which perhaps another more fitting time shall allow expression. But what we bring first of all is hope for victory over the forces of darkness that assail you, and which may well assail you in much greater measure ere many

days or weeks have passed."

"And what hope could this be?" asks a woman to the hæras' side. "A dragon has attacked us now for five nights, and none of our weapons, whether lance, arrow, or harpoon, seem able to slay the beast. And we hear that those creatures which are called vrû'ádach, active in the east, are incapable of being slain by any means, and that they return with the coming of darkness each night, no matter what one may do to resist them."

"Sadly, to our knowledge your words are true, though only to a degree," says Eldárien, emerging from the group, and all eyes fall upon him. "These creatures are born of darkness, and they are but phantoms gathered from the wickedness of men and woven into some guise by the fallen divinities. Thus no iron or steel, no fire or ice, can truly harm them. But we bring word of a power that can dispel them and prevent their regeneration."

"Truly? How is that possible?"

"Only the light of heaven can purge them from existence, dispersing the very darkness that gives them form," explains Eldárien. "And yet even so, their fashioner can create more as long as he is free to gather this darkness again and to mold it into tools against us. I apologize, as it may appear that I speak folly. Such things are difficult to express in human speech, for we must use but figures and images for things that are more real, more vivid, and more expansive than our language is accustomed to express."

"You say that even if dispelled these creatures can be made anew?" Brýma asks.

"Yes."

"Then what good is this new weapon of which you speak?"

"It is, I hope, an aid in the struggle until the more definitive solution is able to be put into effect."

"I follow not your reasoning," complains Brýma, turning to those who sit at his side and shrugging his shoulders in frustration.

With this Rórlain speaks and says, "Eldárien has been entrusted with the light by the goddess Hiliána herself, and is called by her the 'Lightborn,' scourge of the creatures of darkness. Indeed, he—and this woman who stands by his side, his sister—is the sole remaining remnant of the ancient kings of Telmérion before her division into the seven shattered clans. He is the heir of the great king Séra Galáptes. And in his veins also flows the blood of the deathless Velási people. Chosen, therefore, has he been, to guide us through these times of darkness to a new dawn."

"That is enough, Rórlain," whispers Eldárien, raising his hand to restrain his friend.

A dense moment passes in which the rulers of Onylándun, with surprise in their expressions, turn and speak to one another. The travelers wait

expectantly, unable to discern the specifics of their converse and even little able to distinguish the astonishment in some faces from the indignation in others. At last Brýma rises to his feet and silences his council with a wave of his hand. "We know not what to make of these claims," he says, "and many have long begun to doubt, even some of us to forget, the ancient prophecies. When a man comes and claims to be their fulfillment, we can hardly be anything but cautious."

"Of what prophecies do you speak?" Eldárien asks. "I am not aware of any prophecies in this regard. Or, at least, all the prophecies of which I know point forward to the true Dawnbringer, whom I am not. I do not come claiming anything for myself, and yet I also cannot deny that what Rórlain, my friend and companion, says, is the truth."

"So you do not deny being the heir of the king, Séra Galáptes, nor a bearer of the blood of the blessed ones whom in our land we call the 'Veiled'?"

"I do not deny that."

"And what of this 'light' of which you speak?" Brýma asks. "How do we know that you bear this, beyond mere trust in your word?"

Reluctantly, but knowing that it shall be much more simple than to continue the conversation merely with words, Eldárien draws the lightbringer from its scabbard on his back and holds it before him. Closing his eyes, he allows himself to sink back into the place of poverty and silence, of receptivity and trust, at the center of his being, and thus lets the light to flow in him and through him for all to see. He knows even through his closed eyelids that the blade of his sword has begun to shine with brilliant light. He allows it for a few seconds to linger, and then, with a simple sigh, he releases it to its proper home, where it holds him and all things in intangible fullness.

He opens his eyes and looks at his interlocutors, who for a moment stand unmoving in awe-struck silence. The woman at the hæras' side who had earlier spoken is the first to break this silence when she says, "I had seen something from the beginning—in your eyes and in the scars upon your face—but even beholding this, the light pouring through you, the claims you bring with you almost beggar belief."

"I ask only to be allowed to aid your people in their fight against the forces of darkness," replies Eldárien gently.

"And one blade shall do that?" Brýma replies, disbelief in his voice.

"Two blades, for Rórlain has been granted a share in this light, and he too can channel it at need," answers Eldárien. "But no, that is not all the aid we offer. Meager indeed would that be. We also intend to strike at the root of this darkness—to return to the import of our earlier converse—that we might bring an end to this war once and for all. No matter how many of the vrû'ádach and the other creatures of darkness that we dispel, it shall not truly

hinder the plans of our enemy."

"What then?"

"We do not know the exact path yet before us, nor how to achieve the end toward which our journey is directed," Rórlain says. "But we come from the dwelling of the Velási themselves, and it is they who have sent us forth, directing us first to come to your city. Where we shall be led hence we do not know, nor do we know how we shall come unto the final confrontation with the origin of the powers of darkness. As Eldárien said, all that we ask is to be allowed to aid you in whatever way we may, trusting that in this, whether sooner or later, our path shall be made clear before us and we may put a stop to the evil assailing our people once and for all."

Chapter Twelve
In Council

After Rórlain and Eldárien have finished speaking, the responses of the council of the rulers of Onylándun remain mixed, confused, and conflicted. At first there are a few courteous remarks exchanged between diverse members of the council, but then a tense thread emerges between them and soon one of the men to the hæras' side rises to his feet and steps forward, as if to insure that his voice alone shall receive the attention of all in the chamber.

"I find it unsettling, to say the least," he begins, with a raised voice and an oratorical flourish, "that these strangers appear at such an hour, at almost the same moment that we have received such grave news. A coincidence, you may suppose? I think not. I say it plainly and I say it true: he is a supplanter. That is the nature of the man who has come into our midst this day, though he wears a cloak of humility. He speaks outright of his goals, if only we are clear-sighted enough to recognize it. He seeks the throne."

"Tímus, do not jump to conclusions," Brýma says, rising also to his feet. "If he comes only in his own name, how then does he call forth the power of celestial light?"

"You know nothing of the true nature of such light," retorts Tímus. "For all we know, it could be caused by the very creatures of darkness that we fear, and which these travelers claim to have come to vanquish. Yet they could well be in league with them rather than standing against them. The show of light could be but a trick. Are we to fall for it so naively?"

"And the very grandmaster of the order of Nirániel, too?" says Rûmdil, with anger in his voice. "You accuse Cirien Lorjiës, a man known by many and attested both by his wisdom and by his deeds, to be in league with spirits

of darkness and evil?"

"He is not the one subject to our scrutiny here," Tímus replies. "It is his companions. Perhaps they have bedazzled his eyes to their true intentions."

"You speak folly, good sir," Cirien says, his voice gentle and yet firm. "I was present when Eldárien first learned of the nature of his bloodline and his origins. He has sought nothing but the protection of the people of Telmérion for as long as I have known him. And he comes here not to 'supplant,' as you say, but to obey the command given unto him, and to follow the path marked out before him, by those to whom the obeisance of us all is owed. You would prevent him from following this path, which he walks not for his sake but for yours, simply because you fear a struggle of power?"

"No, I would prevent him because it *is* a struggle of power. If he comes in the line of the ancient king and claims to be the fulfillment of prophecy, then he cannot but seek to become king. We know it verily and for a surety, and we have long lived under the shadow of such prophecy: that one in the likeness of the Scarred King would come, and that he would assume the throne once again, thus uniting the peoples of Telmérion under a single banner. Thus your claim that he acts only for the people of Telmérion surely holds no weight. For that is exactly what he does: he acts for the people of Telmérion, that they may be subject to his rule."

"Be seated, Tímus," Brýma says, all patience now gone from his voice. "You are speaking with folly—folly born of both fear and pride. The interpretation that you give to these events is the direct opposite of my own."

"Then you are lost—" Tímus begins, but Brýma interrupts him.

"Be seated, I said!"

And so Tímus sits, visibly fuming with anger and yet acquiescing for the moment. Brýma turns back to the travelers and, drawing in a deep breath, he says, "He spoke of grave news that we have received. This is truth, though I expect it shall be as much a surprise to you as it has been to us."

"We know of little news at all except what we have come here to tell from our experience in the east, and what we have witnessed since our arrival in your city," says Eldárien. "We have learned much already of the state of your city, threatened by a dragon and concealing a cult of darkness within it—a cult that has summoned that fell creature here by rites of blood and death."

"Then about the state of my city you know almost as much as I, or in respects even more, for even that seems to escape me. We shall speak of such things later, if it proves to be appropriate and if we are given the time. But for now I ask you: do you know of the state of the other clan leaders of Telmérion? How fare the other members of the onárion, the council of the seven?"

"We know that Gléndas Medóra, hæras of Ristfánd, was overtaken by one

of the leaders of the Draíon, a beast that called himself Maggot. But about the others we know nothing."

"That sad tale we learned not long after the fact," Brýma says. "It was impossible that such sorrowful and unusual news—and all the other events that transpired in the siege of Ristfánd—would not reach us with all haste. We also heard tell of a warrior wielding a blade of light that felled this 'Maggot.' Am I right to assume that was you?"

"It was in fact my sister," Eldárien replies, gesturing to Elmáriyë.

"You have said nothing as of yet, young woman. What have you to say for yourself in this regard?"

"I did not yet know that I could wield such power," Elmáriyë replies. "Eldárien had been captured and held in custody by this creature of which we speak. Rórlain and I came to save him and it was only as if by chance that I wielded Eldárien's sword and thrust it through the beast. I did not expect it to have the effect that it did."

"If all of you seem capable of wielding such power," Brýma begins, "then what is to prevent you from giving it to all the soldiers under my command?"

"Sadly, that is not possible," answers Eldárien. "It flows in Elmáriyë and myself because of the blood that is within us and the dual task entrusted to us. And for his part Rórlain has been granted a share in this because, under the benevolent gaze of Hiliána, he too has been chosen to—"

"I am the squire of the knight," Rórlain says, interrupting Eldárien and finishing the thought for him. "I serve him who serves her. And I would have no other place."

Brýma shakes his head, not in disapproval or in disbelief, but in something nearer to wonder-filled amazement. "Never before have I had a conversation such as this one in all my life," he says. "I know not what to make of you. And the topics we must discuss flow forth upon me like a flood such that I can hardly keep them straight in my mind and heart. Forgive my digression, but I felt the need to ask." He pauses for a moment and glances at the rest of the council members, who for the moment remain silent, listening to the dialogue without speaking. "Let us then return to the earlier trajectory of our converse."

The travelers nod in agreement.

"I spoke of the news that we have recently received," Brýma continues. "Since you truly do not know the fate of the hærási of the seven clans, you shall be saddened to learn that they have all been slain...all but myself."

"What? They were all slain? But how is this possible?" Eldárien asks. "Do they not live in disparate locations?"

"Indeed they did, but they were called together for a meeting with the Emperor's legate in Brûg'hil," Brýma explains. "They expected talks of peace,

perhaps an end to the war, or at least a truce. Maybe some even simply hoped for a way to learn more of the Empire's motives in calling forth these beasts of darkness from the earth. I too received the invitation to such concourse, but I refused. Long have I known that my fellow hærási are untrustworthy, and even more deeply have I despised the methods of the Empire. Those who sit upon the seats of the rulers of the clans sit in unjust judgment, because they sit in compromise with the Empire or even in cooperation with her. The first compromise was made two-hundred years ago, when our ancestors yielded to the Imperial mandate for surrender. They did this not because the war was lost, but because it was more profitable to surrender than to fight. The onárion was not created out of the desire to safeguard the autonomy of Telmérion or its authentic traditions, but as a way to yield true authority to the rulers of the Empire while allowing 'puppet leaders' to continue in office in the lands of the seven clans. Yes, the onárion was created to keep us in check, to bind our necks to the yoke of the Empire, and yet we agreed to it freely because of the gain we sought to ensure for ourselves. You see, do you not? The history has been carefully hidden, but the truth is there: those who sat upon our seats in the past, during those decisive years, sold out their own people for the gain that the Empire promised them! And even to this day it has not been possible to throw off the yoke that they then freely accepted." Brýma lapses into silence, and no one is able to find any words to respond to him. It is clear that he speaks not merely from guesswork or from paranoia, for the clarity and the pain that mingle together in his voice impress all of them so deeply that, in the very speaking of his words, they feel them echo within their hearts.

Tímus makes a move to speak, but Brýma immediately silences him with the words, "If you are a part of this council, Tímus, it is because you have agreed to walk in dialogue and communal discernment, and not because you feel it necessary to bully others who wish to continue in rational discourse. You know that the rest of us on this council are already but a hair's breadth away from dismissing you from among us. Do not let that day be today. For there have been times in the past when your perspective and your judgment have been of value to us. For disagreement too can deepen one's thought and clarify or solidify one's convictions. But what you have expressed in this conversation is neither dialogue nor debate, but vitriol and the refusal both to speak in reason and to listen in openness."

Hearing these words, Tímus rises to his feet in silence and, with a rude gesture, storms from the chamber. A dense moment of unspoken heaviness follows upon his departure, broken only when one of the members of the council says, "And good riddance. You kept him among us for far too long, Brýma."

"I understand why you think so, Jatíldë. He had begun to grow more and more irrational as the situation worsened. And yet I wished to give him every chance to speak and find a hearing before taking such a drastic measure."

"If I may say so, hæras, he has been combative from the first day that I sat upon the council," Jatíldë responds. "For many years he has troubled our deliberations and frustrated our efforts. I think in this your tolerance came almost to the point of folly. For while dialogue is true and important, and disagreement can be a crucible of learning and of deeper conviction, the great good of harmony in a single vision, where hearts are united in looking upon the same truth, is an even greater boon."

"But now you yourself correct me in front of our esteemed guests," Brýma says with sorrow in his voice. "Nonetheless I accept your correction and, I must admit, I am inclined to agree with it. But..."

"You do have my apology, hæras Brýma," says Jatíldë. "It was an imprudent moment."

"Worry not," Eldárien interjects. "If any of the things that have passed between us in words or in gestures have formed our view of you, they have only inclined it toward the good."

"You are kind," Brýma replies, "but I must admit that this time we have shared has been quite unnatural, and, I feel, unprofessional. We are still reeling from the news concerning the collapse of the onárion, and we have unwillingly—or perhaps better unknowingly—admitted you right into the heart of our counsels."

"We are humbled to be the recipients of such trust, implicit though it be," says Elmáriyë softly.

"Well then, now that we can speak even more freely, let me say it plainly," Brýma continues in a firm voice. "I myself have no doubts that Eldárien is the prophesied king, nor do I wish to impede your journey in any way." He pauses and turns to the rest of the council. "Is there anyone here who wishes to disagree with my assessment?"

They all shake their heads, and one of the men says, "Perhaps it would be good to explain to them why we lend such apparently rash credulity, and at such short acquaintance."

"Good, Víndal. That is what I intended to do." Brýma says. "But why do you not do the honor yourself?"

"Very well," replies Víndal, and turning to the visitors he says, "You see, the seat of government in Onylándun is closer to both the Velási Forest and the home of the Galapteäni than is any other clan. We alone have kept fully alive both the memory and the expectation of the return of the universal kingship that lies in the blood of the Galapteäni alone. Are you surprised? Is it so incredible that after a thousand years the clan of Onylándis still awaits

the reunion of the clans and has not arrogated to itself and its own bloodline the right and the duty to achieve such unity?"

"It does seem rather incredible," Eldárien admits.

"Do you know the history of the one of the early rulers of our clan?" Víndal asks.

"I know very little, I am afraid," answers Eldárien.

But Cirien, knowing more, says, "Was not Thrýmir Onylándis a close friend and companion of Séra Galáptes?"

"Yes, that is exactly correct, or at least so our ancient records, preserved unto this day, recount," Víndal says. "Therefore, when the fracture began in the third generation after the great king, the grandson of Thrýmir recalled the friendship of his ancestors, and he pledged his fidelity anew to the line of kingship blessed by the divines. And on the main—with the understandable exceptions—all who have sat upon the throne of Onylándis have remained faithful to this pledge."

"I am astonished," Eldárien says simply. "The father of the Velási, the man by the name of Sílion, encouraged me to hope in what awaited me, but this...this I did not expect."

At this Brýma laughs, as do a few others of the counselors. "Sílion?" he says. "That is a name that echoes in our tales and our songs, though little we know of these earliest origins. It has been all but lost...and yet his name remains. I suppose it only natural that they continue to name their children after the great father of their people, and that a descendant of the legendary Sílion stands in the same role as his ancient ancestor for whom he was named."

"Oh, this man is not a descendant of Sílion, but the original Sílion himself," Rórlain says, unable to restrain a smile.

The expressions on the faces of all the council members are supremely humorous, and the five companions cannot help but laugh at witnessing their awe and incredulity. For a moment it seems that their belief is at last being tested beyond its endurance, but then one of the women, who has until now remained silent, says, "It only makes sense, after all. We call them 'the deathless.'"

Brýma nods and then to the travelers he says, "It is amazing to even consider. But tell me, what was it like meeting a man—a race, in fact—who is more than a millennia old?"

At first no one replies, until Tilliána, who until now has been silent, says, "It is like stepping into a great stream that has been flowing from the highest of mountains and with the purest of water, growing both deeper and wider with the passing of centuries. And as you feel it enfolding you, you cannot but surrender to its current and allow it to carry you. And, oh, how sweet is

the taste of that water and how purifying is its touch!"

Brýma smiles gently at Tilliána, a glint of light in his eyes, and then he replies, "Perhaps in the days to come others shall be granted the privilege of tasting and feeling such waters."

"Verily, my lord," Tilliána says.

"Address me not as 'lord,'" Brýma says, raising his hands in protestation, though the smile remains upon his face. "I am but your servant, and eager to do what I may to aid you in your quest."

"We know not what lies before us in the immediate future," Eldárien begins, "and neither do we know what lies at a further distance. So I ask you not to renounce the authority of rule that has been given to you, either as individuals or as a council. I fear even greater chaos for the people of the clans following upon the slaying of their leaders. They shall need your help. I shall need your help. Even if you alone remain as the remnant of the clan heads that for so long have sustained the memory and the rule of the Telméric people, I wish for you to do so." He pauses and sighs before adding, "And I...I struggle to think of myself yet as a king."

"And even were I to wish to crown you this very day," Brýma says, "it is not I—"

"It is the people themselves who must embrace their king," Elmáriyë finishes for him. "And we know not how long and arduous a journey it shall be until such a day comes."

"Indeed," Brýma agrees simply. "But yes—I shall do as you request. For I would not wish any more than you to abandon our people in their time of need." With this Brýma's expression changes, as if he has only now become aware of the passage of time and of the far-reaching implications of their conversation. "Let us conclude our converse for the present," he says, "though I invite all of you to join me for the midday meal upon the morrow. That shall give each of us time to take counsel within our inmost thoughts before continuing the counsels among ourselves. It shall also be good to speak in a setting other than this one. After all, we must still discuss this cult of which you have spoken, and what is to be done in its regard."

"We gladly accept your invitation," Eldárien says.

"But may I ask," Jatíldë interjects, "where are you currently staying?"

"We have rented a room at the *Whistling Willow*," replies Cirien.

"I suppose that is serviceable," she answers, "but—with the permission of the counsel—I would extend an offer of friendship, with a view to the reasons and the extent of your stay, inviting these travelers to accept accommodations in the citadel."

To the nods and affirmative responses of the rest of the council, Brýma says, "That is a good idea. Consider the offer extended. I shall give command

for rooms to be prepared for you. Return this evening and speak with the guard at the main entrance. I shall have him show you to where you shall be staying."

"Thank you. We shall do precisely that," replies Eldárien on behalf of his companions. "We have very little resources, so your hospitality has spared us yet another unsolved problem."

"Then may your minds be free to focus on more important matters, and may your hearts be free to rest," Jatíldë concludes.

† † †

When they emerge again from the citadel and step into the streets of Onylándun, the companions are greeted by a heavy falling snow, so dense that it is difficult to make out even the contours of the buildings across the courtyard. But despite the snow the air is still and silent, with hardly a breath of wind, and the snow comes down not at angles nor in a swirling mass of movement, but rather as an almost solid sheet of impenetrable white. They make their way, without further speech, to the temple of Nirániel, and there they part ways with Rûmdil. Sénfyr, who had not been present for their discourse with the council, had bid them farewell on their departure from the citadel. And then they walk, with cloaks pulled tight about their faces, to the inn at which they had stayed the previous night. Here they order a hot and hearty meal and sit together near the hearth in their room.

"Eldárien?" Tilliána asks, when they have only just begun to eat.

"Yes, Tilliána," he replies, "I know the one thing of which we did not speak. It surprises me that the hæras did not think to bring it to our attention or to speak of it with us."

"How did you know that I was going to...?" she begins to ask, but she does not think it necessary to finish the question.

"I know the sorrow in your heart at witnessing the death of more innocent persons, and know also that you cannot for all that is within you simply allow another night to pass without doing all that is possible to prevent more suffering and loss of life."

"You both speak of the dragon?" Rórlain asks.

"We do," answers Tilliána.

"I think that Brýma does not know what to make of the attacks, and perhaps he did not understand that the light we bear can banish the dragon just as it can banish the vrû'ádach," offers Rórlain.

"Either way, it matters little," Eldárien concludes. "We shall have fine rooms in the citadel tonight, but I myself shall not be staying there, not at least until I have confronted the dragon and done what I can to stop its rampage."

"Without question, I shall be accompanying you," says Rórlain. "You shall

have my bow and my axe, and whatever light may be granted me to bear."

Elmáriyë opens her mouth to speak, obviously intending to offer to join the two men in their nocturnal vigil, but Cirien raises his hand and looks at her meaningfully.

"I...yes, you are right," she says quietly. "It is not good to risk the lives of all of us, particularly those of us who have not been trained for combat. I only wish that... Well, I shall certainly not be able to sleep knowing that the two of you face mortal peril while I remain secure in my room."

"I concur with that," adds Tilliána.

"There may in fact be something for all of us to do," Eldárien suggests.

"What is that?"

"We do not know where the dragon will strike, nor how long his attack shall last. Thus, if we await him on the wrong side of the city, we may not be able to oppose him simply through the fact of not being where he is."

"In addition to this," Cirien picks up, "we know that his location was chosen by those who performed the cultic sacrifice that summoned him here. Perhaps tonight shall be similar. If we disperse and scout the city, then we may be able to find some clue as to where to expect him. Is that what you are suggesting, Eldárien?"

"Exactly so."

"But if we are all out scouting the city, how shall the others know if someone has found a clue?" Elmáriyë asks.

"We will plan to meet together at a predetermined time and place," explains Eldárien. "Sadly any clues we wish to find may not even be visible until darkness has already fallen, for I do not expect those summoning the dragon to act during the daylight. I suggest that you try to get what rest you can at present, until we return to the citadel this evening to accept our rooms...and to depart from them. For a long night lies ahead of us."

"What shall you be doing?" Tilliána asks. "Your words seem to indicate that you do not intend to rest."

"I do not. There is a great deal for me to think about, and so I shall walk about the city throughout the afternoon, or at least until I feel it necessary to seek refuge in warmth and repose."

"I know that a man's thought blossoms best in the shining sun of solitude," Tilliána says, "and that silence is the atmosphere of contemplation. But at times he also benefits from the presence of a friend who may share these thoughts with him. Know that I am here for that, if you wish to speak about anything."

Eldárien looks at her with genuine gratitude in his eyes and, with a bow of his head, says, "Thank you."

And so the others seek rest as they may while Eldárien, after a last lingering

moment by the fire, departs from the building and steps again into the cold outdoors, still cloaked in earth and sky with snow both fallen and falling still. He walks slowly along the narrow streets of the city, desiring solitude far more than he needs warmth and space far more than he needs shelter, until he comes to a place where the middle section of the city meets the lower. Here large stone steps intersect a low wall built into the gradual slope of the city street, and these steps also provide access to the battlements. These Eldárien ascends until he stands atop the wall that encloses the entire lower section of the city and separates it from the plains that sprawl far to the south. He walks swiftly but collectedly (the swiftness due not to haste but to the effort to stay warm), his gaze lifted up as he looks out over the wide expanse of land that rolls down from the mountains until eventually, many miles away beyond the limit of sight, it meets the sea.

Of course, for a long time he can see little more than falling snow in any direction. But gradually, as he walks, the dense sheet of snow lessens just enough that he can see the white-clad plains below and, when he turns his gaze back, the city behind him, clad in white as well, though the brown and gray of many houses still show through and the falling snow meets with innumerable trails of smoke curling up from chimneys, dark and almost solid in appearance in the chill of the air. When he comes to the center of the battlements as they arch over the main gate of the city, with a guardhouse built directly in the wall, he pauses and turns his face full to the south, reaching more with his heart, however, than he looks with his eyes. He realizes then that he has begun to reach out in a way that he has never done before, or at least with a new and unexpected depth and intensity, toward that vision that lies beyond the line of material sight, that vision open to the eyes of the spirit and yet no more than glimpsed in the contours of time and of space. And he feels it now as he has felt it in the last few weeks: the tension between the visible and the invisible, the tangible and the intangible, the material and the spiritual. He knows that they are not essentially opposed to one another, and in no way incompatible—this much his heart tells him, and what he knows of the Song that birthed all things—for the single Origin of both could not create two inconsistent opposites ever in tension and conflict. No rather, just as the snow comes down and cloaks the earth, enfolding its every contour and embracing it with the most intimate of embraces, and then gradually penetrates and permeates its very core to bring moisture, life, and fruit, so too the invisible reality hovers over, embraces, and enters in all that is seen. But how the image fails! For in the visible something of the invisible itself is seen, and Eldárien feels it now very keenly: in the gaze of his eyes upon the pallor and purity of the falling snow and upon the landscape garmented in white, his heart beholds something even deeper still, the very substance of beauty

which he can acknowledge and name, though it is not merely one thing among many in the world but the very light that shines through them all and makes them to be what they are.

And this contact with beauty both consoles and causes pain. For despite the purity of this beauty, reflected in all that bears still in itself traces of the primal pallor, the world itself is fractured and broken, like a vessel dropped and cracked and in the long process of being mended. But again how the image fails! For it is not, in this moment, so much the brokenness of the world that causes Eldárien pain—though surely this is present too, and has been present for all the days of his life—but something else, something even deeper. For all that he sees and touches, every moment of his life, comes to him as a gift, a gift of love, and yet he can no longer see or know the Giver as he is in himself. And this sensation, this longing and reaching out of the heart, is new: for he feels kindled within him a thirst to know the great Giver of all things, to trace the lines of all being back to the Being who birthed them, to receive the love spoken in all loveliness and to find in them and beyond them the Lover who loved all things into existence and made them lovable, and who therefore must be infinitely more lovable, the fullness of Beauty itself.

All this he could have discovered, in some manner, by tracing the lines back to their origin, if only his heart were not so impure and his inner vision were not so clouded. And looking back now, he realizes that he had indeed walked a long way down that road in the earlier years of his life. But what he knows now, this is immeasurably deeper! What he knows now, from his time in the forest of the Velási, is something new, something altogether more profound, discovered not by the questioning mind and the searching heart, but given as a gift by the very Author of all things, who in singing the world has also sung himself into the tapestry of the world and continues to do so, that he may be known, and that his love may be embraced and lived. The closest feeling that Eldárien can name that comes anywhere close to this sensation of longing is that of homesickness: the nostalgia for the intimate love and peaceful security of family and home, where the humblest and yet most central realities of the universe unfold, and where the glimpse of primal Love is first given. Perhaps indeed, he thinks, all the longings and desires of life are really one long nostalgia to return to the beginning of one's existence and of all things, the beginning not merely in a temporal sense but in the very fabric of being, which is therefore not only beginning but also end: the Origin who is also Consummation, for he is himself home and love and intimacy all together as one.

Chapter Thirteen
Hope in Being Held

How is it that solitude can be both attractive and frightening, and that the experience of aloneness can be filled both with the deep pang of one's loneliness and with the joy of a deeper presence? But so it is. This Eldárien knows and feels now, realizing that for weeks his heart has been yearning for space, for time in complete solitude, not to distance himself from his companions or even from the troubled state of the world that weighs so heavily upon his shoulders, but in order to let his heart breathe, reach out, and receive. But now that he is here, he also feels beginning to well up within him the fears that he has carried with him but which have not had the space to emerge fully into consciousness—not to mention the ripples of suffering and strife that trouble the waters of life and which he cannot but take to his heart in the compassion that is gifted unto him both as a man and as a bearer of the blood of the Velási.

Of what is he afraid? In this moment one fear emerges above all the rest, and it reaches out with grasping hands as if to suffocate the very breath from him. He is afraid to be king. That is the simplest and most direct way to state it. For he has long known the burden of responsibility for the lives and welfare of others, and he has tasted deeply the bitterness of his failure, of his accountability for the suffering and loss that was due to his own blindness, negligence, or selfishness. And he fears doing so again. What, after all, makes a king or a ruler of men, and what destroys him? How shall a good king be distinguished, and how a bad one? Is not every man designed in his very existence to be a ruler in his own domain, be it only the home that his love creates and which he nourishes with his labor and protects and fosters with his strength and his tenderness? Indeed, even more fundamentally, is not every man—and for that matter every woman—a ruler in the house of his own soul, in the sanctuary of his own spirit? Man and woman stand always in custodianship, a sacred trust placed into their hands and hearts by the Creator, in which the world itself, and their brothers and sisters, and their very selves, are to be sheltered and cared for in the orbit of a love that manifests and extends the very love of the All-Giver.

If this is the case, then the only way to rule others justly, which means not rule but governance and guidance and care, is first to be a guardian of one's own house, the house of one's own being and the house of one's loves. Eldárien reflects on this now, recalling the misguidance that he has given, and

the disorders that have long existed within himself and which have led to ills in the lives of those around him and under his care. But feeling the constricting yoke of these memories—and especially the shame and self-alienation that comes with them—he tries to move briskly through them toward a place of greater clarity, whether that be in hope for the future or in a wider and deeper past where the perspective, being less narrowed by fear, is also clearer and more hopeful.

He begins to walk again, quickly both because of the cold and, even more, because of the movement of his own thoughts that stir him on. It is almost as if, in fact, he feels a need to manifest the internal movement of his mind and heart in the external gestures of his body—as if he needs to give voice to the longing that he carries within to *move on*, beyond the suffocating shame and fear that have crippled him for so long, and into a place of deeper trust and thus of richer freedom. But what of his limits, his blindness, his unavoidable mistakes and failures, which will certainly manifest themselves in even the most optimistic of futures?

As he walks, another thought distills itself gently into the midst of his tumultuous thoughts. And this thought provides some measure of stability. He realizes, even with all of the insecurity that washes over him in this moment, that only six months ago he could not have stood where he stands now nor walked in the way that he walks: in openness to such a possibility as kingship, to a gift and a task that lies beyond all human measure both in benevolence and in responsibility. How has the desire to wash away the stains of his past guilt been transformed so deeply in its root, and opened itself so radically from within, to a desire only to be of service to the people of Telmérion, even if it means accepting the crown of rule in order to unify the divided clans and to protect and safeguard their peace and harmony?

The beginnings of an answer come to him as his path leads him around again to where the bulwark meets the second level of the city, and he finds himself facing a temple dedicated to the goddess Hiliána. He sees clearly now that for many years he has been fleeing from his limitations and from his frailty in a mortal fear, seeing in them the cause of so much suffering and loss for others whom he would only wish to aid. But how could a man, no matter how wise or strong he be, ever avoid his limitations? It is the very stuff of which his life is made, is it not? A man's custodianship is not of the whole world, but of the sanctuary of his own spirit and the temple of his own flesh; his rule and his care is not of the distant nations, but of the homestead that he builds and of the family that flourishes in this place that he creates and safeguards. So too, if he is to write a tale or recount a history, if he is to fashion a painting or mold a sculpture, if he is to develop skill in music or in handiwork, he does so only in the context of limitation, and not against it.

The words he writes are inscribed only in the four edges of the page, and the sculpture is formed precisely by creating limits, creating edges, which delineate a shape and a form. The intimacy of family is centered around the hearth of love and protected by the wall of enduring fidelity, which nothing shall break, for in its breaking all that is good and precious about family is destroyed.

And how much does Eldárien desire to do precisely this, in the deepest way that he can, for the whole people of Telmérion, who are his people...yes, who are his family! He sees now, more than he has ever seen before, a thread that has been woven throughout his life, unnoticed but true: the contours of his love and his affection, like the frame of a picture or the edges of a page, have always been the people of Telmérion, and her unity. It is not that he does not love others, does not love every man and woman who walks this earth, and the rippling grasses or dancing trees or standing mountains of other nations and other lands. No, he does, and he knows that he must, for if love is a true disposition of the heart, it must be universal, open to one and to all. But just as surely and just as necessarily, love must be particular, turning its face and its action upon those who are placed within the orbit of its care. In these limits it finds, as it were, the path of its expansion as well as the locus of its concretization. Here what is limited and what is universal in some way coincide and live together as one. Insofar as love remains true to itself, it maintains the rich tension between both: the love for one's nation and the love for all nations, the care for one's family and the care for all families, the reverence for one woman and the reverence for all women, the care of children and the love of all who are weak, little, and in need, and all who are growing gradually unto the fullness of life.

And precisely such lines have been etched deep into Eldárien's heart—lines that are both the size of the universe, boundless in the openness of their expanse, and also the very shape of Telmérion and the contours of her people. And in him now, upon the occurrence of these thoughts, is enkindled the desire to devote himself to precisely such a love, in both of its dimensions. But what...oh, what of the other kind of limitation that he feels? The one that causes such fear in him? For however limited the scope of his love may be, however focused, it is not the love itself that he fears, but his own inability to love, and the weakness and inconstancy of his heart, which have caused him to hurt others so many times in the past. But perhaps in the sight of his Creator and Father he is not expected to love perfectly or beyond limitation, but simply to love, to love according to his unique capacity each day, as small as that may be. All the rest remains in the hands of grace and mercy.

Stiff now because of the cold, and yearning for a moment of warmth before continuing his walk on its course back to the inn, Eldárien steps into the

temple of Hiliána. He immediately finds himself enfolded in architecture both massive and intimate, with walls and ceiling that, surprisingly, give the impression both of closeness and of expanse. And as he walks forward into the main sanctuary of the temple, he sees the statue of Hiliána appear large before him, stone waves lapping at her feet while she sits upon an isle rising from the ocean—the land of Telmérion—and in her arms is a child that suckles at her breast. Within the expansive intimacy of the temple, its closeness and its wideness both true and inseparable as they conjoin in his experience, he feels as if the structure itself is bowing down over this woman, this Anaía, who cradles in her embrace all the peoples of Telmérion, and all their history. In other words, her love, universal in its scope, has transcribed itself to limits, has focused itself so directly and so fully as to be like rays joined in white-hot intensity upon a single object: upon the heart and the life of Eldárien Illómiel. And in this focus, in this gaze of love and tenderness, she has both revealed the tenderness of the One who is the origin of all love and whose heart her own heart but expresses and manifests, and has also entrusted unto Eldárien a great gift and task, that he may be a sharer in the same love and a custodian of the same mystery. And this he desires to do: to be transparent to the light of eternal love shining into this world just as she is, to be in the service of the same mystery that her timeless existence manifests, and to which she has imparted him a share.

In such a deep and wide perspective, for a moment all of his own weaknesses and limitations appear as nothing—less than a drop of water lost in a boundless ocean. And the flame kindled in his heart leaps up. And the answer comes. It is an answer given, not once and for all as a possession to which he can cling, as if no longer shall he struggle or fight for the truth revealed unto him, but rather as the very ground upon which he shall always walk in every struggle, and the light in which all the coming days of his life, however dark they may be, shall be bathed. It is a gift and an answer which he does not hold, but rather which holds him. And it could be no other way. For the only answer to the awareness of one's limitation and inadequacy is the answer of *being held by One who is greater.* Only the Creator and Father—who is security beyond any security given by one's own desire or capacity for faithfulness, or any promises of the world—can give an enduring peace and security that can sustain the mystery of love in its every expression, however specific and however universal it may be, whatever its depth and whatever its scope, even unto the four corners of the earth in arms stretched wide in compassion and in gift.

† † †

Eldárien sits at the front of the sanctuary, nearly at the foot of the statue, and, pulling his cloak tight around himself and lowering his head, he closes his eyes. The sound of silence and of space seems to envelop him, quieting

not only any noises of the city that could reach his ears, but even, little by little, the restless thoughts of his own mind and the anxieties of his own heart. The shame and fear linger within him, but some of the bitterness of the first and some of the constriction of the second is lessened, and he finds himself simply abiding, at the heart of his weakness and his woundedness, before a gaze in which he is both fully seen and fully loved.

Many minutes pass in this manner, though he is little aware of the passage of time. He only stirs when he hears footsteps in the sanctuary, coming up the aisle and passing directly in front of him. But here they stop. He feels that he knows those steps; or perhaps better, he feels that he knows that *presence.* Opening his eyes and looking up, he sees Tilliána standing before him. She faces the statue with her hands clasped before her and her head bowed, though in a few moments she turns back, and, smiling, nods to Eldárien. "I did not expect to find you here," she says.

"Nor I you," he replies, rising to his feet.

"What led you here?" Tilliána asks, looking at him with an unusual intensity in her eyes, as if she is moved by something of which Eldárien is not fully aware.

"I happened upon the temple unintentionally on my walk about the city," he explains, "and stepped inside both for warmth and for repose. And both I have found."

"It is a beautiful place," she says. "I did not know it was here."

"Were you not resting for the afternoon? Why did you come out into the cold?"

"I was looking for you."

"Really? I thought you said that you did not expect to find me here."

"Well, what I meant," she says hesitantly, "is that I did not actually expect that my heart would lead me here. I did not know...that the bond between us was truly so deep and so tangible."

"You mean to say that you 'felt' my location strongly enough to find me," Eldárien says, astonished, "and with no other indications?"

"Yes."

"That is incredible."

"It is, isn't it? And yet it is simply true."

"Well, we are here together now," Eldárien says. "Would you like to sit?"

"No, I shall stand, thank you," Tilliána replies all too formally, lowering her eyes.

"Very well. But was there something you desired to discuss with me? You seem...how shall I say?...almost uncomfortable. Is something the matter?"

"No, nothing is the matter," she says, but then she pauses, and, raising her eyes, corrects herself, "Or rather, there is nothing amiss that has not been

amiss already."

"You are grieving for what you witnessed this morning, and for all the many deaths of which it is a sign?" asks Eldárien.

"That is so, yes. In so short a time I have witnessed so much pain and loss, and felt it, too, in my very heart and in my very flesh. At times—times like today—it almost feels like more than I can bear. It is as though I could break at any moment, and simply cease... I do not know how else to express it. It is as though the pain would just break me like a fallen branch breaks under a trampling foot. I would still be here, but all my sanity would be gone, snapped asunder by a pressure simply too great for it to bear."

Pity and compassion surge in Eldárien's heart as he looks upon the pained face of Tilliána, her long blonde hair loose about her face, framing her skin rosy from the cold and highlighting her vivid eyes alight with the intensity of the reality of which she speaks. "You speak of a grievous pain," he replies gently. "It is the greatest and deepest of sorrows which seem to stretch the mind beyond its limit, to call into question one's very sense of reality. It is like the solid footing on which you have until now walked is suddenly taken out from underneath, and you know neither where to stand nor where to walk, nor how to cope with the pain that hems you in on every side. Loss such as this can have an oppressive quality about it—I mean that it can feel not only like an absence, a tangible absence of the one whom you loved, and who is there no longer, but like a knife through the spirit's heart, ever turning and never at rest. And not only, Tilliána, do you feel the loss of those whom you loved so deeply, and thus hurt for their absence so keenly, but I also see in you —I also feel in you—how much you carry the sorrows and the losses of our world. And I do not wish to see you break."

"But the burden of such pain, how does one bear it?" asks Tilliána. "At times I can hardly imagine what you and Elmáriyë must feel, bearing so much in yourselves. Even my own pains and my own loss feel like too much for me. And yet, nonetheless..."

"Nonetheless, even though that is the case, you cannot close your heart off to others?"

"Exactly."

"Would you not say that in bearing the pain together, in a true act of heartfelt compassion, there is found a joy deeper than the sorrow and a peace deeper than the pain?" Eldárien asks.

After reflecting on these words for a moment, Tilliána nods and says, "You are certainly right. I know of what you speak. However..." And now she unconsciously shakes her head, both in denial as well as in a gesture that seems as if she is trying to rid her mind of some unwelcome thought. "But when it continues day after day, and the pain only deepens, with little hope of

deliverance or freedom, then the weight begins to shift, such that the joy and the peace seem all but buried under the burden. When I saw those bodies in the city today, slain by the dragon, and when we stood around the emblems by which the cult summoned the creature, I felt such evil and such oppression. The evil was so tangible that it seemed I could hardly breathe. And the depth of sadness was so great that I felt I could weep for endless years and never find solace."

"Oh, Tilliána," Eldárien whispers quietly, taking her hands in his own and looking deep into her eyes. For a long while they do not speak but only look at one another, allowing their hearts to speak in the way deeper than words. But at last Eldárien releases her hands and begins to speak again in audible voice, saying, "While I walked about the city today, I thought much of the reality of kingship that lies before me, granted that we receive such mercy that the path that we walk ends truly in victory rather than in defeat. It is a task and a goal that I would never have chosen for myself, and a part of my heart has recoiled from it, and almost rebelled against it. And this is so not because I am averse to the idea of being king on principle—for I see it not as an honor but simply as a service—for it allows many things that my heart deeply desires. Rather, I remember fancies that I had in my youth, long forgotten but emerging now into consciousness once again: fancies that a high king would return to Telmérion and would unite us all under a common mantle. And I imagined that his care and his guardianship were but a kind of universal fatherhood, and that all the diverse peoples of our land were but many different siblings in a single family. It seemed foolish at the time, a wistful imagining or a wishful daydream. Little did I know that such a task would be entrusted unto me. And I would be all but crushed by the weight of such an awareness, such a task, if it had not been preceded by—and continually held by—the awareness of a fatherhood so much more universal and incomparably more secure. But in fact there is something more that I wish to say to you. I share it not only that you may know where I stand in regards to the journey that we walk together, but also so that you may know your place within it."

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"I know that you have felt before that your role in this quest we share is one of little importance," Eldárien explains. "Rórlain too has grappled deeply with such a feeling, and in his grappling he has found profound answers that give guidance to his heart. But you...you just walk in a simplicity and a trust that touch me and move me deeply. In other words, you are here among us, not because you want to provide some unique or irreplaceable service, but because you have found a *home*, because you have found security in the orbit of our love. And this, I dare say, is more important than any role or service. Yes, while the task and the service of every man and every woman is

important, what is even more primary, giving meaning to all else while also surpassing it, is the pure mutual belonging of love. Indeed it is the love of the Father of all, in which each one of us is made to be who we are, even before all roles and tasks that we may embrace in this life. The word remains with me strongly ever since our time in the Velási forest, and I cannot seem to forget it: *seikáni*, beloved. This is the wellspring from which flows all the richness of life and relationship, all the complexity and multiplicity of roles and tasks and responsibilities, indeed all the many beautiful and painful experiences of life and the very order of society itself...and to this sacred place all returns again at the end. It all returns to that gaze of love by the Father of all, which makes each one of us to be who we are, uniquely and irreplaceably beloved.

"From the first moment when I met you in your pain and your suffering in the ghetto of Ristfánd, and especially in that profound instant when what was yours became mine, when both your life and your death, your sorrow and your grief, your joy and your hope, became mine—from that moment until now, when I have turned my gaze upon you—whether of the eyes or the heart—I have continually felt the confirmation of these words, even before I knew their ultimate origin. Tilliána, you *are* beloved. When I see you I think of nothing else than this. And such an awareness is a confirmation for me of the true nature of kingship, indeed of all forms of custodianship in this world, be it the greatest or the littlest." He pauses and lowers his eyes for a moment, as if unsure of how to continue or uncomfortable giving voice to what he wishes to say. When he raises his eyes again, however, he continues in a kind and confident voice, "I suppose what I am trying to say at the end of all of this is that I wish to give to you that which your heart seeks, and which it has glimpsed, that it may be yours always, even if our common fellowship is no more after our quest has come to conclusion."

"What do you mean to express, Eldárien?"

"I mean to say that, whatever the future may hold, I wish to offer a home to you for the one you have lost."

Looking into his eyes, Tilliána opens her mouth to reply, but she finds it impossible to summon forth words. Instead, tears spring to her eyes, but before they can escape to stream down her cheeks she buries her face in Eldárien's chest and allows him to draw her into his embrace and to hold her. At last, when she has found her voice, though without stepping back or raising her head, she says, "It is difficult to forget and to move on. To hope for a home again when I have so violently lost the first, and even more so when our world seems all but teetering on the brink of destruction. To again accept such a gift feels almost like hoping for too much, and even more so to ever desire again to bring forth life from my flesh, to create a home for the littlest

and most vulnerable members of our race. I do not know if I could ever again hold one of my own children in my arms, without being overwhelmed by the fear of losing them. I am afraid that suffering that again would break my heart forever." She falls silent again and allows her words to linger, knowing that Eldárien receives them fully and compassionately in the silence. In truth, so little are words needed between the two of them, whose hearts have been so deeply conjoined, that it almost feels unnecessary to give voice to the deepest movements of her heart. But necessary she knows that it is, that word and silence, feeling and voice, may join together in witness to the truth and in the communication, in the communion, that binds hearts together in all that they have and are.

And so she continues, "But I also feel deep within me that children are the hope of our future, and that the cradle of the family shall bear the spark in which so much loss shall again begin to be mended. But...but we are not even at war's end, and I fear that we may never be. Is it not too much to plan for such a wondrous gift whenever we stand on the brink of death and destruction?"

Eldárien now holds Tilliána at arms length and looks again into her eyes, his own gaze full of compassion and tenderness. He says, "I understand your hesitancy to hope, and, insofar as I am able, I hold in compassion the pain and the fear that still burden and cripple your heart from the loss of your husband and your children. And yet my heart and my mind both say together a single word: what is hope but hope against despair? What is it but life confronting the threat of death and still believing in life beyond it? Yes, what is hope but clinging to life enduring and unbreakable, because held by the love that is indestructible, taking its origin not from any man or woman alone, but from the very Love that sang the world into existence? If that is the true matter of things, then how can we do anything but hope in the face of destruction and reach out in the face of loss? It is not easy. It is perhaps the hardest thing of all. Yet trust gives birth to hope, and hope sustains love to its full consummation. That is the journey of the heart in this life, from love unto love, from beginning unto end. And I only speak to you in this way because I desire, in what little way I may, to give you hope in the darkness of your own life, as you are a shining lantern and beauteous ensign of hope also for me. In my heart I feel the call and the desire to be for you a shelter and support, to be above all a companion in life and in death, and to build with you a home that may cherish and foster the very beauty that in this broken world of ours is so threatened with destruction and loss."

Chapter Fourteen
A Sacrifice of Flame

After Eldárien has finished speaking, Tilliána replies, "Your words are very kind and full of love. And I know from whence they arise, for I feel the same in my heart. You speak of desire, but also of call. The desire I understand. But... But the call I doubt and I fear. No, no...it is actually the opposite. It is not the call that I fear, but the desire. Easier it would be if it were but another task given to you among the many that lie before you, and I could respond simply with an act of obedience. If you were my king and commanded this of me, it would be easier for me to accept than if you were yourself, Eldárien, and spoke to me of the voice of your own inmost heart. This, this desire scares me. Both yours and mine. For after all that I have been through, I fear to love, to give again the gift of my heart and my affection. I fear that I shall never be able to love in this way again, not in a commitment and a gift that would harness my entire life."

"You fear the loss that would eventually follow upon such a gift?" Eldárien asks.

"I...yes, I think that is exactly it," Tilliána replies. "Obedience without affection is different than this, different than something that goes beyond mere service. The gift of the heart opens up a deeper suffering than anything borne by obligation alone."

"But also a deeper joy, does it not?" Eldárien asks. "And my heart also asks: How could I ever command you to love? Only the One who also grants love can command it. No earthly king can command the love of his subjects, nor can any husband command the love of his wife. Love must be freely given if it is to be love at all."

"But just because something is commanded does not mean that it is not free," Tilliána remarks softly and wisely. "There is much that we are commanded which does not constrain us, but rather sets us free. For are not the commands given to us but waypoints to mark our way or lanterns to illumine the path?"

"If such commands are in accord with the truth, yes," agrees Eldárien. "Thus the One who can command love is also all-deserving of love, and gives us the very love by which to love him. For him to command us is nothing but to express the yearning in his heart both to love us and to be loved by us. But I...I am not deserving of love, and thus could never command it—not of you, and not of another. The One who made us deserves all the love and affection

of our hearts, and his beauty itself awakens this love and draws it back to him, liberating our hearts in the process. But I speak to you, Tilliána, in nothing but the poverty and vulnerability of my own heart. I offer to you the only thing that I can offer: a free gesture of welcome and of care. If someday I am to be your king, as king I shall care for you. But I shall always care for you even more deeply as your friend, and as your life's companion in whatever way that you shall desire and accept."

"And I am deeply grateful for that," Tilliána says. "But I need time to think, to pray, to let my heart come to silence and peace within itself. I cannot give you any kind of answer now. Please forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive. I do not expect an answer. I have heard the word of your heart, and I shall cherish it," Eldárien says. "For now, let us only wait and see what the future has in store for us. We do not know what awaits us in coming days, nor do we know where your heart shall be in such a time."

"Very well," whispers Tilliána with a gentle nod of her head. And then, looking into Eldárien's eyes once more, she adds, "And...thank you. Thank you for accepting me and loving me with such delicacy and tenderness."

"And thank you for allowing yourself to be loved," replies Eldárien, and then, with a gesture of his hand, "Shall we return to the inn for now? The afternoon should soon be drawing to a close, and our time to return to the citadel."

They walk together through the city shrouded in the white of snow both fallen and falling. In the inn of the *Whistling Willow* their friends are just awakening and gathering their belongings for the trek to the upper parts of the city. A general sense of anxiety and fear before the unknown that awaits them that night—rooted in the evil that they have known and confronted in the past, but whose depths they can only imagine—begins to grow as the time passes and the hour of twilight draws near. They are shown to a handful of private rooms in a side wing of the citadel, though there is little time for them to accustom themselves to such rooms or to spend time alone in them, for they depart almost immediately to return to the city. The sun dips his face below the horizon in the west, in a sky that is now clear and free of falling snow, when the five companions step together into the courtyard before the citadel. Here they agree to meet in two hours' time—marked by the bell of one of the temples which rings at intervals, even, as far as they can tell from their time in the city, until midnight.

"How shall we know what to consider suspicious activity, and what not?" Elmáriyë asks. "It may be obvious, but I do not want to rely upon that alone."

"We can only hope, if the members of the cult are active again tonight, that their presence should be obvious," answers Cirien. "Look for any symbols similar to those we saw this morning, or any figures moving about in the

darkness. Though this snow shall greatly inconvenience us, it shall be an aid to us in other respects, for I doubt anyone else shall willingly be out in this cold and in a city covered in white."

"That is true," Elmáriyë remarks.

"And it shall be a bright night because of it," says Eldárien. "Therefore please, all of you, try to remain unseen." They all nod in response. "Then let us return here in two hours' time."

And so they depart, each toward a different region of the city. Eldárien was right about the brightness of the night, for with the departure of the falling snow the clouds too begin to dissipate and reveal the open sky. As complete night embraces the land, above them spreads a wide expanse glistening with countless stars; the moon also rises far in the east and her face shines off the snow such that the entire city and the landscape around it glows in a radiant half-light.

The air is bitterly cold and the prospect of being out in this temperature for the coming two hours—or even for the entirety of the night—is an unpleasant one; and it would even be deadly were it not that they had prepared beforehand by dressing in their warmest attire. Large braziers of fire are also kept alight throughout the city and along the walls for the use of the nocturnal guards, and these, if only in passing, shall provide a warmth to combat the chill. Even deeper than the assault of the cold, however, is their anxiety and fear concerning the activities of the cult and the expected coming of the dragon.

An eerie silence falls upon the city like a cloak of fear thrown about the shoulders, or rather like shackles bound around hands and feet. There is not even a whisper of wind in the air and the heavy accumulation of snow on all surfaces only deepens the sense of muffledness that engulfs Onylándun and its inhabitants. But they walk nonetheless and search throughout the city for their elusive goal. The two hours pass, however, without any incident, good or ill, and the five companions return to the courtyard before the citadel with cold bodies and stiffened limbs, and with anxious and burdened hearts. Together they step into the citadel and stand by a burning hearth in the entryway, the curious gazes of the guards turned upon them. Rórlain moves away from the group for a moment and explains to the guards their situation and their motivations, and they seem satisfied with his explanation. When he returns they begin to discuss the path forward from where they now find themselves.

"It is as I feared," Eldárien says, "though I had hoped we would find some sign at the beginning of the night. If the cult intends to summon the dragon again, I suspect that it will be in the heart of the night rather than at its beginning. But I am loath to invite all of you to remain in the bitter cold for any

longer than you already have."

"What if we were to make rounds about the city at intervals?" Rórlain asks. "It may not be wise to remain outside for the entire duration of the night, but it is feasible that we could walk about the city every hour or two."

"It takes over an hour to walk the circuit of the city," says Cirien, "so do you suggest an hour walking and an hour resting? I understand the recovery of warmth that such would allow, and yet it sounds both tedious and ineffective, particularly when walking through snow that in places is two or three feet deep."

"Not all of us need do so," answers Rórlain. "As for myself, I think I can do it without too much difficulty, but—"

"But for me it is quite hard," Cirien concludes for him. "I understand, and I accept the limitations that come with my age. How about this? I shall patrol at such intervals the upper part of the city near the citadel. That is more within my power."

"That is a good idea, though please set whatever interval your strength allows," says Eldárien. "Rórlain and myself shall take the most arduous paths, as I believe that we can bear it." Then he turns to look upon the two women and asks, "And what about you, Elmáriyë and Tilliána? I do not ask anything of you, nor do I however refuse your aid. Please rest, if you desire. It is truly not necessary that all of us are at vigil for the entirety of the night."

"During our travels the nights were easier to bear, for we slept wrapped in fur, and beside a campfire," Tilliána says in response. "But walking about in this kind of weather...I find my strength already spent. I want to help however I may, but at this rate I do not know what more I have to give."

"Then rest, please," Eldárien says. "Not only do I not wish for you to harm yourself this night, but I also want you to be safe should anything happen. If and when the dragon comes, there is little or nothing you could do against it. Your place is different but valuable nonetheless, so do not think for a moment that your limitation is a failure."

"Very well, Eldárien, I shall do as you say," replies Tilliána, lowering her eyes.

Elmáriyë steps to her side and wraps an arm around her shoulders, saying, "I shall remain here with Tilliána, and we shall rest as much as our worry for the three of you may allow us. But do not be surprised if come morning you learn that I too have made rounds of my own, using the vantage point of the citadel to our advantage."

Nodding knowingly, Eldárien says, "I understand."

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And so the hours of the night progress. Eldárien and Rórlain trudge through the snowy streets on opposite sides of the middle and lower city,

while Cirien keeps watch over the smaller area of its upper portion. Despite the communal decision to return at intervals to the citadel seeking both warmth and rest, Eldárien finds that he cannot bring himself to return, and instead, when he feels exhaustion overtake him, he takes refuge in the guard-house on the foremost part of the wall separating Onylándun from the plains. Here the guards—after hearing his explanation about the reason for his vigil—allow him to lean his back against the wall beside a warm fire. They promise to wake him in an hour, which also happens to be the time of the changing of the guard at four o'clock, when they depart to return to their rooms and are replaced by the morning guard.

But Eldárien is awakened a few minutes before by shouts directed, not to wake him, but to bring warning. He stirs and quickly rises to his feet, trying to make out the words in the voices muffled by distance and by the walls that surround him. Stepping outside onto the battlements, he finds himself standing behind the guards whose shift is coming to a close, and he watches with them as another member of the guard—perhaps from the morning watch—runs toward them, shouting. At last he can make out the sound of his voice, "They are asking for the one who wields the light. I was told he was in the lower city, but I cannot find him. He is the leader of the company that came to the citadel yesterday morning and spoke with the council. Have you seen him?"

"Aye, he is here with us," answers one of the guards near Eldárien, turning back to look at him for a moment and then moving aside so that he can step forward.

"I am the one whom you seek," says Eldárien. "Who is asking for me, and what news do you bring?"

"The old man from the order of Nirániel, your companion, has sent for you," the man says, stopping in front of Eldárien and trying to catch his breath. "But Brýma is also there. He learned of your efforts, and though I won't say that he was at first pleased, it seems that you have proven him wrong."

"Proven him wrong? What do you mean?"

"Perhaps it is better to hasten there yourself. For you have found those whom you wished to find and have intercepted their ceremony. That is all I can tell you."

"That is all I need to know. Thank you." And with this Eldárien sets off at a run across the top of the wall and then through the streets of the city, the icy morning air biting at his exposed face and burning in his lungs. When he arrives at the courtyard outside the citadel he sees a group of people standing in the firelight—or rather two groups of people, one composed of Rórlain, Cirien, Brýma, and a few of the citadel guards, and the other composed of six

persons clothed in black garments from head to toe. The outlines of the latter are highlighted vividly against the snow that, even in the darkness of predawn, still glows grayish white, though tinted with the orange of the firelight. These figures are also now bound, with cords fixing their hands behind their backs at the wrist.

As Eldárien draws near, Rórlain nods to him knowingly and gestures for him to approach. The time has come to intervene. But there is time neither for talk nor for action, as one of the men in black, clearly marked as the leader of the rest by the red symbol emblazoned on his chest—not unlike the symbol that they had found the day before written in blood upon the earth—steps forward and speaks. Even though he is in bonds, his voice and his presence are commanding.

"We summon the dragon, and more than the dragon," he says. "With this act, long prepared and persistently desired, we usher in the movement that shall break the cycle and set many free."

"What is the meaning of your words?" Brýma asks, stepping forward to stand directly before the man. "What are you summoning?"

"I will say only this: What happened in Ristfánd shall be as nothing compared with what awaits you here," he answers. "I suggest that you yield to your fate, embracing it with resolve and the serenity of surrender."

"Please, stop. Why do you do this?"

"It is difficult for the uninitiated to understand."

"Then enlighten me."

But before the cult leader is able to answer, Cirien steps forward and lays a hand on Brýma's shoulder. "It is better not to..." he begins, but then the leader turns away and speaks as if only to himself.

He says, "Many desire their sacrifice to be remembered. They wish to live on in the grateful minds of others. But we do not wish for this. We wish our sacrifice to be forgotten, and to bring forgetfulness." Then, raising his eyes to the sky in which the first rays of dawn are beginning to show, his face in a kind of ecstasy of elation, he delivers an oration in a loud voice that abides no interruption. And yet even as he does so Brýma commands the guards to draw their weapons and to prepare and approach, that if necessary they may strike down the cloaked men before their goal is achieved. "The world is its own poison and its own medicine. And what petty poison and what mediocre medicine! The answer then is to escape, and to bring the world with us in this escape. For nothing lies beyond the cycle of death and rebirth, of destruction and restructuring, except escape, escape from the cycle itself into the nothing that is all and the all that is nothing. Good and evil, light and darkness, they are but two complementary sides of the universe, the duality of all things over which we have no control, but which continually causes us

pain and suffering. And that is its only importance to us: that in the face of these arbitrary cosmic forces, we suffer. And man tires of the ceaseless cycle, of the pain in which he suffers for his prior lives, and by the fleeting joys that will dissolve with the coming of future pain, whether in this life or another. We only seek, therefore, to move beyond the trap in which we find ourselves, to at last escape once and for all. Indeed, what we seek is more altruistic still. For in freeing ourselves from ourselves and returning to the *ónas,* melding again into that about which we cannot distinguish whether it is everything or it is nothing, we also seek to free this wretched universe. We wish to carry everything, once and for all, beyond the cycle and into the bliss of nihilism, into the place where all is nothing and nothing is all, in the escape of forgetfulness."

Then all the members of the cult begin to chant in an unintelligible language, their words rising louder and louder with each passing syllable, and the guards surrounding them step back spontaneously, as if to distance themselves from this mysterious ritual.

And it takes only a moment or two.

Brýma gives the command to slay the figures where they stand, but even as he call out a rush as of wind sounds above them, and in an instant there is a blur of reddish black and a burst of flame. The dragon swoops down directly above them, visible in the firelight and the light of early dawn, and he belches forth from his mouth a torrent of flame before which the braziers of the courtyard pale in comparison. And this torrent is directed at the six cult members dressed in their black garments, drenching them in fire until they become as pillars of fire from head to toe. Those who surround them leap back to avoid the impact of the flames. But the cult members continue to chant even in the flames, as the dragon itself, with a rush of wings, disappears anew into the sky.

Yet in a short time the chanting voices fall silent, and the men once garmented in black now sink to the earth, hardly more than burned embers, blacker still, unmoving and lifeless against the snow.

"Let us get out of the open this instant!" cries Brýma. "The dragon could return for another round."

"Yes, into the citadel immediately," echoes Cirien.

After they have stepped into the entryway to the citadel, Eldárien and Rórlain turn back, looking through the doorway into the courtyard as the last lingering flames consuming the bodies dwindle to nothingness against the snow. Then Rórlain closes the heavy doors but for a fraction, enough for them to look out and watch for the return of the dragon.

"What was that?" Elmáriyë asks behind them.

"It was a summoning, I am afraid," replies Cirien in a sober voice, "and of

a more serious nature than what we beheld yesterday morning."

"Worse than Ristfánd..." breathes Tilliána. "They summoned the vrû'ádach and the other creatures of darkness, did they not?"

"I cannot imagine any other explanation than that," agrees Cirien. Then he turns to the hæras and adds, "Brýma, I know not how long it shall take for them to arrive, whether days or weeks, but all preparations must be made."

"I understand," Brýma answers, his face lined with worry but also with anger. "But why this? And why now? I find it incredible, truly incredible... How can one embrace such darkness and such absurdity?"

"I think rather that they were attempting to rebel against absurdity, to escape from it," answers Cirien quietly. "But they could not find a way out except the one to which their leader tried to give voice. And yet...and yet you are right: they not only fled from the pain of the world, but in the process they came to worship the darkness and to yield to its destruction."

"The words that he spoke...they are truly terrifying," Tilliána says. "What kind of answer can one give to such absurdity, to such frustrated longing? For it is as though he sought to express a longing for eternity, a longing for life, but knew of no path except that of escape unto endless death."

"You have in your very words expressed a path toward an answer, Tilliána," Cirien says in reply. "Whenever the awareness of a benevolent divine presence at the origin of all thing is lost, then the conflict between good and evil becomes unintelligible, and the hope for enduring life a fiction." He sighs and shakes his head sorrowfully. "This again gives voice to our desperate need for the revelation of the One, the All-Father, in history. Without the unveiling of his face and his love, how could we ever come to a truly confident assurance of more than mere escape from the duality of life and death, joy and suffering? When the very ground of all being disappears from sight—and unless he is revealed to us anew—all our hopes and aspirations remain only tentative and uncertain."

"How terribly painful is this cry of the human heart, a cry that is but the wish to be free from the apparent absurdity of life, and from the narrowness of a world in which the one Creator is no longer seen and known!" cries Elmáriyë. "Even though they turned to the very powers of darkness in order to be free from the darkness that they hated, and I should be angry at this, I feel for them only pity and compassion. And I know that there are many, too many, in a similar situation, even if they do not go to the same lengths in their search for freedom and liberation. How I wish that all could know the truth that has been revealed unto us: the truth that I can never truly die, for I am seen, known, and loved by the One who is beyond death, the One who is life itself. He is the beyond that is both transcendent and near, both on that side of the veil and on this, and it is inconceivable that a being who exists in

ceaseless relationship with him could ever cease to be, sustained as it is on the unbreakable cord of his enduring love." She pauses for a moment and turns to look at Eldárien, her face lined with emotion. He turns his whole body to face her and looks into her eyes. She then says to him, "Eldárien, if it is granted to you to become king, do all that you can to bring the light that has been revealed to us and entrusted to us to those who walk in the darkness, crying out for a light that they can no longer see or believe."

Eldárien answers simply, with a nod of his head, "There is nothing I desire more than that."

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As the sun gradually rises over the mountains in the east, painting the sky in hues of pink and purple and casting glimmering light off the snow that cloaks the entire face of the earth as far as the eye can see, the five companions gather the remains of the burnt bodies of the cult members and bury them in the main graveyard of the city. The prayers that Cirien offers over their unmarked graves are sorrowful ones, filled with lament and grieving, though because they are prayers they are filled with hope, the hope that, along with faith and love, is the lifeblood of prayer even when all is cast into darkness.

After they have departed from the cemetery and stand again in the streets of the city, they pause for a moment, their bodies huddled together for warmth and their limbs exhausted nearly to the point of collapse, both from their nocturnal vigil and from the struggle of digging graves in frozen soil covered in a thick layer of snow. "Well, we have done what needed to be done, or rather we have done what we could," Rórlain remarks, his arms wrapped tightly around his torso in the effort to retain his body's last lingering warmth. "It seems that the dragon had its victims for the night, though I am surprised that it did not return for more slaughter. Regardless, I think that we all need to sleep."

"Yes, you are right," says Cirien. "We can concern ourselves with the import of last night's events once we have all had some rest."

"Wait," Tilliána interjects, "but did not Brýma invite us to dine with him this day, and to continue our discussion?"

"Ah, that he did," Cirien replies. "However, before we left the citadel for the burial, he said we should postpone it for another day. Our 'unannounced night,' as he called it, was a good enough excuse to reschedule. So he said."

"And I am grateful that he did," Tilliána concludes with a sigh of relief.

On the following day they join Brýma and two other council members, Jatíldë and Víndal, for the midday meal. Concern is evident in the eyes of all and in the tenor of their voice as they discuss the import of the words of the cult leader. Despite the grave threat, one solace that they have is that the dragon did not even make an appearance the previous night. Perhaps the

activities of the cult were indeed restricted to these few members who offered themselves as blood sacrifice to summon forces of darkness upon the city. Then none would remain to summon the dragon each night, nor to enact other works of darkness within the confines of the city. If this is the case, then at least the conflict shall be only with those forces that approach them from without, and not a danger and a poison also from within the city itself. Or perhaps the cult is only biding its time and preparing in the shadows for yet further activities. Regardless of what the situation may be, those who defend the city can only hope and walk forward in readiness, using this time as best they can to prepare for whatever may come.

Cirien and Rûmdil agree together to spend the coming days—and longer if necessary—searching for any remaining presence and activity of the cult within the city. Eldárien and Rórlain, on the other hand, offer to work with the guards and warriors of Onylándun in preparing for any coming assault, and to stand with them whenever such an attack may come, placing the light that they have received at the service of the people and for their protection. Tilliána and Elmáriyë, being untrained in the arts of war and unacquainted as yet with the nature of such cults, plan to aid in whatever other matters may be of assistance to the people of the city, whether that be speaking with the them in encouragement and care or preparing fortifications or, should it come to it, tending to the wounded and burying the fallen. But how they wish that such grief would pass the people by, and that no more would there be massive graveyards of men, women, and even children slain in the chaos of battle and siege. If only the land remained one of peace, or could discover this peace again, such that every man or woman, every person however young or however old, could have hope of walking the journey of life from its beginning to its natural end without fearing the violence of others.

But is such a hope of peace even possible whenever the battles of nations among themselves is but one expression of a conflict that is cosmic in its proportions, in the war of light and of darkness, of good and of evil, of the radiant beauty of being and of all that militates against it and would drag it into nothingness and absurdity? Perhaps indeed, after all, that is the only true source of hope in the longing for peace, rather than the cause for despair. If it is up to the leaders of nations alone to safeguard peace, how could there ever be true confidence in enduring harmony and concord? For in the world in its present state, marred by the fall of humankind, the weak suffer while the powerful triumph, the good are afflicted while the evil seem to stand victorious and free, enjoying what they have so unjustly appropriated for themselves. But if there are other forces at work greater than the heart of man, a law of being deeper than merely the conflict of strength and weakness, then hope there can yet be, however elusive and mysterious it may at times appear.

And as the companions leave the meeting and return to their rooms, precisely this conflict and this struggle for hope occupies Eldárien's heart and attention. Depending on the amount of time until the coming of the attack, and on the nature of their enemy, there is little possibility to rely upon reinforcements from other cities. And even if the people of Onylándun are able to repel the attack—and hopefully more thoroughly than did the unfortunate citizens of Ristfánd and the suffering towns all over Rhóvas—this does not solve the fundamental problem nor eradicate the threat at its root. Regarding this, Eldárien cannot help but feel an immense weight upon his heart, an intermingling of desire and fear, a reaching out even as his spirit quavers with uncertainty. For it has fallen unto him, as the one called Lightborn, as the chosen king, to confront the powers of darkness at their very origin and to break their stranglehold on the people of Telmérion. But how and where shall this be done? He knows not even where to start, nor what to do to approach an answer.

Sílion had said that they should travel to Onylándun and here trust that their way would become clear before them, but the waiting is difficult. For as important as the light that he wields shall be in deflecting the forces of darkness that come to assail the city, he yearns rather to seek out this darkness in its very habitation, there to confront it once and for all. For even if against men of flesh and blood a tactic of offense is inappropriate—for life is to be safeguarded at all costs, not forfeit—it is altogether different when confronting the impersonal, diabolical forces of evil that lie at the root of the cosmic struggle. And to his own surprise, Eldárien notices that in addition to his fear and his hesitation, he also bears in himself a spark of boldness kindling into flame, which he has never known before. For a moment he realizes that it is no longer necessary to be passive before the circumstances of life, to be merely resigned to the lot that falls unto him, and to accept the evil that afflicts his brethren who are so dear to him. Even if at times there is no path to walk but that which leads through suffering and loss, nonetheless a freedom lies here—in his heart and in his action, in his hope and in his longing—far deeper and far surer than he has previously either known or imagined. Even if only for a moment, as a flash of lightning in a cloudy and dark night, he feels the spark leap up into flame and draw him onward, onward to the confrontation that, so far beyond his own abilities or efforts, provides hope of victory yet, since it lies in powers greater than his own in which nonetheless, in all of his littleness and frailty, he is granted to participate.

Book IV

A Song for Telmérion

Chapter One
In the Caverns of Darkness

Vast caverns of stone spread in all directions far beneath the earth, their only illumination the veins of precious ore that weave through the darker rock like blood vessels through the body, bringing not life but light. And yet here light is life, and darkness is death. For ever since the Empire began to exile the dangerous, the unwanted, the criminal—whether literal or political—into these expansive underground caverns, now a prison whose width and depth is unknown, existence has been for many a struggle against encroaching death. If light is a rare thing, since wood for torches is almost impossible to come by, even more rare is all that constitutes a healthy diet. For here fruits and vegetables do not grow, and the shipments from "above"—as it is now called by all here in the "underworld," or simply said, "below"—are far less than the inhabitants would need. Beasts live in the belly of the earth, that is true, and some are easy enough to trap or to hunt—rats and wraithclaws and even bats—but there are also legends and rumors of creatures deeper within that, were they to be disturbed, would bring an end to this struggle for life in a quick if not painless death.

And yet so it happened that the beasts slumbering deep under the earth were stirred awake by the presence of man, and a war began between the exiled members of humanity and the creatures of darkness. At first the representatives and office-holders of the Vælírian Empire knew nothing of this, for they took little interest in the affairs of those imprisoned in the depths through their policy of "purging." And if these exiles were slain by a power not their own, then all the better; if these underground caverns proved to be not only prison but executioner, how favorable an outcome. For as high and as steep as are the shafts of narrow stone that connect the overworld and the underworld, it always remains possible—even if a slim possibility—that those below will find some means of escape, and, in escape, find courage to kindle the fires of revolution and resistance. But such fires, to all appearances, have been utterly quenched, and the conflict of man and beast rages almost like a blazing inferno. As many heroes as arose to fight the darkness, and as many times as the beasts were cast down, they rose up again, as if immortal, born anew from the darkness as from some malicious seed.

But heroes did arise. Men and women of valor and strength, of integrity and fidelity, unwilling to allow their brethren to die, even in such a place as this. And yet in the hearts of many also burned a flame of vengeance and of

spite, mingled deeply with more noble aspirations. And through the very act by which the Empire sought to prevent rebellion it in truth stirred it into flame. It provided the crucible in which its enemies were forged into a force strong enough to supplant it. Eventually the Imperial officers learned of the creatures of darkness—whom old legends called *ötûnr* and *vornknost*, though they originated in the land of Telmérion far to the east, where they were called eötenga and vrû'ádach—and they sought some way to harness these powers to their side, in fear of suffering the destruction they might bring were they to find access to the overworld. Too late was this discovery to prevent rebellion, though not too late, perhaps, to crush it.

For access was at last gained through a secret shaft through which the slightest glimmer of the long-lost sky shone, and to which a path was built by many hands, allowing those exiled by the Empire to escape again into the light of day. And beholding this light once again after many years, burning in its brilliance and yet deeply desired, the rebellion began in earnest like a flame that, struggling to kindle, at last finds the air and the space it needs to spread and to set all around it ablaze. And thus at the same moment that the Empire learns how to find the vrû'ádach that still live in the land of Telmérion, and to join with them in warfare against a rebellious nation on distant shores, does rebellion spark on their own soil and among their own people. Perhaps this, after so many years of successful conquest and rule, shall be the downfall of the Vælírian Empire and the birth of a new order.

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Elmáriyë awakes with a start and sits up in bed, the vivid images of the dream swimming before her interior vision, overwhelming and yet also elusive, like sand slipping through a sieve. No, this was no ordinary dream. It was a form of *bearing*, a participation in events that only recently began to unfold in the land of Vælíria far across the sea. How she knows this she cannot explain even to herself, but she simply knows and cannot bring herself to doubt it. What she has seen is true, and the conflict now blazing in the land of Vælíria is just as visceral and just as real as that now playing out in their own land, crippled as it is in the two-pincered grip of Empire and eötenga.

She swings her legs off the bed and places her feet against the cold stone floor, feeling it through her thick yet worn socks, while she reaches toward a chair that sits not far away and lifts her outer garment in her hands. With a sigh she pulls it over her head and ties it at the front before standing and looking about the room. It is dim, lit only by the embers of a dying fire and by the subtle pre-dawn light that filters in through a large window looking out over the city below.

Her mind and heart are preoccupied with the impressions left by the dream, and though the images from it fade, a deeper awareness remains. Yes,

she feels vividly that it was unlike any dream that she has had before, not a play of images or events before the slumbering imagination but an inflow of knowledge from a source outside of herself. But why was this presented to her now, and why to her and not another? Reflecting on this, she realizes that, granted that the knowledge communicated to her is true, it answers certain questions and reveals certain facts that are deeply intertwined with the events in which the people of Telmérion are now immersed. This of course was obvious on first glance, but Elmáriyë was so overcome with the newness of the impressions that only upon reflection does she understand the significance of what has been given to her.

She kneels and places her forehead against the floor, praying until the sun shines full into the room, turning darkness into light. Then she finishes dressing and steps into the hallway, seeking out the room of Eldárien. In her experience he has always risen early in the morning, so she expects him to already be awake, perhaps even to have been so for hours. And she is proven right when he almost immediately answers her gentle knock on his door.

"Good morning, sister," he says, looking at her with a gentle smile, though she can also read the lines of pain and compassion that mark his face.

"Good morning...brother," she replies, adding softly, "It is finally beginning to feel natural to call you this. And it brings joy to my heart."

"And to mine as well," agrees Eldárien, and then, with a glimmer in his eyes, he asks, "Is there something on your heart, or something that you need?"

"There is indeed something on my heart. You see, I had a dream last night...but it was unusual. It was less like a dream and more like a 'seeing,' or rather a 'knowing.'"

"Why don't you come in, and we can talk about it?" he says.

She nods silently and follows him into his chambers, where she takes the chair that is offered to her, while he sits opposite her, on the edge of the bed.

"I dreamed," she begins, "of events occurring in the Vælírian Empire. I would have doubted them were they not both so unexpected and so viscerally presented to me. What do you know of the recent happenings across the sea to the west?"

"Almost nothing, I am afraid," replies Eldárien. "There has always been a great deal of censorship in what the officers of the Empire allow to cross the waters and to reach us. It seems that is always the case with such unjust rule —though only in recent times have I found the conviction and courage to call it that—that such leaders seek to know and control much in the lives of their subjects, and yet conceal their own intentions and activity."

"Even on the smallest level that seems to me to be abuse of authority in every case," says Elmáriyë. "And I fear that many think of the Creator in a

similar manner: as a Master who keeps his distance, hiding his face and his heart, and yet controls and demands everything in the hearts and lives of his creatures. When there is no love and no communion, can it appear as anything but an excessive demand, made with the force of will and the power of might?"

Eldárien nods sadly to this, but then, looking up into Elmáriyë's eyes, he smiles again, gently and yet firmly, and says, "But when there is love, a bond of mutual belonging, all flows in freedom, for from freedom it is born."

"If only our society, and the society of all humankind, would know such a truth," sighs Elmáriyë. "And yet in this case we belong to the Empire, but it does not belong to us. And what I have seen this night disturbs me even more. For I beheld recent, or even current, events in the land of Vælíria. It appears that those who prove a danger to their society—whether a true danger such as criminals, or only those who disagree with the given policy—are being exiled into a vast series of underground caverns. These have been put to use as a massive prison for the undesirables."

"A prison?" Eldárien asks. "How can people make a living beneath the earth? It sounds more to me that such a fate would be not prison but execution."

"According to what I beheld, many do in fact perish. But those who survive have become hardy and strong, and they have also risen up in rebellion—and freedom they have found at last."

"Freedom?"

"Yes," says Elmáriyë. "For not all the tunnels and chambers had been explored. Not even a small portion of them. Eventually those below found access again to the light of day."

"So you are saying that there is a rebellion occurring at the heart of the Vælírian Empire?" asks Eldárien. "How do you know this is not of the past or of the future?"

Elmáriyë reflects on this question for a few moments and then replies, "I suppose that I do not know. It seemed 'present' to me, but that is one of the things that could be my own interpretation. I wish there was a way to confirm it."

"There may be a way. We just need to discover it," Eldárien says.

"Another thing needs to be said, however, about what I saw," continues Elmáriyë. "It seems to answer some questions that we have had, and you most of all. I hope that somehow it may also give us light for the path going forward, though I know not yet precisely how."

"And what is that?"

"In the lowest depths of the caverns creatures of darkness were awakened, and they waged war against the inhabitants of the prison. It was this that

spurred them on anew to seek for a way of escape. And yet the Empire too learned of these creatures, and—"

"And the plan was first conceived to join with them in order to quell the rebellion here in Telmérion," Eldárien concludes for her.

"Exactly."

"I understand how they could trace the eötenga back to our land, for from here they originated. In fact I did not know that their presence had spread anywhere beyond our continent. However, I still do not understand how they thought that such creatures would be amenable to dialogue and cooperation. Was anything revealed to you in that regard?"

"I am afraid not," replies Elmáriyë with a shrug of her shoulders.

After this Eldárien lowers his head, leaning his chin against the palm of his hand, and he thinks of the import of Elmáriyë's dream. She too leans in, bringing her head nearer to his as if such proximity will aid them both in thinking, though in fact she is drawn by the implicit desire simply to be closer to him. At last, after many moments have passed, Eldárien raises his head and says, "I do not yet understand the meaning of what was revealed to you, at least insofar as it summons us to action. If it is true that the events you beheld are currently unfolding, then we may take hope that Telmérion does not stand against the corrupt state of the Empire alone. But what it means for our own journey, I cannot say. Even the presence of the creatures of darkness on other continents, and in the earth beneath the very heart of the Empire...I do not know what this means." He sighs and runs his hand absentmindedly over the deep scars on his left cheek, and then he adds, "To be honest, if anything, it causes me to feel more overwhelmed. For if I am called upon to exorcise these creatures and to free our people from their oppression, how am I to do so if they also reside in other lands?"

"I understand that feeling, and I feel it myself," Elmáriyë says. "And yet...and yet will it truly make a difference either way? For if you are called to confront the darkness in its very origin, to break the power of the one who has first fashioned these beasts, then it should not matter how many of them there are or how widespread is their presence in this world."

Eldárien shakes his head doubtfully. "Perhaps you are right. But I cannot help sensing that the more of these horrors that have been given shape, the more of the wickedness and evil that there shall be to break. For it is of this that they have been made."

"I think that the weight of human guilt and evil, and the darkness in this world, remains regardless of whether it is fashioned into eötenga or not," Elmáriyë says, hesitantly following this train of thought. "And for that no human gift alone can atone. If I recall correctly, Sílion was very clear about this truth. Yours is another, lesser role, a small share in a greater work which

most properly and in its full expression belongs to Another."

Eldárien nods. "You are right. Sílion said that I was tasked with removing these forms of darkness from the grasp of the one who fashions them into the shapes of our enemies. No more and no less. And yet that itself is so far beyond me, both in thought and in action, that I can only walk forward in trust... And it feels that I walk from darkness into darkness."

"Is it not true that all of us can only walk in trust? It is the nature of our life within this world," says Elmáriyë. "The future always remains dark, for we know not what it holds. But we do know the most important thing of all: for we have the promise that after every darkness, however deep and prolonged it may be, enduring light awaits, undimmed and unbreakable."

† † †

"Yes, the vrû'ádach appeared directly in the city with the coming of the night. Normal methods of resisting siege, therefore, are useless against them," Rórlain says as he and Eldárien sit in council with hæras Brýma. At this moment he is questioning them concerning the assault on Ristfánd in hopes of aiding and abetting the preparation for a coming attack upon Onylándun. Only three days have passed since the "sacrifice" of the cult members in the heat of dragon-fire, and these days have been a flurry of activity. "I myself stood in wait upon the battlements, prepared to defend against a siege from without—by the forces of the Empire—only to spend the time of fighting leading a company of men through the streets of the city there to combat the creatures of darkness. They will not fight like a normal army, but rather seek only to kill, indiscriminately, man and woman, young and old. It matters not to them. They come only to destroy."

"If this is the case, then how can I possibly protect my people?" Brýma asks, lines of worry marking his features, lines that have been deepening over the previous days and now crease his expression almost to a grimace. "Is evacuation and flight the only answer? Is there another alternative, and one that would not expose them to danger upon the road?"

"If the attack is aimed at the city, then flight is a viable option," answers Eldárien. "Those who flee may yet have a chance to escape the notice of the vrû'ádach, whose gaze would be fixed upon the city. The only other option is for all the civilians to lock themselves in their houses and to bathe them in light, with brightly burning hearths, lamps, and torches. Brilliant natural light is the only reliable resistance that an ordinary, untrained person can offer against these creatures. While it does not harm them, it can keep them from appearing within the houses themselves, for to do this they need shadow and darkness. But this too raises the question of barricading the doors and keeping the creatures outside. Our best option would be to have all trained fighters scour the streets and seek to put a stop to the raging of the

vrû'ádach, while those unable to fight directly take refuge inside. So it was in Ristfánd."

"That is true," Rórlain adds, "however they are vicious fighters. And since the events at the black castle in the heart of the Yjind Mountains—and the unleashing of whatever beasts of darkness there arose from the depths of the earth—we know not what other forms of eötenga we may encounter. I fear that our strength of arms will be far from enough."

"That is my fear," says Brýma. "For even a single dragon has been able to wreak havoc among my people and has eluded all our efforts at resistance. I fear that flight is the only viable option I see before me, unless it be relying upon the light that you wield."

Eldárien and Rórlain share a meaningful glance for a moment, and then Eldárien, turning to Brýma, says, "The light indeed has the power to dispel many of these creatures at once, but I fear that—due to the simple limits of our presence and our strength—it shall not be enough to defend an entire city."

"The limits of your strength?"

"Aye. Channeling the light takes a great toll upon the wielder, and after only a short time—depending upon the intensity of the light which he calls forth—he finds himself spent. In the most complete circumstances, he will find himself waking up in bed hours or even days later."

"Or perhaps worse," Rórlain comments quietly.

"What then do you recommend?" asks Brýma.

"It is difficult not knowing the time of their arrival nor their number. We have only vague knowledge deduced from the words of the cult leader, and Cirien and Rûmdil are still looking into the matter," Eldárien says. "My spontaneous suggestion would be that you send all the civilians west to safety in another city. However, I fear that eyes are directed upon us that would see such an action and utilize it against us. That would, I suspect, lead to an even greater massacre—in the open with very little protection either from light or from walls—than would trying to resist the assault within the city itself."

"You really believe that we are being watched?"

"Considering the nature of our enemy, I think it almost certain." After a deep sigh, Eldárien continues, "All of this reveals to me more vividly how necessary is the task entrusted to me, and how pressing is the need to set upon it as soon as possible. For the vrû'ádach come, and our resistance against them is frail and faltering. The only way to stop them for good is to cut off their power at the source. And this I must do. Yet I know not where to go to discover the origin of their power, even if its nature I can in some way guess."

"So there is no hope?" asks Brýma.

"There never was much hope, at least not immediately visible to the eyes

or held in the resources of our own hearts."

"Then we stay and give what resistance we can?" Brýma offers, the regret and despair evident in his voice.

"I suggest so," says Rórlain, and Eldárien nods as well. "And we should give unto all, citizens and warriors alike, weapon and flame and light. The vrû'ádach are slain by piercing of the heart or removal of the head, and thus they fight no longer, at least for a time. If their general is with them, it is probable that with his slaying they shall cease to fight altogether. He is distinguished from the rest both by size and by the fact that he alone can give voice to thought in speech. Practically speaking, slaying the general may be our only hope to bring their attack to a conclusion. The problem is, however, that he may command them from a distance."

"Enough..." Brýma sighs, and then, more forcefully, "Enough! I have heard enough! In all that you say I hear but one thing: it is impossible. There is little to no hope, but we have no choice but to resist anyway. Fine...then that is what we shall do."

"I shall do all in my power—we shall do all in our power—to aid you in this resistance," says Eldárien. "I wish that I could give you more assurance, but all that I can do is stand by your side in the struggle."

"Yes, yes...and I am sorry for my outburst," Brýma responds, making an effort to calm himself. "I know that you are doing all that you can. Only it does not seem to be enough...not nearly enough."

"It is not enough," says Rórlain, "but it is all that we have."

Eldárien ventures further words, even though Brýma seems to have reached his limit. "If we can withstand the attack of these creatures, we will have an opportunity to make another plan, which shall certainly include increasing our forces and our defenses against those who assail us. In the meantime, we shall do all that we can, within our limited time and resources, to prepare to resist this oncoming assault. It need not be the end, but a beginning—a beginning of fruitful resistance to the forces of darkness."

"It is very difficult to believe that such could be the case," Brýma remarks.

"And yet so we must believe if we are to act at all," replies Eldárien. "And there are grounds for such belief, as slim and as weak as they may appear. It is my plan to direct my attention to the strongest and most threatening of the creatures—the dragon and any of the greater eötenga—and hopefully thus to locate their general, or another leader, if others they have. In the meantime, Rórlain shall head up the defense of the city from the bulk of their forces. This we have already discussed."

To this Brýma only nods silently, clearly feeling uneasy and out of his depth, willingly having delegated the leadership of his forces and the defense of his city into the capable hands of these two men. If such delegation would

be a sign of weakness in another man, in Brýma it appears only to be strength and courage, the rare courage of seeing and accepting one's limitations and embracing the aid of others where one falls short. Being the sole surviving hæras of the people of Telmérion, many would expect him to exert his power still more forcefully, or at least to insist upon his station. Instead he has graciously welcomed the aid of these travelers from the east, and he has made his heart and his city an open and hospitable place for the one who stands revealed before him as the promised king. And Eldárien, for his part, does not let his gratitude and humble awe go unnoticed; for rare is the man, in all ages of history, who is willing to yield the authority which he has long wielded into the hands of another who comes to supplant him. But it is an unspoken understanding between them that Eldárien does not come to supplant; he does not in fact come to rule at all. He comes to protect and to save. The kingship entrusted to him is something that he has accepted, but he wears it as a gift that is not his own, something that belongs to another, and of which he is only a steward. And if Eldárien is so vividly aware of his own role of stewardship, how can Brýma not recognize that his role has also always been one appropriate to a steward? That, at least, is the way that Brýma sees it, and he is not even aware himself of the degree to which this disposition is a mysterious fruit fashioned within him by invisible grace throughout his life, both in its most intimate and hidden movements as well as in the unfolding external events of his life's journey.

"I want to say," Brýma remarks at last, after a long moment of silence, "that you have the making of a true king. There is something in you that is not in myself. You speak with a trait more than courage and deeper than confidence, something that I can only term hope, born of faith. And thus I shall try to hope too, in my small measure, that this beautiful flame that flickers within you shall not be snuffed out by the chill winds that come upon us, or be engulfed in the anguishing darkness that grows day by day, threatening to swallow up our people in endless night."

Chapter Two
Under the City

Eldárien and Elmáriyë both feel it: the attack comes in a matter of days. The sense of impending danger, the darkness that flows in as if on the fringes of their consciousness and grows hour by hour—all of this and more awakens in them the conviction that they have very little time to prepare the people of the city for an attack that by its intensity shall make the assault on Ristfánd pale in comparison. Sharing this word with their companions as well as with the council of Onylándun, they all set to work in preparation. As recommended, weapons are placed into the hands of every person, be they man or woman, and be the weapons sword or spear or sharpened tools of trade. Torches, too, are prepared in vast numbers, and they are placed in sconces throughout the streets and alleyways of the city, to be lit to dispel the shadows from which alone the vrû'ádach appear. Handheld torches are also given to each family, according to the number of persons in each household, so that none will be without light. But how can every shadow be banished from a city? Shall not a corner here or a crevice there remain, from which the enemy may take shape and thus step into the light to assail it? They have little hope of preventing the attack, and little of controlling from whence it shall arise. The amount of unknowns that stand before them is great, in fact beyond counting, and their preparations remain founded upon guesswork or upon frail hopes and intuitions rather than upon the certainty of what awaits them. Yet they have no choice but to so prepare.

Eldárien approaches Cirien with his worry and with the burdensome fear that weighs upon his heart as the day of attack approaches, and the latter responds in a gentle voice, "It is impossible to cut off every avenue by which the darkness would assail the light. This is as true for the battle with the eötenga as it is for the life of the spirit in its hidden depth. But to live in fear of the darkness is to grow weak and constricted, until the heart is paralyzed by the evil that could assail it or even by the evil that lies within it. It is important to be aware of the dark and to know what ills it can bring, particularly the ills of cooperating with the inclinations to evil that, due to our fallen state, reside within us. But true freedom and hope lies only in seeking the light, responding to the light, and surrendering to the light. Only a light greater than our own can counteract the darkness, both within ourselves and outside of ourselves."

"But can the darkness be so purged that we need not fear it any longer?"

Eldárien asks in response. "Is it possible for the light—not our own frail light striving in combat with the darkness, but a light greater than our own—to dispel all the lingering shadows and to grant us security and serenity in the abode of enduring light?"

With a mysterious glimmer in his eyes, Cirien asks, "What does your heart tell you?"

"My heart...my heart says that it must be so," answers Eldárien in hardly more than a whisper. "And yet my heart also says that the flames of such light, the purifying power of such radiance, demands everything in response. Only in total acquiescence, in complete surrender, can it find the room to accomplish its work in us and in our world."

"Poor indeed must one be to become and to remain docile to the light: with open hands and open heart," Cirien says, not responding directly to Eldárien's words but affirming them in a still deeper way. "For every clinging possession creates a shadow where the light is not allowed to shine. It constricts and darkens and blinds the heart, narrowing it from the wideness for which it was made and preoccupying it with its possessiveness, with its foresight and control, and with the pleasures and passions of life. To stand utterly poor in the freedom of love, with heart open and vulnerable, is to suffer pain and loss, and yet it is also to discover anew, for the first time, the true depth and breadth of the light, and its enduring strength."

"And this I must do..." sighs Eldárien.

"This you must do on behalf of us all," agrees Cirien, placing his hand upon his friend's shoulder for a long moment. "I would wish that this battle were already concluded, so that you could follow your course to its end. I know that it beckons you, that it draws you ardently from deep within. I see it and feel it."

"I wish I knew where to go, and the path to be taken to such a place."

"As do I. But only from this unknowing, from this expectant waiting, can knowing be born; and the current anguish of your heart is a womb in which a ray of light shall shine and a thread of guidance shall be conceived. Of this I have no doubt."

"But when the time comes, and when I at last depart," says Eldárien, "I fear bringing my companions into a place of darkness and loss. I have been considering—"

"You have been considering going alone," Cirien says.

"Yes."

"I understand your motivation, and there is truth to what you say. In the deepest confrontation between darkness and light, each heart stands in a certain respect alone. We each must choose for ourselves. And yet this choice, as you know so clearly in your case, is also for the sake of all. And if this is

true, then this very choice is also upheld, strengthened, and supported by others, whether we are aware of this or not. We each stand alone, and yet we all stand together. Such is the mystery of this life, and such also is the paradox of this war that is being waged against us now, both in the external conflict and in the secret drama unfolding at the heart of our people, at the heart of the life of each one of us."

"What then do you suggest that I do?" asks Eldárien.

"Go not without Elmáriyë," replies Cirien. "That alone can I say. Your paths flow together and cannot be separated. For the rest, I trust the voice of your own heart, and the path that events themselves shall unfold."

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The reddish glow of twilight illumines the sky as if a parting gift of beauty before the descending of the night, and the snow-clad landscape shares in this light, enfolding the city all around with a whiteness whose pallor stands in sharp contrast with to darkness that the citizens fearfully await. Tilliána stands at a tall glass window in a hallway of the citadel, looking west and watching the last light of the sun fade from earth and sky. Every new night brings fear of the emergence of the creatures born of shadow, and Tilliána finds her heart and mind, and her very body itself, fatigued and worn to the point of breaking by the continual anxiety and expectation. She thinks of the siege of Ristfánd, which has left a deep scar upon her heart that she expects shall never fully heal, and she thinks too of the loss of her family which preceded it. But her mind is not only occupied with thoughts of fear and of loss; she thinks of her friends and companions, too, and finds some solace and strength in their presence and their love. She must admit to herself, however, that the thought of them also deepens her fear, not perhaps intensifying it but giving it another color, another level of intensity and seriousness. For she fears not only for herself, nor only for the people of Telmérion, the beauty of whose existence is so cruelly threatened by the violence of creatures of which they are unaware, but she fears also for those whom she has come to love.

It is these many currents of thought and feeling that preoccupy Tilliána now as she stands looking out at the dying of the day, and she tries to allow each to have its place, if only to yield it to the healing and the guidance of the light. She thinks of Eldárien most especially now, however, and of the hopes and uncertainties of the future in his regard, and of the gradually blossoming communion between them. Suddenly her thoughts are interrupted by the sound of footsteps coming down the hallway behind her. She turns slightly to look and sees Elmáriyë approaching. They share gentle smiles in greeting and then the latter passes on, continuing down the hall. But then, after a moment of hesitation, Tilliána says, "Wait a moment, Elmáriyë."

"Yes?" she turns back and looks at her friend with kind expectation in her countenance.

"I wanted to...I wanted to share with you something that weighs upon my heart," begins Tilliána, uncertain of what precisely she wishes to say and yet knowing that she wants to say it.

"Of course," Elmáriyë replies, and she steps forward until she stands directly before Tilliána. Her very physical proximity brings a sense of comfort and security. "I am glad to hear any echoes, be they good or ill, light or heavy, from the heart of my dear friend."

"Yes, I...thank you," Tilliána stutters, struggling to begin. But then she finds her voice. "I know not how to express it or to put it into words. And much of it is not unlike what all else here feel, not only in our company but in the whole of the city. I feel that I am standing before an abyss over which there is no passage nor crossing, before a blackness that blots out all hope for the future. All that I loved in the past was torn away from me, and I was left gasping for air. But then I was given you, all of you... You are each so precious and so beautiful in your own way, that the gift of even just a single one of you would be enough to astound my heart and to fill it with gratitude. But my heart also struggles to understand, and to accept, the bonds that are woven in me...woven between us. For the fibers of my heart were torn, torn so violently by the deaths of my husband and my children. And almost before I had time to grieve their loss you stepped into the void, and shortly after you Eldárien, Rórlain, and Cirien."

Seeing that Tilliána pauses, Elmáriyë asks, "Do you wish that you had more time to grieve their loss in solitude?"

After thinking about this for a moment, Tilliána responds confidently, "No. That is not the case at all. I think it is best this way. I do not know how well I would have been able to cope had I been alone. Perhaps I would not be standing here today were it not for the gift of your friendship."

"And I am glad that you are standing here today," remarks Elmáriyë, "whatever the future may hold."

"And that...that is what worries and afflicts me so deeply." Tilliána sighs and turns back to the window, and Elmáriyë joins her. Together they look out as the last bits of lingering light in the sky fade into darkness and the first stars appear in the blackness of the firmament. After a short time has passed, Tilliána turns back to Elmáriyë and continues, "I am afraid that I shall swiftly and totally lose that which I was so quickly and freely given. And I do not want to endure such loss and such pain. But above all I do not want to see you suffer. Eldárien and Rórlain stand face to face with the powers of darkness; they walk straight into the darkest of darks and enter into confrontation with the most destructive of dangers. And I fear that they shall not survive

the conflict. I fear such for all of our people. I fear what Telmérion shall be when this war is concluded, if Telmérion as we now know it shall still exist at all." She pauses and hesitates for a moment, but, consoled and invited by Elmáriyë's loving gaze, she continues. "I struggle to believe in any promises for the future, or to lean into any hopes, for fear that in their very birth they shall be stillborn, snuffed out like a candle by the chillest of winds before their light has even begun to shine."

"You fear losing those whom you have come to love," Elmáriyë responds, "and this keeps you from opening your heart fully to the promises that such love makes?"

She nods.

"To my sorrow, there is nothing I can do to assuage such fear," continues Elmáriyë. "In the heart of hope and faith alone can any one of us find the courage to love even in the face of darkness and death. But your heart yearns for this, and your very grappling shows just how deeply you are willing to walk in fidelity to the light and to the gifts that have been given unto you. But what shall the future hold? None of us know. I cannot make promises about the future. And yet..." With this Elmáriyë steps forward and takes both of Tilliána's hands within her own. She leans forward until their foreheads touch, and they stand for a long moment in this position, as if communicating, through touch, in a speech beyond words. At last, and without leaving this position, Elmáriyë continues in a whisper, "And yet I can assure you of the fidelity of the One who birthed the very light that draws our hearts, the goodness of the Fashioner of love and its true safeguard. In this fidelity and goodness there is yet grounds for hope, hope not only for a fleeting moment of contact, but for light beyond darkness and life beyond death, for a love that, sharing in what is eternal, endures forever."

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On the following day Cirien and Rûmdil discover traces of the cult hidden beneath the city, deep in the earth, in a sewage tunnel that passes the entire length of the lower portion of Onylándun. Before entering, they ask Eldárien, Rórlain, and Brýma to accompany them. The entrance, or what appears to be the entrance, lies off the main line of a channel that flows from the upper city, a sewer accessed only by removing the heavy grating that lies upon it. This itself was no easy task, for the bars had long ago rusted and whatever key there had once been was lost; but finding access to the secret underground passage was even more difficult. Had it not been so evident that something concerning the cult awaited them there, Cirien and Rûmdil would have passed it over after the first effort.

For this tunnel is accessed only by the successful completion of a puzzle that functions as a sort of passcode, designed likely by the persons who also

etched in the weathered stone above it the same symbol that had been drawn upon the earth in blood. A series of interlocking bricks are inlaid within the wall, each with a design upon it, or rather, with a runic word in the language of darkness, though inscribed with such geometrical shape that only someone well acquainted with the tongue and its writing would understand it. But such a person is Cirien, perhaps the only man who, without having any direct acquaintance with such cults and their activities, is nonetheless well-versed enough even in the darkness to understand their secret runes. This is a grave and yet fortunate providence.

"Have any of you a piece of paper upon which I may write?" asks Cirien after a few moments inspecting the bricks and their runes.

All shake their heads or respond in the negative with the exception of Brýma, who replies, "I have a little slip of parchment, but if you intend to do calculations, you shall need to write small."

"I will try. It is better than attempting to do calculations against the stone," says Cirien, looking at the parchment, which is hardly more than four by four inches square. With it Brýma hands him a graphite stick. He immediately sets to work marking down the runes in the order in which they appear on the wall, and then turns to his companions and says, "My suspicion is that these bricks must be rearranged in a particular order—so as to form a phrase. Our task is to discern what that phrase may be."

Cirien takes a few minutes to make a few notes on the paper, perhaps marking repeated words or phrases, and then, for another quarter hour, he dwells upon the runes, rearranging them in his mind all the while using his fingers to calculate as best he can. The others remain at his side quietly, not wishing to disturb him but also at a complete loss as to how to aid him. At last he looks up and says, "I think I have it!" He then occupies himself in rearranging the runic bricks in the wall in the order that he has discovered. Once this is accomplished, the bricks begin to glow with a reddish light, shifting before their beholding eyes from the runes of the dark language to the letters of the common tongue, legible to all though intelligible only to Cirien. In addition, in the center of the bricks a circular design appears, as if awaiting a simple touch to unlock the door completely. But before doing anything further, Cirien turns to his companions and says, "That was much easier than I expected it to be. Once I could discern the relative import of the words, my mind was able to unfold the rest of the meaning, little by little, from that seed."

"I am quite impressed," remarks Eldárien softly.

"You should not be," replies Cirien. "But either way, it is complete, though the words are not pleasant." And for a moment he turns again to look at the wall, and, looking with him, Eldárien reads:

Quandas din creshas, burgusmandur,
quandas lug demdegas, argmashkandur,
quandas Dray askandur, Anay falteandur,
lors Unas dimindur kar les shekranur
mortegs, mortegs in agronis kar terganur.

Verdrex, roga, roga promkes, lug bucha,
bur verdex capagka maxor, crynucha,
lug faltye, faltye ab eroak, eroak eg eroak.
Lugbuch gordas lug, vardas in terganur,
lors din crynucha, kar mortga jonanur.

"These words," Eldárien says with a heavy exhale as the realization dawns upon him, "they are the words of a bone-chilling chant that Maggot pronounced whenever I was in his custody. It was intended as a mockery, and it indeed felt as such, even though I knew not the meaning of the words."

Shaking his head sorrowfully, Cirien replies, "And you were right to feel so. For I will give you the meaning, translated as best I can in a short time, into our tongue, though they do not quite do justice to the succinct intensity, to the gall, of the words in the original language." He then recites:

"When the dark grows, let us all rejoice;
when the light decreases, let us all exult;
when the Draíon ascend, let the Anaíon falter,
let the radiance of the One diminish and shrink.

The king shall arise, arise as promised, the light bearer,
but even when his strength reaches its height, it shall be crushed;
the light shall falter, falter to nothing, the abyss of abysses.
The lightborn bearing light shall suffer in torments,
all radiance crushed, and death shall be his reward."

For a moment the impact of these words hits Eldárien almost like a physical blow and knocks the breath out of him. He feels their force directly and becomes aware in a single moment both of the fact that the Draíon have long known of the coming of a promised king and also that they have had every intention to destroy him. As he opens his mouth to stammer out some response, he is interrupted by Rórlain, who says, "Well, that is not encouraging in the least. But I suppose we could have expected nothing less."

"Indeed," says Cirien tersely, placing a consoling hand on Eldárien's shoulder. "Try not to dwell on it overmuch. I would not take it as a prophecy or an assurance, however frail, of the future. It is but the resentment and malice of creatures who have become so corrupted from their original purpose that they know nothing but hatred and envy."

To this Eldárien nods and says, "Yes, you are right. I shall try to do precisely

that. But come, let us press forward. The way is now open." And he places his palm against the center of the wall and here the stones part, opening to either side like two sliding panels and revealing a hidden passage beyond. Without further delay they enter this passage, narrow and dark, guided by the light of the torch that Cirien carries, and lit from behind by a like torch in the hand of Rûmdil. The walls are of rough-cut stone overgrown with moss and lichen, and even apart from the sewer that lies now behind them the air is damp—and cool, though in contrast with the wintry temperatures above ground it feels warm in comparison. For perhaps a hundred yards the passage continues without deviation until it suddenly widens and opens out into a chamber a good forty feet across in all directions with a vaulted ceiling fifteen or twenty feet high arching overhead.

"Whatever was once done here, it looks to have been brought to an end," remarks Cirien, "for it is dark, and the air hangs heavily, as if no one has been here in a very long time."

"I would not so easily interpret the evidence in such a manner," says Brýma. "The air is heavy because we are below ground, and because we stand so close to the sewer. The very walls seem to bear the weight of the city, and to cry out in turmoil with its mass and in protest against its refuse."

"But it is dark nonetheless, and thus it seems currently unoccupied," Rórlain says. "Are there any further chambers beyond this one?"

Sweeping his torch in a wide motion in order to allow its light to play upon the floor and the walls, Cirien is silent for a moment, thinking and inspecting, and then he says, "There are lamps upon the walls, though unlit. Let us take advantage of their light, so that we may better see."

Rûmdil and Cirien then go about the chamber with their torches, passing flame to wick until the room is bathed in the warm and flickering light of more than a dozen mounted lanterns. All is unveiled to sight with the exception of the center of the chamber, which, being so far from the walls, remains mostly in shadow. The room, however, is almost entirely empty, with the exception of a few benches turned at odd angles. And yet as they look upon them they realize that they are all set as if to give a clear view either of the outermost walls of the chamber or of the center. The benches not having backs, it is impossible to tell which. There are also bookshelves at three different locations along the walls, containing various texts both in the common tongue and in the dark language that only Cirien knows. As for decorations, there are none, not a single drawing or inscription, but only lifeless stone sitting as if long dead in suffocation and in waiting. And there is no exit from the chamber except the same passage by which they entered.

"The room is an exact circle, is it not?" Rórlain asks, looking around in the newfound light.

"It does seem so," agrees Cirien. And with a deep sigh, he adds, "And that is only fitting if it is the secret lair of the cult of the Cycle."

"I suspect that we confront more than that," Eldárien interjects. "Those whom we encountered did not speak at length of the 'cycle.' It seems to me, in fact, that the thing in which they placed their hope, that which held their belief, was something toward which the cycle was ordained as to an end. They believed not in the Cycle as we believe in the truths revealed to us by our Maker and his Anaíon in whose hands is the life of the world. No, it seems to me that they worshiped a power yet darker and more irrational—one who, possessing superior reason, yet uses it to lead human hearts into a fascination with the absurd, stirring up in them a willingness to use power and violence to achieve the end of fashioning the world according to what he has shown them." Then, turning to Cirien, he extends his hand and asks, "Could I hold your torch for a moment?"

After Cirien gives it to him, Eldárien steps toward the center of the room and holds out the torch so that its light falls full upon the shadows that yet obscure their gaze. Before them what was hidden is now made visible: a raised dais with rivulets carved upon its smooth stone surface, rivulets in the shape and the runes of the Cycle.

"It is the same that we beheld above, drawn in blood," says Cirien. He steps forward and crouches down to inspect the dais more closely. "This is clearly an altar. The stone is yet stained with traces of blood. See here, the rivulets flow down into a channel around the dais, and then...below. It appears that there may be some storage-place, some chamber beneath us, into which the blood of sacrifices was allow to flow and collect." Then he stands and looks warily at his companions. "For a long time, it seems, has this kind of cultic practice been festering beneath the city. It is as if they wished to stain her very heart, or at least her very bowels, with blood."

"What do you make, Cirien, of Eldárien's comment?" Rûmdil asks. "I understand your references to the Cycle, and this image, reappearing now, is clearly associated with it. But...but it does seem to me that there is something in their practice and their aspiration that drives them still more deeply, and the sense of 'being trapped' and the longing for escape that the cycle represents is but more fuel to the flame of this longing and this anguish."

Cirien draws in a deep breath and says, without any hesitation in his voice, "Of course, he is right. I never intended to imply otherwise."

For a long moment no one speaks, as each man inspects the chamber, feeling the burden of its evil and the sickness that lies within it like a virus. But then Eldárien speaks, "Look, there is a blackness here, in the center, which is not amenable to light." When the others have gathered around, he waves the torch as close as he can to the center of the dais without himself

touching it, and yet its light is unable to touch the heart of the design, the middle of the circle. There is in its place something like an impenetrable shadow, a spot of utter blackness, which refuses the light.

"What about the light of Hiliána?" Rórlain asks.

Eldárien turns and looks at his friend for a moment, his face conflicted, but then he nods silently. With a simple gesture, he raises his free hand and turns it toward the place of blackness, palm open. A moment later a steady stream of bluish light breaks forth from his flesh and shines upon the dais. It seems to enter into conflict with the shadow at its center, as though a battle of two powers is being enacted, and the visible light and darkness are only reflecting this encounter. But only a moment later a brilliant flash of light bursts forth from the center of the dais, and all of the men spontaneously step backward in surprise. The light returns into Eldárien's hand and then all descends back to normal luminosity, illumined only by the flickering light of the torches.

"I fear..." he begins, breathing heavily, "I fear that I have awakened something. Get away from the dais. Now."

They have hardly enough time to react before the shadow turns into a mist, not white or gray but black, deeper than the deepest night and darker than the darkest shadow. It spreads from the dais so quickly that the men have hardly taken a few steps before it engulfs them in itself, bringing the light of the torches to naught and immersing them in complete blackness. And in the darkness something stirs before them. They feel it even before they hear it: a groaning as if of a creature long asleep, and raspy breath, and the unfurling of wings.

A moment later Rórlain whispers, his voice constricted by conflict and fear, "I shall give enough light that we may see," and the blue light now radiates from where he stands, both hands extended, and it pushes back the blackness sufficiently that the men may see the creature that stands before them. Whatever they had expected, it was not this. For the entity that they behold resembles neither the vrû'ádach nor the dragon, nor any creature that they have seen before, any more than all living things bear a resemblance to one another since composed of like parts. It appears as a creature of flesh, and yet its flesh looks more akin to shadow given form than to solid substance, or perhaps like stone come to life by an excess of heat. Six arms it has, extending forth from a body that seems to perpetually change its shape at every moment, such that the true nature of the creature can never be clearly seen. And above its figure extend two wings with a span of more than twenty feet, wings whose sinews are of a similar enfleshed blackness, though the folds of them seem to be composed of solid flame, burning red, though consuming light rather than emitting it. It is a creature of contradiction and absurdity, whose very appearance seems to assault both their senses and their minds and to

force them into submission.

Raising its wings until they touch the ceiling above, the creature lets out a bellowing roar that sounds like two stones of immeasurable weight and size grinding against one another with the force of giants. For a few long moments the intensity of the sound overwhelms the hearing of the men and all goes mute; they fear then that their hearing capacity has been forever broken by the intensity of the sound. But gradually sound returns and they are able to make out, not only their own heavy breathing and the anguished beating of their hearts, but a voice coming from the creature in similar but more subdued tones.

"*Lugbuch gordas lug*, you come here with failing hopes and faltering strength, and you seek to set yourself against powers far beyond you." The beast faces Eldárien directly, though its gaze seems somehow to spread out to pierce the hearts of all the men alike, instilling in them a paralyzing terror. "Were I one to pity, I would pity you, and yet there is barely a thought or feeling farther from my mind than that. You have come face to face already with two of my kind, and they toyed with you for but a short while. I intend, however, to immerse you in unending torment."

The beast pauses now as if to draw in breath, though it does not breathe nor have need of it. Instead the moment serves only to deepen the dramatic effect, as if a deliberate flourish in an oration meant to draw the listening crowd still more deeply into the spell that the speaker weaves with his words. When the creature speaks again its voice is almost soft, like a whispered seduction into the ears of the heart or a lie that seeps in to cause doubt and confusion and shame. And much is said then, to each man uniquely, which no mortal words can express even distantly—yet not because this voice speaks with such purity and simplicity, such depth and wisdom, that man only in the radiant lightness of his inmost heart can surrender to it. No, the subtlety of this voice is of a kind far different than the softness of the divine voice; it is rather the opposite, snaking its way into mind and heart under the cover of shadow, seeking to work wickedness in the darkness, for fear of the light and in hatred of the light.

"Lord of Worms and Lord of Mæres," it says at last, as the disparate strands of its voice weave together again into a crescendo of sound that speaks to all alike, leaving their attention as though rapt with submission and yet drained of all presence, recollection, and resistance. "Both have crossed your path. Or rather, you have crossed upon theirs for but a little while. But I am greater than both, and I carry on what they cannot do. They serve me, and I serve none. They have their tasks, petty filth, and they shall wreak what havoc they may in the domain allotted to them. I suspect that you shall not meet the one called Maggot again, for his pleasures lie elsewhere, and he prefers to torment

those who are already far from the light." The creature then laughs a sinister laugh that is both deep and shrill, causing the stones of the chamber to quake. "And the Lord of Mæres...his day has passed. His pleasure lies in the nightmares of men, and what he once did in the world, stirring up war and strife, occupies him no longer. All those hordes of beasts fashioned by his own ingenuity, he cares little for them now... He taught us much in those days, but he now gives hardly a thought to external warfare and destruction. He is an untrustworthy ally in conflict, following his fetish without thought or care. But I take up now the mantle that he laid down, or rather I take thought of what he has forgotten, and I make it new, and all my own...so much better than he had ever dreamed in that ceaseless dreaming that is his."

"Y-you are the one who has been fashioning the eötenga?" Eldárien manages to say, though his voice emerges hoarse and strained with the effort.

"Is that not what I just said?" the creature responds. "However, it is true that many have also lain dormant for centuries, only now to be awakened again. And you aided in this, did you not, stirring up what had been slumbering? Old and new alike shall join together now to be your living nightmare, and the nightmare of all who seek to abide in the realm of light and life."

Forcing a step forward, Rórlain also opens his mouth to speak and says, "Give us your name, monster."

"Oh, another finds it in himself to resist the sweetness of my discourse? But I shall answer you, in my way. You must however know that among my kind the possession of another's name gives power. You weak mortals and your petty gods speak names in love, but we speak them in possession. In this lies our delight and our strength. My name, then, you shall never know. But my title I gladly give. I am called the Lord of Death, and only one stands above me, the very Lord of Darkness whose name none can utter, though they all fear it and experience it haunting the recesses of their fragile and fear-filled souls. The Lord of Death—death, that is my domain and that is my desire. Surely you have glimpsed the delightful destruction that I have already worked in the very heart of this city? Poor Brýma, such a pitiful ruler," he says, turning slightly so that his gaze falls more directly upon the hæras of Onylándis. "You have stood over these people for so long, and yet you were unaware of the illness festering underneath the surface. They have given me power and substance through their worship, their devotion, and their sacrifice. And how much pleasure I took in their blood, as much as in the corruption of their hearts. It is a cycle that I deigned to establish—or a cycle it seemed unto them. But I know the deeper truth. They thought in circles and so came to seek escape before all things. But I think in a straight line, from birth unto death...and death I seek. Yet dissolution of mortal flesh is not

enough for me. You shall all know, soon enough, in what consists my true delight and the object of my affections." The beast emits a sound as though in mockery and then concludes, "We have delayed long enough with petty mortal speech. Let me show you in the coming days the true nature of my voice and the depth of my power."

With this the Lord of Death lets out a tremendous howl like the roaring of thousands of beasts, and the entire chamber shakes so violently that the men fear that it shall collapse upon their heads. The air around them, too, begins to vibrate and glisten as with currents of flame or jolts of electricity, and through their bodies flow waves of incredible pain. But they are unable to react, so overwhelmed are their minds and their senses by the terror and dismay that assault them in the presence of this lord of the Draíon. And yet a moment later, as if by instinct, the eyes of Eldárien and Rórlain interlock, and then together they open what hidden depths of their hearts still remain open to the light and call its luminosity forth. In an instant of intense confrontation flames and darkness burst forth from the Lord of Death, as if his very bodily form has imploded by the force of the power that it concealed within it. The walls and ceiling of the chamber burst by the impact, stone splitting as if tiny pieces of sand or mud under the fingers of a mischievous child; and yet the divine light springs forth in the same moment and enfolds the five men as in globes of radiance, and the flames of the explosion and the sinews of the darkness curl around this light, licking at it and yet finding no access beyond it. And in the next instant all the flames and darkness are gone, and the presence of the Lord of Death has for the moment departed. Instead, the men stand, shaking and exhausted, in a crater in the earth with open sky above them.

Chapter Three
Siege

As the men emerge from the crater, exhausted from the confrontation and their bodies shaking with weakness and fatigue, they look around. And to their dismay, they see destruction in the perimeter surrounding the explosion of dark energy that emanated from the Lord of Death. Whatever buildings had once stood on the surface of the ground directly above the cultic chamber have been completely decimated, and for a good thirty yards surrounding, the damage is severe. Climbing out through the rubble they hear voices —cries of anguish and cries of fear, cries of pleading calling out the names of those who are lost—and they fear the worst. Upon coming to the streets of the city, they are met by a crowd of persons who have gathered about the gaping wound in the earth, and they immediately learn that the same light that had enfolded the five men in the chamber had also enveloped the people in the houses and streets surrounding, saving them from the blast. Only those in the area directly above the chamber were not spared the full force of the explosion, and their deaths must have been instant.

Eldárien receives this news with a mixture of relief and regret. The light, called upon by his and Rórlain's conscious will, had nonetheless spread to others whose location they did not know and had protected them as well. But such light had not prevented all destruction, nor all death, and—whether through the limits of their own power or through some other mysterious reason or circumstance—the explosion had been directed upward, and nothing in that direction had softened the blast.

But why had this happened at all, and what was its import? Not only do these questions plague the hearts of the men, but they also greet them in the numerous voices of citizens who crowd around them, their faces marked with panic or confusion and their words drowning one another out in the effort to be heard. It takes a moment before Brýma is able to silence the crowd enough that he can address them. "There was a mysterious power that slumbered beneath the city," he says, "but it appears to have been exorcised. We will tend to your losses immediately, and I shall share more information with all of you soon."

"Brýma, it was not—" Eldárien begins quietly, whispering in his ear. But Brýma turns and gives him a look that immediately silences him.

"Rûmdil, will you please hasten to the citadel and inform the members of the council of what you have witnessed?" says Brýma, turning away. And

then, addressing the people again, "Are there any wounded that need immediate treatment?"

Before any answers can be given, however, the earth begins to groan and shake with such violence beneath their feet that they are hardly able to remain standing. As if in anguish the land cries out, and then from the center of the crater, a scar upon the flesh of Telmérion, black mist belches forth. The same blackness that had enfolded the five men in their confrontation with the Lord of Death now seeps from the center of the wound, spreading rapidly outward like poisonous fumes, wrapping itself around everything in its path, and piercing its every crevice, until all is immersed in darkness. Chaos ensues almost instantly as the citizens cry out in fear and confusion, uncertain of the dangers that the darkness might hold. Despite their best efforts, there is little that Brýma and the others can do to calm or temper this panic. In a matter of minutes the city is enveloped in darkness not unlike that of night, though more wicked and malicious, and without the subtle beauty that the night of the world always bears, and the mist rises up to blot out the very sky, until the sun itself is hardly more than an orb of subtlest presence in the midst of a black sheet overhead.

And then something even worse than the external darkness comes. Eldárien and Rórlain are the first to feel it, and they immediately know what it is, for long now have they been acquainted with the terror that is induced by the proximity of the creatures of darkness, the eötenga. From the same center from which the dark fog spread now emerges a horrendous creature not unlike the vrû'ádach, but much larger, with muscle rippling across its taut flesh. It climbs from a hole in the earth as if some insect tunneling from the depths of the soil back to the surface, and it lets out a roar that echoes across the city. As it takes a step forward, they see that the rippling of its muscles is due not only to its incredible strength, but to something else; for it appears almost that the skin boils and, in boiling, rips open to unleash what it bears within. From all over its body then lash out in every direction massive snakes, fangs bared and hungering for prey. The creature steps forward and calls out in the black language words of command, and these words receive response without the slightest delay, as eötenga in great number, and of all shapes and sizes, begin to crawl forth from the crater as spiders from their secret lairs. There are vrû'ádach not unlike those that they have encountered before—in the barrow of Séra Galáptes and in the siege of Ristfánd—though they have been "improved" by their master, with claws as long as daggers, able to pierce armor and to counteract a blade, and with spine-like growths upon their skin, on the torso and the upper arms and legs, which evidently serve as armor. In addition to these vrû'ádach, there are other eötenga as well, whose great variety and grotesqueness surpass description.

"And thus it begins..." breathes Eldárien, unconsciously stepping back and staggering upon his feet, as if struck with a blow to the chest. Taking a moment to reign in his fear and frustration, and the panic that he too feels, he turns to Brýma and Cirien and says, "Have everyone evacuate the lower city to the upper regions, and seal off all access between the two. I know not how or where they shall also appear, but this is clearly the locus point of their arrival. And set ablaze all the lights that you can! Torches and braziers and hearths alike. Light will be your best weapon against these beasts, but prepare also to fight them off with weapons of iron and steel."

"Our torches give hardly any light, sir," says a voice behind Brýma. They turn and lay their eyes upon a soldier of the guard, his face creased with despair, though a spark of courage shows still in his eyes. And his words are true: in his hand he holds a torch with flame licking from it in full blaze, but its light is all but devoured by the blackness that surrounds it.

"Oh, by all the gods...what are we to do?" cries Brýma in anguish.

"The very same as I said," insists Eldárien. "There is no choice but this. The light is weak, but it shines nonetheless." He pauses a moment and then opens his mouth to say something else, to ask for a company of guards to remain here and aid in the resistance, but there is no time. The beasts begin to spread from the crater, and he draws the lightbringer from its scabbard and steps forward to meet them. Rórlain is at his side, his axe already blazing with bluish light.

"We must be sparing," Eldárien manages to say before they engage the enemy. "To expend the light too liberally will break our strength too soon. But we will do what we must to hold them off until the people of the city can take refuge and until a defense can be prepared."

"Let us hope we last that long," replies Rórlain, and then he sweeps forward, his axe blazing and leaving a trail of light lingering in the air where a vrû'ádach is felled in a single blow.

Without being asked, a company of soldiers does join the two men, though Eldárien can feel the fear gripping them like a poison threatening to paralyze them where they stand. And so, even while he wields his sword against the enemy, he calls out to his companions in words of guidance and encouragement, instructing them anew on the best way to fell the enemy, and trying to stir in them hope for successful resistance. But he knows the terror that the eötenga sow by their very presence, and he himself feels also the terrible weight of the black mist which seems to invade not only the air surrounding him but also the very recesses of his heart and his mind, seeking to crush them into impotence.

In order to protect the men who fight with him, Eldárien places himself in the path of the largest beast, whose flesh roils with snakes dancing left and

right and preparing to strike as soon as it steps into proximity with the soldiers of the guard. And they do strike out against Eldárien with vicious speed, more in number than he is able to deflect with his blade. He severs many of them from the body of the beast, their heads falling to the ground and hissing as they dissolve into nothingness, but eventually he is forced to call forth a blaze of light from his upraised palm and to burn the rest of them in holy fire. Against this fire they recoil, shrieking in a sound that causes the eardrums to ache. But then they are silent.

Eldárien falters as he feels the strength leave him, and he leans for a moment upon his sword to regain his balance and composure. But despite the slaying of the snakes that emerged from its flesh, the eöten itself does not falter, but steps forward and seeks to engage Eldárien in combat. In an instant its upraised arms are intercepted by Rórlain, who leaps through the air and with a wide swipe removes both of its hands from its body. These too dissolve to nothing as soon as they touch the earth. Howling in anger, the eöten raises is head into the air and calls out. Without hesitating, Eldárien takes this opportunity and lunges forward, thrusting the lightbringer deep into the chest of the creature until he is certain that it has pierced its heart. But as it falls to its knees and then crumbles away as dust in the wind, Eldárien sees behind it more creatures of similar size and form climbing forth from the crater, all of them roaring in triumphant rage, their bodies fashioned to be weapons of both danger and terror by a malicious will and a mind that delights in twisted forms.

"We are going to be overrun, Eldárien," Rórlain calls from a few feet behind him. "We must pull back and regroup!"

As the company does so, and to their relief, a volley of arrows rains down upon the eötenga, loosed most likely from the middle portion of the city the entrance to which lies perhaps eighty yards to the north.

"But the arrows will not be enough," laments Rórlain. "Unless they strike the heart, they shall do no good."

"If only we could..." Eldárien begins, but his voice dies in his throat.

For a moment, before the enemy engages them again, Rórlain catches Eldárien's eyes and looks deeply into them. "Perhaps we can," he says, and his voice is full of meaning, a thread of hope reaching out as if to weave its way through the very darkness and despair itself, and to forge a path.

With the next volley of arrows Rórlain extends his arms and closes his eyes, rapt in intense concentration. Immediately Eldárien feels power passing through him, surging through his heart and his flesh as it flows into Rórlain, and through Rórlain into the arrows that fall from the sky. In an instant their tips burst forth in blue flame like a shower of stars glowing pure and bright, and then plunging into the flesh of the beasts. On contact with the light the

lesser of the creatures dissolve, defeated, even if the arrow that struck their bodies only grazed them.

Eldárien allows himself to be encouraged by this sight, even though he feels weakness grip him still more strongly. He hesitates for a moment, and yet, knowing now that this can be done, he cannot count the cost. With an act of the will he unleashes the light also into the blades of the soldiers of the guard who stand around him, and they burst forth in the same brilliance, meeting in combat the creatures that still emerge from the darkness as quickly as they are slain. Despite this, his heart grieves to see many of these men slain at the hands of the beasts, overcome by their sheer number and by the terror that they bring, overwhelming the heart and deadening the body even as it tries to resist.

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Tilliána and Elmáriyë rush through the upper city, lighting lights and encouraging wavering spirits as the battle rages below. Evacuees from the lower city are aided in their flight to the citadel and its surrounding buildings, until there is no longer any room for more; and then the largest and most sturdy houses of the upper city are filled and barricaded. As far as possible the untrained men, recruited only recently and given weapons despite their lack of preparation, are allowed to stand guard over their families and friends, their wives and children, while the trained city guard stands outside in companies awaiting their summons to direct conflict, if they are not already together with Eldárien and Rórlain in the midst of the fray.

Cirien, for his part, gathers a small company of men and says to them, "Will you accompany me back into the midst of the fighting, not to engage the enemy directly, but to find what wounded we may of our own people, and to carry them to safety? It is more important to save the lives that are threatened than to destroy the might of our enemy. And that latter task lies not in your domain or in your capacity; it is entrusted to another." Seeing their willingness, even touched and constrained by the fear that now, with the permeating mist of darkness, fills the entire city, Cirien leads the company back into the lower city. The barricade is shut firmly behind them, to be opened only when they return with the wounded in need of healing.

In addition to this company of rescue led by Cirien, another group of soldiers is led by the captain of the guard, a man by the name of Hínding. Sénfyr, the captain-vicar, also accompanies him. They come to the aid of those fighting with Eldárien and Rórlain to stymie the invasion of the eötenga, charging forward with swords and spears raised like a wave at sea crashing against the bulwark of the forces of darkness. But however strong this wave may be, the wave of the eötenga is greater, pouring forth without end from the center-point of darkness that lies in the crater where the Lord of Death

had appeared.

In this conflict the courage of men is tested—sorely tested—against the fearless might of the impersonal creatures of darkness, mindless tools of destruction in the hands of forces that themselves refuse to appear before those whom they so willingly subject to slaughter. Even with the reinforcement given by the troops under command of Hínding, hardly more than a quarter of an hour passes before the guards of Onylándun are pushed back to the base of the stone wall upon which the upper city stands.

"We cannot hold them any longer!" Rórlain cries to Eldárien through the fray, his axe still blazing with light in his hand, though his ragged voice betrays the exhaustion that threatens to overtake him. "There are too many. If we remain here any longer, none of us will survive."

Eldárien regretfully nods at the truth of these words, fearing what will happen to the rest of the city should the vanguard retreat. Will not the eötenga simply flood freely into the rest of the city? Perhaps indeed the vanguard is the only thing preventing them from emerging freely from every shadow in the city and working a slaughter like the one that occurred in Ristfánd. Eldárien indeed has the vivid sense that the only reality keeping the creatures of darkness from emerging at will is the light that stands against it, the light entrusted into the care of Rórlain and himself. And thus he fears what may result from the withdrawal of the light, however subtle this withdrawal may be. But then he remembers the voice of Hiliána and the tenderness of her presence, and the word of loving gift that had reverberated within him and had opened him anew to the mystery that lies beyond the eyes of flesh, shining into this world through her and the other Anaíon from the Origin of all. And this presence that has carried him through many places of darkness is rekindled within him even now, and he finds the trust to surrender anew to its light.

This allows Eldárien to accept Rórlain's proposition in more than mere despair, but rather with a deep prayer of the heart that the light itself shall remain strong where his own strength and capacity falters. He and Rórlain then lead the company up the stone steps to the upper city—calling out for Hínding's company to follow directly behind them—and the barricade is opened for a moment to allow them all to enter. It is shut again just as quickly to block out the eötenga, who are greeted with a dense rain of arrows blazing with light that Rórlain confers upon them.

"What else can we do?" Rórlain says, his voice constrained with anguish, when the gate closes behind them.

"I do not...I really do not know," answers Eldárien, wiping the sweat that runs down his forehead with the back of his hand. "But we have discovered something that we did not before know to be possible. The light can be

imbued upon the weapons of others. This itself is a great boon, even if alone it is not enough. Perhaps there is more also that we can discover than this."

"Is there any way to stop the invasion itself?" Sénfyr asks, stepping close and joining the conversation. Near him stands Hínding, though the latter's attention is wholly directed to his men, whom he addresses in words of encouragement.

"It would be necessary to find their leader and to break his power," Rórlain answers. "But I have seen none who might be such."

"If it is the one who calls himself the Lord of Death," says Eldárien in a voice weak with anguish, "then I have little hope either of finding him or of defeating him. His power was far beyond anything I have encountered before, far beyond the strength of any man. I fear that it would crush all in its path in an instant. Why he did not crush us in our encounter with him, I know not...but I am certain it was not from lack of ability."

"This 'Lord' you speak of," Sénfyr says, "where was he and what happened to him?"

"He was hidden in the underbelly of the city, summoned here, I believe, by the members of the cult. He appeared for but a few moments in a circle of summoning, only to taunt us and to disappear—calling forth both the darkness that now envelops us as well as the beasts that now flood the city. The crater from which the creatures emerge is the same place where we encountered him."

"Could you perhaps find him again in the same place?" Sénfyr asks. "I know it sounds foolish, but...if the beasts still emerge from the same place, could he not still be there giving them life and vigor?"

Eldárien and Rórlain think about this for a moment, and then the former says, "I doubt it. Proximity has little or no effect on the power wielded by such beings."

"And yet there must be a reason that the eötenga emerge from there and from nowhere else," interjects the latter. "I think there may be some truth to Sénfyr's suggestion."

"What truth do you imply?"

"I wish I knew..."

At this moment Hínding finishes speaking to his men and turns to the three, interrupting their converse. He says to Eldárien, "You are the one of whom all now speak? The one gifted with light and claiming to bear the blood and heritage of Séra Galáptes? If this is the case, can you not use your powers to discern the way to defeat our enemy, rather than relying upon your reason and thought alone?" Despite the intensity in both his words and his voice, his tone is not unkind.

Eldárien is taken aback at first by the directness of his question, but then

he replies, "The gifts of the gods are not contrary to reason and to the truths discovered by human thought. And yet you are right in this: they go beyond it both in depth and in insight. Perhaps there is some hope in what you say."

At this moment a deafening crash sounds not far away, as the eötenga begin to batter against the gates preventing them from entering the upper city.

"We have little time," Rórlain says. "Is there any way that I can assist you, Eldárien?"

"I...I need to be alone for a moment, that I might concentrate and listen," he replies. "Harness the light as you must. Give me only a few minutes. Whether I discover something or not, I shall return to you soon." With this he turns away and shuts himself in a guardhouse nearby. He drops to his knees and places his head against the earth, covering his ears with the palms of his hands to block out as much external noise as he is able. In the darkness that surrounds him he does not at first realize that his eyes have remained open, and upon this realization he closes them, directing his gaze inward, beyond the flesh, as if reaching out to touch what cannot be touched, not now the light for which the heart longs but the darkness from which it recoils. A couple minutes pass and he feels nothing—as if he is grasping at air and wishing it were solid. But then he turns away from the darkness and back to the light, leaning into it with all of his spirit, a spirit weakened and exhausted. *Show me*, he pleads, *show me where I must go to bring an end to this assault.*

Now time seems to stop, and Eldárien feels suspended in expectation, a dense silence and darkness enfolding him, not now pervaded with terror and death but rather more akin to the darkness of the womb, awaiting the outpouring of light and life. And then image and awareness flow into his mind. Both together merge into one reality, a conviction in his heart abiding and deep. In image, he sees himself lifted up from the earth and carried, carried across mountains and valleys, across snow and stone, night and day, through darkness and fear and conflict, in hope and faith and longing, and to a citadel high upon majestic peaks, built upon the living rock of the mountains themselves as if an extension of the very life of Telmérion, breathing forth as a cradle for the civilization of man, and yet by man tended. In awareness, he comes instantly to understand the answer to his pleas: the assault of the creatures of darkness that now lay siege to Onylándun can only be stopped by defeating their onslaught in direct conflict here and now, and this is possible because, when slain with the power of the light, such creatures cannot return again to the earth until fashioned anew by their maker. And underneath this awareness is concealed another: it is not Eldárien's place henceforth to lead the conflict against these legions of darkness, but rather to follow the path marked out to the very heart of the darkness, whence all else arises. Only

there, in confrontation with the Lord of Darkness, can the power that fashions the eötenga be broken at its source.

And as his mind and heart make contact with this mystery, as they press through the path ahead of him—across these mountains and to this abode of darkness—Eldárien feels a sense of oppressive evil, of inexpressible wickedness and malice, and also a sense of impending danger, not only to the people of Telmérion but to his own person and to the one who stands at his side. He feels the confrontation as if walking into the heart of the ocean during a terrible storm, fighting the violent crashing of the waves that seeks ever to thrust him back toward shore. No, he cannot go back—back to safety, back to shore—for only by casting out into the deep, by plunging into the heart both of darkness and of light, can the darkness at last be broken and light prove victorious.

And then, just as swiftly as it has come, the vision ceases, and Eldárien's consciousness returns to the guardhouse, where he kneels with his forehead to the floor, the sounds of fear and violence echoing through the walls that surround him. He rises to his feet, allowing the truth of the vision to abide within him—indeed to flow into him and to take up its abode in his heart—even as the constricting anguish of their current situation grasps him again with vehemence and threatens to choke his spirit. And the question immediately stirs within him, though he knows, in the lingering light of the vision, that it is a question that cannot and need not be answered: *But what does this mean?* Even when the path is shown its details remain hidden, and only in the living of each succeeding moment, hidden in mystery until that time, are the specific contours of the journey revealed. And human freedom finds itself set upon this path, at times to accept in obedience what can be no other way, and at times to reach out with creativity and hope, finding whatever means it discerns to be best and trusting in a providence and a sight greater than its own.

And precisely this is what faces Eldárien now, as he pushes open the door of the guardhouse and steps into the crowd of soldiers that stands at the ready before the wall separating the two segments of the city, the creatures of darkness battering against the gates and threatening to break them down. He hurries forward toward Rórlain and the other commanders in order to share with them what he has learned regarding the conflict that lies before him, and how these creatures shall be repelled, as little hope as there may seem to be that such a thing is possible.

Chapter Four
Flames of Darkness, Flames of Light

"Your suggestion was more right than you knew," Eldárien says to Hínding, making no effort to hide the tone of gratitude in his voice. Their eyes lock for a moment, only to be torn apart by the distraction caused by another echoing jolt of energy and sound reverberating from the gate as it is battered by the largest of the eötenga. "But the answer given is not a pleasing one," continues Eldárien, making sure his words are loud enough to be heard also by Rórlain and Sénfyr. "There is no commander here whom we may slay in order to bring this attack to conclusion. We have no choice but to eliminate every last one of our attackers. But once they are slain they need trouble us no more for the present. If only we can hold them off, there is yet hope of restoring peace."

"But is there any hope at all of holding them off?" Sénfyr rejoins, his voice laced with doubt. "One of the larger of these beasts is worth thirty men."

"Aye, that is true," Rórlain accedes, "and yet, with the power of the light, one man may be worth thirty vrû'ádach, and even a good number of the greater eötenga, provided we can gain an advantage."

"But what advantage could we possibly gain?" Sénfyr asks.

"It is our city," interjects Hínding. "So let us use it for our purposes. We have little time, however. The gate shall not hold much longer." Then turning directly to Eldárien and Rórlain, he says, "The two of you can still channel that burning light into the weapons of our army?" When they have nodded in agreement, he continues, "Then I have a plan, to be put in effect immediately. Let us post as many archers as we can upon the roofs of the houses or in the watchtowers. Also, let us line the edge of the highest level of the city with men who may rain down arrows and javelins on our enemy. If we cannot overcome them in direct conflict, let us use the light to our advantage by piercing them with lesser weapons bearing a greater power."

"That is a good plan," agrees Rórlain. "But what about the people of Onylándun? Many have surely taken refuge on this level of the city. There is not enough space for all of them close to the citadel."

"If it comes to the matter, it shall be up to our best fighters to defend them," replies Hínding. "But we must also let our archers know to aim most especially to prevent the houses being breached."

Just as these words have left Hínding's mouth, a high splitting sound rends through the air and the gate near which they stand gives way beneath the

blows of a massive troll-like eöten.

"Sénfyr, put my words into effect immediately!" cries Hínding, raising his sword and turning toward the breach. "We shall hold them here as long as we can."

There is not a single instant for any further deliberation, as eötenga of many shapes and sizes now rush through the broken gate, pushing back the vanguard that has awaited them. Hínding fearlessly steps to the front of the line of soldiers and engages directly with the enemy, his sword hewing down one creature after another. Rórlain and Eldárien are not far behind him, though their attention is always divided, on the one hand by the melee combat in which they are fiercely engaged, and on the other hand by the effort of continually giving space for the light to pour through them and into the weapons of their allies. The strain weighs heavily upon both of them and they feel weakness gripping their bodies more and more; and yet in the same manner they feel a mysterious strength surging up from the center of their being and flowing through them along with the very light that they share. As a person experiences a new surge of energy at the furthest limits of exhaustion and fatigue, so in a deeper way—and from a different source—the two light-bearers experience now a power within them that is far beyond their own strength, sustaining them even as they sustain the army that relies upon them.

Due to the sheer number of the eötenga pouring through the rift, it is all but impossible to restrain them enough to give Sénfyr the necessary time to set in motion their plan of defense. But they fight to the utmost of their ability—Hínding like a wild tempest sweeping against the creatures of darkness, and Eldárien and Rórlain at his side, hacking left and right with blades blazing—and the soldiers around them take heart as they behold their leaders aflame with such courageous resolve.

Yet even as they fight the company of soldiers is gradually pushed back further from the gate and toward the center of the city. The massive size of many of the eötenga necessitates this, as it is impossible to remain alive against their onslaught without keeping a wide berth between them and the company of soldiers, engaging them only from this distance. Eventually Rórlain slips his axe back into his belt and takes his bow from his back, loosing arrows upon the enemy until they are all spent. Eldárien, on the other hand, remains always in the vanguard of the forces, with Hínding not far from him, though his arms ache from the continuous swordplay, and indeed his whole body teeters on the brink of collapse. But as he looks around he sees that the soldiers of the guard are in the same position. Their foe, however, assails them with numbers that appear endless, and when one creature is hewn down another rises to take its place. The vrû'ádach nonetheless pose less threat than the larger beasts, some in the misshapen forms of men—trolls—and some a

bizarre mixture of the parts of animals forged by darkness into new and unnatural creatures.

One eöten in particular proves to be nearly unstoppable, striking down soldier after soldier who tries to stand in its path. It has a body the shape of a great bear and yet horns like a ram with which it seeks to gore its victims; but most dangerous of all are its six serpentine tails twisting in perpetual movement and striking out continually with jolts of biting electrum that brings instant death to all whom it touches. Dismayed at the sight of this beast, Eldárien calls to the men around him and urges them to retreat to a safe distance. Too many bodies lie burned and broken against the earth in its path to allow the men to engage it in direct combat any longer.

"Archers!" Eldárien then cries, gesturing with his hand toward the beast. "Take it down!"

A flurry of arrows from the surrounding roofs rains down upon it, and yet it hardly flinches, treating the arrows—even blazing with holy light—as no more than irritating pin-pricks.

About a dozen yards to his right, Hínding calls to Eldárien and says, "Its hide is too thick for arrows!"

"But it is impossible to get close enough to strike it," Eldárien replies, though his words fade away even as he speaks them, voiced more to himself than to anyone else.

With a roar the beast bounds toward him, tails lashing out and teeth bared in fury. His heart racing in his breast, Eldárien casts his gaze about looking for some way to stop the creature, and his eyes fall upon a long-shafted spear with a wide and heavy blade clutched still in the hands of a dead soldier. He sweeps down and picks it up in his left hand and, just as the beast leaps into the air toward him, he throws it with all of his strength. With hardly a second to spare before the beast lands upon him and its tails bring him death, the spear pierces deep into its heart. In a brilliant flash of bluish light, it dissolves into nothingness and is gone. Eldárien then sinks to the ground in exhaustion and, even as the rest of the eötenga surge toward him, he finds it impossible to rise.

But a figure steps between him and the oncoming enemy, his axe at the ready. With his other hand, Rórlain reaches out for Eldárien and says, "Allow me to help you to your feet."

But as soon as Eldárien is again standing, and Rórlain has hewn down the first few of the oncoming eötenga, they are forced to retreat another twenty or thirty yards, another rain of arrows allowing them the space to escape. With this retreat they join with the full force of the city guard, Sénfyr now at their head, his task of gathering and stationing the archers complete. Looking about for a moment, they realize that they can no longer see Hínding and his company.

"Where is Hínding?" Rórlain asks.

"He and his warriors must have been forced down a different street," answers Eldárien, leaning on his friend as he tries to regain his strength. He then says quietly, "I am wearying, Rórlain."

"Allow me to carry the load alone for a while," is Rórlain's tacit response. "I can channel the light still, so allow me to do it."

"It will be much harder without my assistance," retorts Eldárien.

"Let me try it nonetheless."

"Very well." After this, Eldárien allows himself to step back into the company of soldiers behind him and to lean against the stone wall of a house. As much as he wants to fight, he knows that pushing forward in his condition now would only lead to his collapse. He bows his head and closes his eyes, attempting to reach deep within himself in order to draw upon new strength where his own fails, and where even the strength that had flowed within him before seems to be inadequate to the task when his fatigue has reached such a level of intensity.

Even as he focuses in this way, he is interrupted by the words of Sénfyr, "What about Hínding? I fear for his company, separated from the rest."

"I..." Eldárien looks up and opens his mouth to speak, but he is interrupted by a sound that echoes across the sky above them and sends waves of terror into all alike. For all know that sound, though they had hoped beyond hope never to hear it again.

"Until now it had only been taunting us," Sénfyr says, his voice shaking, "picking us off little by little. Now it brings terror."

And he is right, as the sound of air whistling against the dragon's wings is followed by a burst of light as fire rains down upon the city in a steady stream from one end to the other, igniting soldiers and buildings alike.

"Get off the roofs! Get off the roofs!" Sénfyr cries, rushing forward and calling out to all who can hear his voice. "Find whatever cover you can!"

Rórlain, rushing away and disappearing onto a side street, picks up Sénfyr's words and relays them to others.

For his part, despite the fact that his flesh fails and his heart chokes with fear, Eldárien cries out, "Courage, men, courage! We have the light, and we have already slain so many of their kind. There is hope yet that we may also stop this dragon." He knows that his words can hardly penetrate the heavy curtain of fear that falls upon the city even more vividly now, as the presence of the dragon is added to the blackness that envelops all things and the violent assault that presses upon them. But as afraid as he is, Eldárien believes his words, ignoring the seed of doubt that stirs within him. And because he believes, he must speak. "If we do not believe that we can defeat it, we have already lost!"

After these words he stumbles forward after Rórlain, seeking to join his friend in whatever he aims to do.

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Despite the efforts of the soldiers of the guard, the middle city is now almost entirely overrun by the forces of darkness, and the vrû'ádach have begun to batter and break the doors to the houses and to enter into them, their wicked intent to be sated only with the slaughter of all in the city, from the strongest to the weakest, from the oldest man to the youngest child, from the rugged body of the warrior to the innocent body of the maiden.

Seeing this, Sénfyr calls forth the courage of the men who stand at his side, "For the safety of our people, for our families, our friends, and those with whom we have shared life, let us find in ourselves strength within weakness and bravery amidst fear. The enemy is great, but let our love be greater! And if death is to be our end this day, let it not be said that we stood idly by while our people were slaughtered. Let it be said rather that we met them face to face with the courage of champions."

The men raise their weapons in the air and echo in response to Sénfyr's words a tremendous war cry, clinging to courage even as the dragon makes another pass over the city, flames streaming from its mouth all the while. And then they rush forward, a unified wall of weapons cutting its way back into the center of the city, hearts joined together in an unexpected unity of vision and purpose, and fighting with a renewed vigor, precisely because of their solidarity in a shared fate of darkest loss. Whenever they reach a house with a battered door, a few soldiers break from the company and enter it, while the rest of the company continues on, keeping its impetuous charge, knowing that it is their only remaining advantage against the enemy that has flooded the streets of their city.

A few streets over, Elmáriyë stands by the doorway of a two-story house while eötenga bash against the door from without. A handful of men and women at her side carry weapons, awaiting the breach with failing hearts. Unsheathing a long dagger from a scabbard at her waist, Elmáriyë draws in a deep breath, though her chest is constricted and her lungs constrained. For a moment the fear of violent death vibrates through her being like a harsh wind rippling through the trees of a forest, and her mind immediately goes to all those whom she loves. She thinks of her adoptive parents and her siblings, who live still, she hopes, in the peace of their hamlet cradled in the security of the mountains, longing and praying for her safe return; she thinks of those in the temple of Nirániel with whom she had shared daily life, and who had weathered the assault on Ristfánd with ardent devotion and tender care; but she thinks especially of her four traveling companions, to whom she has been bound more deeply than she has been bound to anyone else. She thinks of

Rórlain and of Cirien, of Tilliána and of her brother, Eldárien. And in this moment all that she wants to do is hold them close. Face to face with death, she does not wish to let go, to leave them behind and to no longer behold them, touch them, and love them in this life. She has loved too deeply to depart without the going tearing her heart with grief at the farewell, and she has grown too close, the roots of her own heart and life interlacing with those of others, for there to be a separation without immense tearing.

But then Elmáriyë looks into the eyes of those who stand around her, and she sees the fear in their gazes, but also the resolve. She sees the grief at the assault on their city and the crushing of so much that is precious to them, but she also sees the glimmer of light and hope that lives in every heart, however desperate, however lost, longing for a love that lasts beyond death and a home that is secure even when all else crumbles—a glimmer of light that endures because placed within the human heart by One who is greater than the human heart, greater indeed than the entire universe.

"My friends," she says to those around her, her voice weak at first but growing stronger as she speaks, "fight to defend your home. Not the home that is a house of wood and stone, but the home that is woven of love, of the bonds of fellowship. These creatures seek to destroy our lives and to shatter our families, but let us resist them. Let us resist them. And yet take heart that, even when this life is shattered and the veil separating life from death is torn, a homeland still awaits us which no violence can assail and no evil can destroy."

Even as the last words leave her lips, the door gives way and a horde of vrû'ádach flood into the room, their claws lashing out to kill. The room is filled with the shouts and screams of men, women, and children, some of whom stand against the oncoming enemy wielding what weapons they have, and some of whom retreat in fear, cowering behind furniture or trying to flee up the stairs even though the upper story is already over-full with those who have taken refuge in the house. Without delay Elmáriyë calls upon the light within her—this light that she has felt flowing ceaselessly and draining her strength since the siege began, channeled by Eldárien and Rórlain. It pours forth from her upraised palm, a shower of radiance meeting the incoming vrû'ádach head-on, and burning their flesh until nothing remains of them but wisps of ash that then, as if carried away by a hidden wind, disappear into nothingness.

"You saved us!" an elderly man to her side cries out.

Elmáriyë tries to reply but she stumbles in exhaustion from channeling the light, an act with which she is entirely unacquainted. In her weakened state from supporting Rórlain and Eldárien in their own channeling, this act took almost everything she had left within her. Nonetheless she manages to say,

"Help me to barricade the door again before more seek to enter." Even as she speaks more vrû'ádach break off from the main host that fills the street outside and step into the house. She reaches for the light again but feels through it the faltering weakness of her companions, and her heart hesitates. Does her drawing upon the light make it more difficult for them? Is she exhausting and weakening them even as they fight to defend the city? And does she have the strength herself for another channeling?

Yet as she turns and looks into the faces of the townspeople, these questions and uncertainties fade away. All she knows is that their lives are threatened and that she has the power to protect them. And even as the vrû'ádach collide with the people within the house, their weapons flailing, she unleashes the light again and the creatures dissolve. But immediately afterward she sinks to the ground and consciousness begins to slip away from her. The last thing she sees is three men and two women pushing a thick wooden table to the door and lifting it upright so as to block the entryway, and the gnarled hands of numerous vrû'ádach reaching around it, trying to claw their way through or to break the strength of the resistance that restrains their entry.

She awakes with her back to the wall and opens her eyes to see the worry-lined face of Tilliána looking down upon her.

"What—?"

"They were able to hold the vrû'ádach off for the present," Tilliána replies, answering her unfinished question. "But the roof of the house is on fire, and we have had to vacate the upper story. Soon we will be forced to flee into the streets."

Receiving this revelation, Elmáriyë sighs, "From death into death... May it not be so."

"Indeed, may it not," says Tilliána, and then, extending her hand, she asks, "Are you alright? Are you able to rise? We need to go now."

"Yes. I am just fatigued," says Elmáriyë, placing her hand in her friend's and allowing her to raise her up.

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Eldárien sprints a dozen yards behind Rórlain, trying despite his weakness to keep up with him. The latter seems unaware of his presence as he scans the ground for fallen arrows whose shafts are still intact and gathers them to replenish his empty quiver. In a matter of minutes Rórlain comes to the edge of the city, slaying all of the eötenga in his path, and he climbs the stairs to the high stone wall, taking three steps at a time. Then he knocks an arrow to the string of his bow and raises his eyes to the sky.

The dragon, Eldárien realizes. *He seeks to slay the dragon.*

Climbing the steps at a much slower pace, Eldárien joins his companion and stands at his side, his sword resting at the ready against his shoulder.

Without turning his gaze from the sky, Rórlain remarks softly, "My attention is divided, and it is waning. It is difficult to push so strongly against the darkness and yet to continue at the same time to allow the light to flow through me into the weapons of our allies."

"Will you not allow me to bear a little of the weight?" Eldárien asks.

Rórlain does not reply for a moment, lost in thought, but then he says, "Wait for my word. I can bear it for now." Yet he sighs and adds, "However, I may need your help with the dragon."

"I would not allow you to face it alone even if you asked."

The two men look out over the city together, awaiting the beast as it returns to bathe the city again in its destructive breath. And the sight before them is one of horror and loss, as the black sky shrouded in the darkest mist contrasts with the bloody orange hue of a city on fire. The light of the flames allows them to see far across the city and to discern the extent of the damage, even as this very light is frail and faltering before the darkness that engulfs everything more fully than the darkness of a moonless midnight. For while the darkness of earth's night gives way to the lights enkindled by man, whether the flames are for war or for celebration, for festival or for study, the darkness of the mist wraps itself around the light and assails it as if to devour and extinguish it.

"It comes!" cries Rórlain as the figure of the dragon emerges from the darkness, swooping down low enough that its scaly reptilian underside glints dully in the light of the flames as its broad, bat-like wings remain extended and motionless, maintaining the fell beast in a smooth glide over the rooftops of the city. A guttural roar echoes from the dragon's throat as it calls forth the inferno that it bears within its bosom and looses it upon the city, not now upon the high roofs of the buildings but rather in the hollows of the streets.

"No!" Eldárien shouts in anguish, seeing the torrent of flames cover both men and eötenga alike. "We must bring it down!"

Rórlain raises his bow and both men together pour the light into the arrow knocked upon the string. As the dragon passes above them, he looses the arrow, and there is a burst of light as it strikes the dragon on its breast. But it seems to have no effect, and the creature flaps its wings again and soars up into the air until lost from sight.

"It will come around once again," Rórlain breathes. "Would it be possible to summon more power? Its armor is too strong for anything less."

"I do not know..." sighs Eldárien, struggling both to catch his breath and to remain standing in the fatigue that overtakes him. "Perhaps an arrow is not enough, either way."

"It is both too high and too fast for me to trust my skill with a javelin," replies Rórlain. "I do not know any other way to stop it."

"Is there some way that we could force it to land and confront us directly?"

Rórlain thinks about this question for a moment, but all the while he shakes his head. "I think not, and it is unlikely that we would survive such a confrontation..."

The dragon passes over the city two more times and each time they loose another arrow upon it. The first time Rórlain's aim misses the mark and the arrow flies too low and is lost in the darkness; the second time the arrow strikes the dragon's wing, in the very place where the skin is stretched thin and free of scales, and yet even here it fails to pierce and, deflected, falls to the earth. "Your shot was good," Eldárien remarks. "If anything was going to penetrate its armored flesh, it would have been that."

When the dragon ascends and circles for yet another pass, even though the city is already mostly engulfed in flames, Eldárien closes his eyes and plunges into thought and interior searching. In a flash, the vision returns to him in remembrance, and he sees anew with the eyes of his heart the path that he is to walk. Groping out with his heart, he seeks to lay hold of some hidden clarity or guidance concealed in this moment of insight, but it feels as though he is grasping nothing but empty air, and an answer does not come.

† † †

Elmáriyë and Tilliána hasten into the streets of the city, the many people who had taken refuge in the house accompanying them. And to their dismay they see many townspeople already crowding the streets, all of them fleeing from the wreckage of the burning buildings. Stray vrû'ádach and even a few eötenga assail these people, though a handful of brave men and women with makeshift weapons attempt to resist them. The two women join them without hesitation. Tilliána wields a short sword that was given to her this very day at the commencement of the attack, when all alike were outfitted with any spare armament as the creatures of darkness poured from the gaping wound at the heart of the city. Elmáriyë bears the dagger that she has carried from Ristfánd, and a bow and quiver of arrows hang over her shoulder. For the moment she does not call again upon the light, fearing another collapse, but charges vigorously into the fray and plunges her dagger deep into the chest of a vrû'ádach who assails a young woman cowering before it, trying to shield her infant child. And even as Elmáriyë's blade pierces the creatures flesh, it flashes forth with bluish light not of her own calling.

Turning back to Tilliána, she says, "Our friends grow stronger."

Tilliána nods silently in response, joining her companion and sparing a loot at her for a moment, only to be interrupted by a vrû'ádach who draws near to her slashing its wicked claws wildly. Stumbling back with a fearful cry, Tilliána slashes her sword and parries the claws even as they continue to bear violently down upon her. Sinking to the ground she pulls back the sword for

a moment, only then to thrust it forward beneath the reach of the vrû'ádach, embedding it deep into its thigh, in a space where two armored spines meet. The light blazes again and reduces the vrû'ádach to nothingness.

Elmáriyë helps Tilliána to her feet and squeezes her hand for a moment in both comfort and gratitude, saying, "Let us play our part, as small as it may be."

"I...I fear for Eldárien and Rórlain," Tilliána replies, catching her breath and trying to still the mad pounding of her heart. "You say their strength has grown, but is not this gift born of poverty, and does it not flow through weakness? Yet I fear that they shall collapse under the strain."

Elmáriyë casts her eyes down for a moment and mutters, "As do I." Then raising her head, she adds, "Let us try to locate them. Perhaps we may be of some assistance."

After a moment's hesitation, Tilliána replies, "I think I ought to stay here. I want to protect these people however I may; and even were I to find our companions, there is little that I could do. If anyone can aid them now, it is you."

"I... So be it," answers Elmáriyë, a glimmer of love and fear in her eyes. "But please temper your courage also with caution."

To this Tilliána simply bows her head in acknowledgment.

And so Elmáriyë turns away and hastens down the streets, all the while opening wide her heart to listen for the reverberations of Eldárien's presence which could guide her to him. She has only begun to get a sense of his form, of the contours of his consciousness pressing against hers, when she is stopped by something that demands the entirety of her attention. Turning onto another street, she steps almost directly into the heart of a battle, the guards of the city and the creatures of darkness crashing against one another as two opposing currents or as thunderheads meeting in the sky and threatening to burst on the impact. However the eötenga are much greater in number than the dwindling company of men led by the man Hínding, whose face is bloodied and whose armor is scratched, even as he continues to wield his sword with adeptness and energy. Seeing Elmáriyë, he cries out, "Get away, young lady! This is no place for you!"

Any further words exchanged between would be drowned out by the vicious onslaught of the eötenga as they press forward against the warriors. Elmáriyë hesitates in uncertainty and then turns to run, to follow the sense of Eldárien's consciousness that tugs upon her heart—a consciousness that she knows now is on the point of collapse, having expended itself both in martial combat and in the channeling of the light. But in the very moment that she turns away she hears a cry of pain and anguish, and her head jerks back spontaneously to the battle. She sees Hínding fall to the ground, the

claws of a great eötenga thrust into his throat. His death is immediate. The company of his men falter upon witnessing the felling of their leader, and the eötenga seize upon this opportunity to press their advantage.

Conflicted in her mind and heart, Elmáriyë is for an instant paralyzed in indecision, but then—without any conscious choice on her part—light breaks forth from her body so brilliant that the entire street is painted white for a long moment, and the encroaching blackness recedes. When the light again dims and eventually fades away, taking up its abode anew in the recesses of her spirit, all the eötenga in the street have vanished. The men of Hínding's company look at her in astonishment. But, getting a grip on herself, she says to them, "G-go... There are many people forced now into the streets, and they must be defended." And with this she turns and sprints away.

As she runs, she reaches out to Eldárien with the tendrils of her mind, trying to communicate with him. *Brother, can you hear me?*

There is no response.

I am here, Eldárien, and I am coming.

After a long silence: ... *Elmáriyë?*

Yes. I feel you, and I am coming to you.

Good. We could use your help right now. We are trying to bring the dragon from the sky, but nothing we do seems to be enough.

You are on the wall?

You know? That is amazing... I did not know that you could...

The duress has pushed me to it... The very darkness has urged us on to a deeper mode of communication. Then Elmáriyë hesitates for a moment before concluding, *But I do not know how much longer I can sustain it.*

Then be silent, Eldárien urges. *I shall see you soon.*

† † †

At the heart of Eldárien's remembrance of the vision he had in the guardhouse, Elmáriyë's voice has broken through, and he knows that with her arrival will come an answer.

"Elmáriyë is coming," he says to Rórlain. "I believe she will be able to help us."

"If you say so, I trust you," Rórlain replies, even while knocking another arrow to the string of his bow. "The dragon comes again. Let us try again, shall we?"

And yet even as its reptilian figure becomes visible over the flames of the city, jaws open and fire billowing from its mouth, Elmáriyë's voice bursts into Eldárien's mind again, and with it time seems to stop as though suspended by the pressing importance of their dialogue.

Eldárien, she says, and with the speaking of his name he feels her consciousness flowing into him and joining together with his own consciousness.

Without the need for words she communicates to him her realization—her deep seeing of the heart—and they behold together as in a single sight the answer to their plea and the convergence of their desire. They behold that there is a new kind of channeling and another form of bearing—or rather an extension and a coming-together of both—which alone can break the power of the dragon and save the city of Onylándun.

There is no time, Elmáriyë says within Eldárien's mind. *The dragon's flames spew forth at this very moment upon the street in which Tilliána stands with a crowd of civilians. If we do not act now, it shall be too late for them...and for her.*

I know what to do, he answers. *We have both seen it. But my question is...how?*

I think we shall simply know. Let us join together now and do what must be done.

He voices his interior assent and leans in with all of his presence—mind and heart, spirit and body—joining his consciousness with that of Elmáriyë, who likewise leans into him. They experience then something more intense and more total than either of them has ever experienced before, a flowing together of their hearts into a single shared awareness, a joining together of their minds in a single consciousness that does not for its depth and totality eradicate the uniqueness of each, but rather affirms and shelters it even as it harnesses it wholly in the gift of mutual presence. And together in this shared presence, strengthened by one another and by the light that holds them and flows within them, they turn toward the dragon and sense its immeasurable darkness. They open their hearts to the vast immensity of this darkness and evil that emanates from the dragon, spreading forth to poison the very atmosphere and to strike terror into the hearts of all. They know that dragon's visible form, and the flames that come forth from this form, are but manifestations of this darkness, shadows given fleeting shape by a malicious power that wages war against the children of men, the children of Eldáru.

In this act of opening, Eldárien and Elmáriyë feel an immeasurable weight of evil surge into their minds and hearts, like a blade thrust into the flesh and yet, more accurately, like a venom sucked from a wound, only to be spit out leaving the sufferer free of illness and spared of death. And yet expelling this darkness proves to be even more difficult than absorbing it, and both of them falter under its weight, their joined consciousness oppressed even to the point of breaking. For her part, Elmáriyë collapses in the street where she stands and blackness cloaks her vision, while Eldárien staggers and almost falls from the wall, except that Rórlain reaches out and holds him up. But at the moment neither of them are aware of this; they know only the darkness that flows in upon them and takes up its abode within them, so intense and so all-

consuming that they can focus on nothing else.

But then, for them gradually and painfully, though externally it is almost instantaneous, their consciousness returns into the passage of time and they become aware of their surroundings. And then the darkness passes, like a wave of grief and lament, like a torrent of sorrow in the face of evil, indeed like a lance of pure evil itself besieging their hearts, and it is gone. But in each of them a gaping scar remains, bleeding with the blood that is emitted only from the spirit's heart, more deeply even than the heart of the flesh. And as they return fully to their bodily consciousness—while sensing still the bond that now unites them profoundly through this shared experience and makes them in both flesh and spirit enduringly one—they also feel more vividly themselves, two locus points of ceaseless communication in which intersect the lines woven throughout the universe. They behold human lives like threads of a single fabric woven of countless stories all harmonized together in the beauty of love and intimacy by the work of the great Weaver. And they feel themselves a part of this fabric, instruments of unity, such that the needle drawing thread passes also through their own hearts—piercing and pulling—and in this way draws a fractured world deeper into the communion that, in the beginning, was so terribly ruptured.

My brother, Elmáriyë says in her spirit, while the conscious connection between them begins to fade, *I love you. And I am glad that you are here with me.*

It is all that she can say, and all that she desires to say, before she slips from consciousness as pain and exhaustion overtake her.

Chapter Five
Aftermath

Eldárien awakes to the sound of voices. Without opening his eyes, he allows consciousness to gradually return to him, and the events that led to his collapse surge before his mind's eye. He sees again the hordes of creatures laying siege to the city with merciless intent, and he sees the flames devouring the houses from dragon-fire; he sees mangled bodies and slaughtered men, and he sees Rórlain firing arrow after arrow at the reptilian beast that flies overhead. Finally he beholds in his inner vision the form of Elmáriyë, white against a black background, and yet hemmed in on every side and assailed until the darkness devours her as well. He sees himself, radiant with a similar white light, reach out to her, his glowing hand extended through the blackness; but as he does so all the light in him is blown away, and he plunges into

endless night.

"The last remaining enemy forces have been defeated, sir," an unknown voice says.

"Good. Now I can rest as well...at last," comes the weary voice of Rórlain close to Eldárien's side.

"You fought well," sounds the voice of Tilliána from his other side. "All in the city are indebted to you."

"They are indebted also and especially to our two friends," replies Rórlain. "I do not know what they did, but they saved us from utter destruction."

At this Eldárien opens his eyes, and yet he is surprised to find himself looking, not into a room bathed in warm and permeating firelight nor in the light of the sun streaming in through a window, but rather into a murky darkness that is punctuated only by the dim and struggling glow of candles and lanterns whose light seems hardly able to reach more than a couple feet. But even in this dim light he can make out the figures and the faces of the two speakers, who sit on either side of his bed and lean forward as they converse together.

"The darkness..." he says, finding his voice again and trying to sit up, "it endures even now."

"Oh, you are awake!" cries Tilliána, turning to him.

"How do you feel? Are you able to sit up?" Rórlain asks, seeing Eldárien's efforts.

"I believe so. The weakness has in large part passed," says Eldárien, and with little support from Rórlain he eases into a sitting position while Tilliána situates a few pillows behind him to help hold him upright. "I feel more or less like myself again," he remarks, though even as he says the words he knows that they conceal something unspoken—the awareness that deep in his heart something has forever changed, and that the scars from the absorption of the darkness remain with him. "Is Elmáriyë alright?"

"Yes," answers Tilliána with a gentle smile. "She awoke not long ago. And now she walks through the corridors of the citadel in solitude, as she said that she required some time alone."

"It is an immense relief to hear that she is well. Though I would like to speak with her myself."

"Of course," Rórlain says.

"But first, tell me what happened after I lost consciousness. And how long have I been asleep?"

"Not long, considering past incidents," answers Rórlain. "It is only afternoon of the day after you fell unconscious. The battle was yesterday, and it ended before the setting of the sun," and then, with an audible sigh, he adds, "though its rising and setting are hardly noticeable now..."

"So defeating the creatures did not expel the darkness released by the Lord of Death?"

"No, it did not."

"I heard that all the enemy forces were defeated," Eldárien says. "By that news I am surprised and yet relieved. It seemed to me that we were almost entirely overrun."

"We were," Rórlain says with a bow of his head, "and yet whatever the two of you did seemed to suck the will to fight out of the eötenga. It also dissolved the dragon to nothingness. In one instant it hovered over the city, fire pluming from its jaws, and the next instant both it and the flames born of it disappeared. Unlike what we have now witnessed many times—when the creatures of darkness make contact with the purging light—it was not dissolved nor burned away. What I beheld was something different, though it seems to have the same source. It almost appeared that the dragon was consumed from the inside out, that the very stuff of which it was made faded away from within until there was nothing left for its being to feed upon."

"That is...rather accurate," remarks Eldárien, recalling the intense and timeless moment that he and Elmáriyë shared in their confrontation with the darkness.

"What exactly happened?" asks Tilliána.

After pausing for a moment as he grapples for an answer, Eldárien responds, "I do not know that I could put it into words. Suffice it to say that Elmáriyë and I joined together and confronted the darkness of which the dragon was composed. We somehow...absorbed it."

His two friends are silent for a few moments upon hearing this, reflecting on its import and unable to find a fitting response. Then at last Rórlain says, "So it was another form of bearing? And yet not of a man but of a beast?"

"It was a bearing, yes, and yet it was something new, something deeper, like a new chapter of a book that holds unexpected secrets that before could not be guessed...even if, upon their revelation, the heart knows that they are continuous with all that came before."

These words prove to be enough, and they speak no more of the matter, passing on to other topics of conversation.

"So the eötenga fought no more after the dragon was defeated?" asks Eldárien.

Rórlain shakes his head. "That is not true. They seemed dazed and confused for a while, just long enough for us to mount a counterattack; but then they fought as they did before, though with less vigor and less concord, almost like they were thrown into disarray through loss of the unifying voice that directed their activity. Yet it seems that whatever you did unto the dragon also effected the origin-point in the crater. It is either that or we had already

resisted the majority of their forces. For little more emerged from the crater after your absorption, and those lingering in the city we have been able to defeat over the last day." Rórlain smiles softly and adds, "Yet I have fought no more since what happened on the battlements. I have been in the citadel, trying to remain alert while channeling the light for the weapons of our troops."

"Without Elmáriyë and myself that task fell to you alone," Eldárien acknowledges.

"Aye, it did. But it was one that I was glad to fulfill." With this Rórlain leans back in his chair, and, yawning, he adds, "Yet I have not slept at all and feel exhaustion closing about me."

"I am impressed, and I am grateful," says Eldárien, reaching out and placing a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Your stamina far outmatched mine, both in combat and in channeling the light."

"As for the light," Rórlain remarks, "I think that you bear most of the strain. I draw on the power within you and so it takes much less of a toll upon me."

"But a toll it still exacts," Eldárien says. "I recall what happened in the depths beneath the black castle of the Lord of Mæres."

Rórlain nods silently and a pensive expression crosses his features.

"So go, my dear friend. Go and take some well-deserved rest," Eldárien says. "I am confident that Tilliána shall be able to answer any other questions that I may have."

With this Rórlain takes his leave, and the two remain in the room alone, the darkness and silence between them saturated with meaning and with presence. A few minutes pass in companionable stillness as each rests in the other's presence, and then Eldárien says, "I am glad that you survived the battle."

With a shadow of grief crossing her features, Tilliána replies, "And yet so many did not."

"Yes...the losses were great. What a grievous anguish it was to behold and what a sorrow to lament and mourn. Did many more perish after I lost consciousness?"

"For a long time it was horrible, as we tried to save as many people as we could from the flames. Those unable or unfit to fight have spent the last day combating the fires and rescuing survivors of the battle, both in the streets and in the buildings. The middle level of the city lies almost entirely in ruins —or at least everything that was able to burn. But the lower city and the uppermost level, with the citadel at its heart, have, surprisingly, remained nearly untouched. The dragon focused its attacks where the fighting occurred...and where most of the population had taken refuge." She sighs and runs her

hands slowly through her hair, looking at Eldárien with a glint in her eye, a light coming not from without—for the air is too dim to cause refraction—but from within, from the place whence spring tears. But then she continues, "The dragon only made a single pass over the upper portion of the city, and most of the buildings here are constructed entirely of stone, so even then it had little effect. Yet the middle level, the focus of his attack, is now but a skeleton of what it once was."

"Do we have a count of our losses?" Eldárien asks quietly, compassion in his voice.

"The city was home to almost twenty-thousand," replies Tilliána, "and we have a count neither of the living nor the dead. But if I had to wager a guess, I would say that half of us have been slain and half of us still live."

"A terrible loss," breathes Eldárien, bowing his head in mourning. The gravity of the loss hits him like an icy wind, knocking the breath from his lungs and causing his heart to ache. When he has recovered enough to speak, he looks intently at Tilliána and asks, "How are you coping with all of this? Even though we successfully held off the onslaught, your fear of loss was doubly confirmed. The toll of death was immense."

She does not reply immediately but returns his gaze without flinching or lowering her eyes in shame or in grief. And then she says, "I have accepted that horrors shall assail us and mark our every step until this darkness is at last defeated. But even if it be not my place to lead the people through this anguish, and if it be not my place to bear their sufferings, I nonetheless receive into my heart their pain, and it pierces me as if it were my own or of those whom I love."

"And the loss of those whom you loved is still fresh, unsoftened by time," Eldárien remarks. "Every new loss, I understand, only tears open that wound again."

She nods, eyes lowered as tears form within them. "That is true, but I also grieve for each loss in its own right, with as much capacity as my heart can find within it."

"Your words and your attitude are empathetic and loving. This cannot but be a good and sacred thing. But I also think that perhaps its expression is not fully wise," says Eldárien after thinking for a moment. "Suffering as we have seen, and the loss of innocent human life, bears a mystery of absurdity within it, a breath as from the depths of iniquity. To look too deeply and too long into such darkness can suffocate the heart, and worse. You may desire to feel the pain of all as if it is your own, but I think that this is the sole prerogative and capacity of the One who made us. Even our own pain is too much for us to bear unaided."

"But I cannot hold them at arms' length!" cries Tilliána. "What kind of

person would I be if I closed my heart off from others, if I made myself insensitive to the waves of suffering and loss washing over them...all so that I would not be burdened or overwhelmed?"

"I would never ask you, Tilliána, to close off your heart from others," Eldárien explains. "If I were to do that in my own right, I would consider myself as having betrayed the deepest calling of my heart and its highest aspiration. No, I ask you only not to gaze overmuch into the abyss of darkness and loss for fear that it should swallow you up. The pain shall come, and the evil, but keep your eyes always on the light—or search for the light when it cannot be seen—for this alone shall allow you to hold the darkness truly, and also to avoid losing yourself under the weight of malice, grief, and suffering that weighs so heavily upon our world."

† † †

After their conversation has concluded Eldárien rises from his place of rest and dresses in a set of new garments that have been laid out for him, as his others were torn and covered in muck from the battle. The tunic, cloak, and tabard that he was given in the Velási Forest, however, have been washed and set aside that he might don them again. His new trousers are of woven fabric padded on the inside with fur and his undershirt is a few layers of wool and linen, tied at the breast with loose strings. Beneath his tunic, however, and over his undershirt, is his usual gambeson, which has accompanied him now all the way from Tel-Velfána and which, despite its age, he he still wears as it is not easy to replace. Over this new attire, with remembrance of the radiance of the Velási and their home which contrasts so vividly with the darkness that now envelops him, he puts on the gifts that were there given to him.

Eldárien's body is sore from the combat of the preceding day, but an even deeper exhaustion hangs over him—though exhaustion is not an accurate word to express it. It is rather that the horizons of his mind have been opened and the limits of his heart expanded through his encounter with the darkness of the dragon, though what he encountered in the dragon was itself but an incarnation of the invisible burden of evil and malevolence that weighs upon the world and threatens the well-being and freedom of all human hearts. He does not linger on any of this now, however, as he is concerned for Elmáriyë and wishes to see her as soon as he can. But even as he leaves his room in search of her, Tilliána and her grief sit heavy also upon his mind. He knows her fragility and yet also her strength—her long-suffering endurance but also the sensitivity of her heart that without the wisdom and guidance of the light would devour itself in the name of compassion.

And he fears also to cause her pain in the decisions that lie before him in the immediate future; and more deeply, he simply is concerned for her safety and happiness. In the face of the war and destruction that crash upon the

continent of Telmérion, this concern for the happiness of a single person may seem out of place. After all, have not so many already lost their lives and the lives of those whom they love, have they not lost so much that brought them happiness or at least a sense of stability and security in the life that they once knew? Why focus then on the happiness of one when it is denied to so many? These questions are real and vivid, and yet the answer to them is even more vivid in Eldárien's heart: What is love but love for a single person? Even love for a community, for a nation, and for all of humanity is founded upon love for the individual; and for such broad and expansive love to be true and authentic, it must be founded upon a vision of the heart that, in looking upon the individual person, comes to see and reverence their unique beauty and dignity, which is unlike that of any other person, special and unrepeatable. And the paradox is that precisely this love for the individual opens the eyes of the heart to the love of all, bearing in itself the first fruits of dilation and expansion. For both forms of love spring from the same reality: the abiding awareness of the beauty of each one of the children of Eldáru, of all persons not only in the land of Telmérion but in every region of the earth.

But how rare is such a love! A love truly universal, which is not limited or constrained by prejudice or fear or a spirit of militancy, competition, or myopia! A heart universal in the breadth of its interior vision, looking forth upon all persons with a readiness to be moved to cherish, love, and care—even if only in the affection and prayer of the inner being—how rare a reality this is! But such, Eldárien knows, is the heart of a true king, and he hopes that he may receive and remain faithful to some measure of this mystery. Though there is only one truly universal kingship in the history of the world, the prerogative of no man, nonetheless Eldárien yearns to incarnate some fraction of the light, some small part of the broad vision and worldwide love that is promised of the One who will bring the bright light of dawn to every darkness.

He thinks of the time that he and his companions spent in the forest of the Velási, and of the illumination of heart brought by the reality unveiled before him in those precious days—a reality that he had glimpsed with the longing of his spirit throughout his life, but which had to be revealed to him from the outside to be truly known and lived. In these thoughts he comes to understand anew, and more deeply, that such a universal love as he feels drawing his heart is not possible except on the basis of a universal truth. In actual fact, when the lines are traced back to the heart of every thing, and all are traced back to their true origin and foundation, it becomes apparent that Love and Truth are one. For if the universe was sung into existence by creative Love, then its truth too lies in love, and in love is its fulfillment. But so too, love is not love unless it is born of Truth, unless it participates in truth and lives at

every moment according to its beautiful illumination.

As he walks the halls of the citadel, occupied by these thoughts, he comes upon Councilor Jatíldë. Lines of weariness crease her face and her eyes are downcast. Walking in the opposite direction, she almost passes by without noticing him, but she looks up at the last moment and an expression of surprise crosses her face. "Oh, it is you, Eldárien Illómiel," she says, stopping and turning to face him. "It seems that the promises you brought when you came to our city have proved true. You and your companions saved us from certain destruction." The tone of her voice reveals both the honest gratitude and the grief in her heart.

"Your words are kind, Councilor Jatíldë," replies Eldárien. "I want to express my condolences and my compassion, however, for the great loss that your city has suffered and that I am certain has deeply touched your own heart."

Averting her gaze for a moment, clearly in the discomfort of shared sorrow, she answers, "Thank you for your compassion, as well as for your aid." Then, raising her eyes again, she adds, with a touching vulnerability, "When you first came to Onylándun, I was hesitant. It is true that our people have long awaited the fulfillment of the promises made to us—awaited the coming of the heir of the great Séra Galáptes, the prophesied 'Scarred King.' But when you came bearing his likeness both in appearance and in power, I did not wish to give credence lightly. But what surprised me the most, even more than the very fact of your appearance at this desperate and dark time in our history, was the modesty with which you bore what has been entrusted to you. Too long, I think, have our people been under the yoke of those who have sought to rule, and who have delighted in this rule. The coming of a man who accepts governance out of obedient service is a breath of fresh air in a place of suffocation."

Bowing his head before her, Eldárien remarks with a reciprocal trust and openness elicited by her own, "Your words, again, are kind, lady Jatíldë, perhaps too kind. But I accept them as well. For me it has never been a temptation, nor even a thought, to aspire to rule over others. Much too well do I know the burdens and responsibilities of such an office. It is only the longing of my heart to care for the people of our land, and to ensure their safety and prosperity, that allows me to accept what has been entrusted to me, not with a sense of mere burden or weight, but with true desire and willingness born from deep within the heart. In fact I think that no burden is ever meant to be borne but with the desire of the heart, for it is this desire that gives the strength to bear joyfully and with abiding peace also all that chafes against the spirit and weighs upon the mind, that we may remain light and free even when much around us is heavy and dark."

"And it is precisely such dispositions, Eldárien, that make me hope that you will indeed someday become our king," says Jatíldë, "though such a day seems far away and unattainable. But if there is any hope for a dawn after such darkness, it lies in the reality that burns like a flame's spark in your heart."

"That spark lives in all of us," Eldárien affirms simply in response.

"Well then, may you find opportunity to stir it into flame. The people are already muttering about the 'savior of the city' whose light they saw flashing upon the weapons of all and devouring the very darkness itself."

"But the darkness still remains."

"Aye, that it does, but the beasts no longer. And do not be too quick to snuff out the hopes kindled in the hearts of a fearful people long accustomed to despair. We are a people of hope, and we have clung to it for centuries when so many others have forgotten, and despite the burdens of doubt that lay upon us. Foster and cherish that hope, for it has long survived the direst straits and endured the deepest of discouragement."

Nodding slightly, Eldárien says, "Your hope—the hope of the people—encourages and strengthens me, and I would never do anything to lessen their hope, but only to strengthen it. But pray that my own hope may remain firm against the coming days of darkness."

"The rock itself must be upheld..." voices Jatíldë, her gaze wandering wistfully down the hall, and Eldárien is uncertain of her thoughts. But after a moment she turns back to him and, with a final look into his eyes, she says, "You shall be tested, and yet in you we shall all be tested. For you carry all of us within you. Thus as you go ahead of us, and on our behalf, we can hope to follow after, even as we support you already now."

"I shall strive to be worthy of such faith," says Eldárien in soft voice.

And thus their converse concludes and they continue on their way, moving in opposite directions down the hallway, though their paths now align in the journey of the heart.

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Passing down a few more corridors, dark but for the lanterns flickering upon the walls as they strive to hold back the encroaching darkness, Eldárien comes upon his sister. She is seated upon a stone bench with her head leaned back against the wall. Her eyes are closed. Nonetheless he need not say anything nor give any other indication of his presence, for as soon as he draws near she opens her eyes and turns to look at him, a knowing awareness in her gaze.

"Our journey passes into both darkness and light greater than I expected or imagined," she says, rising to her feet. "I suppose that is only fitting and necessary, for the two must meet in every person, waging the great battle that lies at the heart of all things. I do trust and believe in the victory of the light,

but the darkness is so deep and so wide, and it harms so many whom I would wish to save." She pauses and takes a step toward him, the expression written upon her face drawing lines of weariness and care far deeper than her age or her innocence would suggest. "And it plows furrows in my own heart, too, this darkness and this evil. It inflicts wounds deep within that, in this mortal life, shall never find complete healing. I know this now, and I only pray that the wounds I suffer may prove to be a space of deeper love."

"I hurt for you, sister," says Eldárien in a gentle voice, closing the distance between them and placing his hand for a moment upon her shoulder. "I have seen and experienced much, both in goodness and in evil, in joy and in pain. I am wearied and weathered by life and by warfare, by trauma and by loss. And yet you are young, and if I could I would spare you from the pain that must be laid upon your shoulders and that must plow through your heart."

Looking up into his eyes, she replies, "You should know that I would have it no other way."

"Of course. But evil is still evil and pain is still pain. And as I acknowledge it as such, I cannot but wish also to spare you its deepest hurts and most lasting scars," he rejoins.

"And rightly so," Elmáriyë says, "though what must happen will happen, whether we wish it so or not. Nonetheless you speak wisely and truly in many ways. For I am young, though only twelve years younger than yourself. But it does feel that you have lived an entire lifetime whereas mine is only beginning. And because of my youth and my inexperience, because of the frailty and weakness of my heart, I fear the burdens placed upon me." She pauses and shakes her head as if disagreeing with herself or at least with her formulation of the words spoken. And then she tries again: "I fear, rather, myself. What a mystery that we have been given such dignity as to hold our destiny in the hands of our own counsel and choice. Such freedom frightens me, though I know also that I wish to cherish, protect, and foster it with every act. And especially I desire to entrust it back into the care of the One who has given it to me—the One who in this receiving does not belittle or constrict freedom but safeguards it and sets it free.

"I do not fear him. I never have. Even as a young child I knew he was there—was here—always present and always loving." With these words Elmáriyë places her hand to her breast, directly over her heart. "Yes, he remained hidden and in large part unknown, but I have always retained, as it were, a memory...a memory of him...a memory of being touched by him in the very act of my creation. The marks of his making, the prints of his presence, have always been here. But now, in coming to know him as I have never known him before, not only in the intuition and longing of the heart but in the revelation by which he unveils himself before us, I am even more assured both

of his greatness and majesty as well as, especially, of his goodness and loving kindness. Why then am I afraid?" She pauses again as if striving both for understanding and for words, and then she says, "Stretched between darkness and light, I know my littleness and weakness. Stretched between my littleness and his immensity, I feel my frailty and the brokenness of my heart. Stretched between brokenness and the wholeness to which I am drawn, I see before me a path marked by suffering and loss, and my heart cannot but pause in fear and hesitation. Shall I remain faithful to the end? Shall I come at last to the place to which my heart aspires...the only place that I truly wish to be?"

Her voice fades now into silence and she says no more, though their eyes interlock in a deep and prolonged exchange of gazes, and this says more than the words of either of them can express.

It is Elmáriyë who first breaks the contact, or rather transfers it to another manner of presence, as she turns away and says, "Will you come with me? I want to show you something."

"Yes," Eldárien replies. "Only lead the way."

She leads him but a few dozen steps down the corridor to a heavy wooden door which she pushes open and passes through. He follows her and immediately braces himself against the bitter cold that engulfs him as he steps out onto a narrow balcony skirting the side of the citadel and overlooking the city. They step to the stone railing and lean against it, and together they turn their gazes as far as they can see. And Eldárien knows without the need for explanation why she wished to share this view with him: for the darkness is still so thick that the sky is shrouded, the sun no more than a murky orb among the surrounding blackness, and, in the city below, the houses are hardly visible to their eyes, but silhouettes among a sea of darkness interspersed with pinpoints of flickering light from torches and lanterns burning throughout the city. Even in the middle of the day it is almost as dark as a moonless night.

"How far do you think this darkness has spread?" Elmáriyë asks, keeping her gaze directed outward upon the city.

"It is impossible to know," replies Eldárien after a moment of thought. "But if it spread high enough and wide enough to blot out the very light of the sun, then I fear it has spread far indeed."

"Over the entire land of Telmérion?"

"Perhaps."

They both lapse again into silence, and the air around them echoes this silence, not sweet and rich like the silence of a wood on a spring afternoon or the silence of the seaside or the silence of prayer's sanctuary; no, it is rather the silence of fear and death, of suffocation and loss.

"Eternal and endless night," Elmáriyë remarks in a whisper, "this is the fear of every heart. It conflicts with everything that we are and everything that we

desire. It is the loss of communication, the rupture of communion...crying out for another and yet finding one's voice muffled, stifled into nothingness, and bringing no response. All beauty is shadowed and submerged, and nothing remains but the affliction, the suffocating affliction, of a fog that wraps around the eyes and the mouth, bringing both blindness and death, death unending." She reaches out and places one of her hands within Eldárien's, and he holds it tight. "This, I understand, is what our enemies would seek to do unto our world. This is what I fear. And this is what I pray all the children of this world are spared."

"You have been touched, Elmáriyë," says Eldárien at last, inclining his head toward her out of spontaneous care and affection. "No, you have been pierced and wounded, as you yourself said. And there is nothing I can do or say in response that would bring you the answers or the consolation that you desire. And yet this wound is not all for ill, as much of the pain and longing and fear in your heart is also a wound of love giving birth to yet greater love. I can only join you in the same mystery, knowing that what we feel, what we bear, is but a participation in the pain and the desire of all, and, I hope, a vessel for their healing and salvation."

She leans her head against his shoulder and exhales deeply. "I know that you are with me, Eldárien. Nothing that I say is foreign to you now, for you bear all that is mine also in your own heart, just as I bear all that is yours in mine."

"When we absorbed the darkness of the dragon," Eldárien begins, "you felt as I felt and bore what I bore. I know this. We were united as one in that moment, and the unity lingers even now, though hidden from sight and feeling. Indeed I felt as if you yourself, Elmáriyë, came to live within me by this shared act and experience. Surely you felt the same."

"It is not even a question," she replies. "Indeed, when we were joined together I saw what you saw—not only in that moment in which we received the darkness together, but also in the past. I saw the memories of your life as if they were my own, indeed almost as if I was living through them myself. Only this sense of your presence, in fact, enabled me to receive and to bear the darkness as I did...as we did, together."

"What a mystery," Eldárien breathes, astounded at the ease with which they are able to name what has occurred between them, what has occurred within the heart of each of them. And yet he is also astounded at how, in naming it, it also seems to slip away and to elude their grasp—a mystery not to be possessively held and comprehended but to be surrendered to and lived in the trust that surpasses feeling even while holding it. "And I cannot help thinking that this joining of heart and life...this joining of hearts in a unity that does not dissolve distinction but affirms it in mutual belonging...I

cannot help thinking that this is a taste of what awaits us beyond death, in the true path of eternity."

"And yet no power of our own, no capacity of human or even Anaía, can bring us there. It is the prerogative and the capacity of the One alone, who in creating us can also fulfill us," says Elmáriyë. "Indeed, not only is it so far beyond our reach, even as our hearts cannot but yearn for it—since for it we have been made!—but we have also betrayed this gift in a thousand ways. Only he who in witnessing us falter does not lose either compassion or the ability to save can also redeem us and restore us. It is he who made us, and it is he alone who can grant us the fulfillment of his gifts, gifts that we have betrayed in our infidelity and yet which he promises to grant anew in undeserved mercy."

"This promise," Eldárien remarks, "it is inscribed into the heart of each one of us, is it not? The whole of our life is stretched between two profound mysteries and yet passes through a third—and in this lies its whole drama and meaning. We have been born from the abyss of uncreated Love, and unto this Love we are destined to return. And yet along the paths of this life, we pass through an abyss of suffering and darkness, the fruit of evil, which threatens to pull us away from our Origin and thus also from our End."

"And yet our faith, our trust, and our consolation is this: that the Abyss of Love also cradles not only to two ends of time, the two ends of the life of every person, but also each and every moment of time and all the fabric of history," Elmáriyë says in conclusion, her voice vibrating with emotion. "For never but through this Love at work in us and for us, this Love to which we are invited to surrender, can we hope to pass beyond the abyss of death and into the abyss of endless life. We must be held and carried. Only Love can carry us where Love desires us to be, and he has implanted in us the desire to be there, too, with him, for he knows that only in his embrace is everlasting bliss and perfect happiness."

After these words have echoed for a time in the silence, Elmáriyë shivers and lifts her head, saying, "It is cold out here. Let us return indoors."

When they have passed indoors and seated themselves in a common room beside a blazing hearth to combat both the dark and the chill, Eldárien turns to Elmáriyë and says, "In beholding the memories of my past, did you also come to understand the path that lies ahead of us? The path that I must walk, and which you must walk as well?"

"You speak about the vision?" asks Elmáriyë.

"Yes. So you did witness it?"

"I did, and the understanding given to you was also communicated to me. And I think that this was necessary, for if we are to walk forward into the darkness together, our hearts must be joined and united as one."

"Then you know," says Eldárien, "that the darkness and evil we have now witnessed is only a taste of what awaits us."

"You once descended into the very heart of the castle of darkness in order to save Tilliána, and so I shall not hesitate to walk through whatever darkness in order to bring relief and salvation to our hurting people," Elmáriyë says, "though I am glad to have you by my side. For I do not trust in the strength of my heart, nor of my flesh, and I fear it shall fail before the end."

"Regardless of whether we walk unto failure or unto victory, we will walk nonetheless," says Eldárien. "But my hope is that our journey shall not be as absurd as that. Together, then, let us walk. Let us walk into a mystery not of our own making and far beyond our foresight or control. Nothing remains for us then but hope and the longing of the heart for life."

"This ancient citadel that you beheld, and that I beheld in you," Elmáriyë asks, "where is it?"

"Was not understanding of this given to you?"

"Only the glimpse necessary to set out, and no more than this."

"So it is with me," Eldárien says. "It lies to the north, at the heart and the height of the Teldren Mountains, nestled atop the ageless peaks and looking out over the land like a sentinel of the ages...though now this land is shadowed in darkness, hidden from even such sight as this. I think," he adds, after a pause, "that only one such castle can fit what we saw: it is the citadel and seat of Séra Galáptes, which fell long centuries ago and has lain all this time in ruin."

"And so it is thence that we journey?"

"Yes, and my heart calls for haste. I do not wish to delay any more than necessary. Not only does the well-being of our people depend upon this, but I also feel...I also feel something within my heart tugging me there. It draws me, whether for good or ill I am uncertain, but it draws me." Here Eldárien pauses and descends into silence, almost as if withdrawing into himself, such that even his physical form appears to sink into the shadows. Elmáriyë turns toward him as if to speak, but then he opens his mouth and continues, "I am afraid. I am afraid the same as you, Elmáriyë. I fear for our journey, and I fear for the people of Telmérion. After the darkness that we absorbed, after this darkness pierced my heart, I feel that it bleeds now at the slightest provocation, and that even a whispering echo of evil spears it like an onrush of anguish."

"But we cannot remain and shield ourselves while others stand unprotected before the onslaught of evil," Elmáriyë finishes for him, and he nods silently at this. When he does not speak again, she asks, "What is to be our first step?"

"I would like to speak to Brýma and perhaps to the entire council," he

replies. "For though we have seen a glimpse of the destination, we know not the path. Yet the memory of the people of this clan is long, and if they have held in remembrance the thought and the longing for the coming of the king-heir, perhaps they also remember something that may assist us in finding his lost citadel."

"And what of our companions?" Elmáriyë asks, unable to conceal the emotion in her voice.

"You know as well as I," answers Eldárien in a kindly voice. "This path is for the two of us alone. That was unmistakable. And I would not bring any others along even if it were possible and if they offered."

"They may well offer."

"I know. But there may be no return for us from the place to which we go. I would bring none along except those who have been chosen."

"There may be death and destruction enough, also, for those who remain and walk another way."

Chapter Six
Before the Plunge

Despite their desire to depart with haste another week passes for them in the city of Onylándun, as they are occupied with the recovery of their bodies which sustained abiding trauma from the events of the siege and the absorption of the dark, and also with aiding however they can in salvaging some sense of life for the people after so much death and loss. Elmáriyë's recovery in particular is difficult and prolonged, and she lapses back into what appears to be a mysterious illness, but which she and Eldárien know to be the result of the darkness that she has taken within herself and that she still bears. She is often confined to bed, or to a chair, her gaze far off and distant, as though looking through a thick fog toward destinations unseen but known, unreachable but desired. Only toward the end of this week does she begin to show signs of recovery, though this is in no part complete, and they begin to realize that she may never entirely recover, and instead shall walk precisely as she is, finding in weakness not an enemy but a friend.

They hold converse with their companions, and though the news of their solitary departure is grievous, it is expected. Deep in their hearts each one of them knew that it was necessary and awaited it. Tilliána is silent, withdrawing further into herself in the grief of another loss, and Cirien bears the news with wise and knowing equanimity; it is Rórlain who is vocal about his concerns and about his feelings. He speaks alone with Eldárien as they sit in the

bedchamber of the latter, the hearth burning quietly between them, wood popping and crackling steadily beneath the flames.

"It is difficult for me to allow you to depart," begins Rórlain. "I spoke truly when I said that I intended to pay the life-bond by remaining always at your side, through life and death. And yet now you say that you must go to a place where I cannot follow. I understand why this is so, since here I must remain to protect the innocent people of our land from the onslaught that would destroy them, and there you must go to root out the darkness itself in its very origin. I only...I only wish it were not so."

"As do I," says Eldárien, "for your companionship—no, your friendship—is precious to me. But though we renounce the former, at least for a time, I trust in the endurance of the latter."

"You are certain that there is no other way, however, than to go alone with Elmáriyë? Could not others accompany you on this path?" proffers Rórlain, uncertainty in his voice.

"I am not certain that it is the only way, but it is the way that I have chosen," Eldárien replies. "I would not put anyone else at risk accompanying us to the place to which we alone are summoned. For of that I am certain: that we are called there and nowhere else, and that there is asked of us something that can be accepted, can be given, in no other way."

"But trouble enough there shall be everywhere in our land," Rórlain says, "that the path you walk may be no more dangerous than anything else."

"I wish that were truly so, not because I wish great trouble elsewhere throughout our land, but because I wish for a little less before Elmáriyë and myself. But I am confident that it shall be otherwise."

"What do you mean?"

"We walk into darkness and strife, passing not out of danger but into it," Eldárien explains, "and only in this way can we hope to spare others, our people, from darkness and strife themselves."

"You intend to confront the brunt of the evil and pain so that others may be spared? If you sense this so clearly, it makes it even harder for me to allow you to depart, despite the fact that I know that I can neither prevent you nor accompany you."

"Your support shall be for me a strength and a consolation, Rórlain, even at a distance and even in the silence of the heart. To know that you support me as I walk, and that you know whence I go while you remain to aid our people in their fight—this shall be for me a source of strength."

"Then I shall give it," says Rórlain. "But I ask you also not to forget me, and especially to never lose sight of the people and their conflict, for the sake of which you walk."

"You have the pledge of my heart that I shall remain vigilant always, inso-

far as is within my power, to this lamp of love burning always in the spirit. But, along with all else that I have been given to see and to feel, I sense that before us both lie tests that shall be greater than our own strength or resolve."

"That does my heart fear," Rórlain sighs. "I have been thinking much about what awaits the people of Telmérion in the coming days, and about what should be my response. Am I merely to remain here in Onylándun in case of future attack, or should I travel elsewhere? And if so, how shall I know where the power entrusted to us shall be most needed? For with your departure I alone shall be the custodian of the light in the midst of this war, and my very presence shall be a boon in battle unlike all others. This is a heavy burden to bear, for how shall I choose whom to aid and whom to abandon?"

Eldárien does not immediately reply to his friend's heartfelt questions, but rather reflects in order that his words may be spoken from the same depth of the heart and the same stance of reflection from which Rórlain's queries spring. When he does speak, he says, "A heavy burden indeed. And yet all the burdens that man is asked to carry in this life are not his to bear alone. Seek counsel with others, as you are now doing with me. But also look above all to the One who has placed this burden upon you, for I believe that even the very circumstances among which we now find ourselves—pulled in different directions by both the call of the present need and by the voice of the heart—are not merely random, but are arranged by a deeper wisdom. And if this is true, then you need not fear falling short of what is entrusted to you by weakness or limitation, but only by infidelity. Such an awareness and such a trust remains my only solace and consolation during this time, and I would wish for you to find solace in the same."

"That I shall try to do," Rórlain responds simply. "But even on the level of natural prescience, based on the knowledge that we have, there are certain questions that trouble me."

"To what do you refer?"

"I refer to the fear that our enemy is manifold, and multifaceted, and that we have little hope of holding off the attacks that shall surely come upon us in coming days. After all, has that not already been the case? With our departure from Ristfánd, did we not leave the people throughout the lands of Rhóvas, and even farther north, bereft of our aid and the light we could bring?"

"That is sadly true," agrees Eldárien, lowering his eyes. "And that is why I cannot bear to delay my quest any longer. For there is a line drawn straight from our departure from Ristfánd to the departure of Elmáriyë and myself from Onylándun. They are along the same trajectory, the same movement, which leads from the superficial conflict to the heart of the problem, that it may be solved. But...I am well aware of the suffering and loss of life that my

absence may have allowed. How much, after all, would one wish to hold the entire world and to prevent all suffering and death! That is why I said that the only path we have is that of trust and obedience in what has been entrusted to us. No man, however great or however gifted, can hold the entire world, nor bring it salvation."

"You are right, Eldárien," says Rórlain. "And I had not thought before of the continuity between Ristfánd and now. It is just...it is just difficult."

"Terribly difficult, enough to tear the heart in twain," Eldárien confirms. After a moment's pause, he then asks, "You spoke of the multiplicity of our enemy. Did you have something in particular in mind?"

"Aye. I think of the Lords of the Draíon whom we have encountered. In standing before them, it felt like I was facing a force so much superior and filled with such incredible malice and will to destroy. And each seemed a lord and leader in his own right. In my inner heart it seems that they all, nonetheless, converge into a single many-headed beast intent on wiping out the people of Telmérion."

"You fear defending against one head while another strikes elsewhere," remarks Eldárien, and though it is not voiced as a question, Rórlain nods in assent.

"So you do not think that the Lord of Death spoke true when he said that both Maggot and the Lord of Mæres would trouble us no longer?" asks Eldárien.

"I am certain that he spoke lies," replies Rórlain without hesitation. "Now, granted there were seeds of truth in what he said; such, after all, is every effective lie. But on the main his words were false. Maggot, or the Lord of Worms, may be a petty lord in his eyes, a mere worm obsessed with worms. But I do not believe that Maggot thinks so of himself. Nor does what I have encountered of the Lord of Mæres convince me that 'his day is past.'"

Eldárien thinks on his friend's words for a few moments and then he nods, saying, "I must agree with you. There is something that puzzles me about all of the Draíon whom we have encountered, and my mind has been casting about for a solution to this question for a long time. I think only now is my thought beginning to yield itself to some sort of answer. The uncertainty is this: the assault being waged upon our people by the creatures of darkness appears unified, as if guided by a single hand. Would you not agree?"

"Indeed."

"And yet among all the commanders of the legions of darkness whom we have confronted, we have encountered only myopia...indeed a firm insistence that they stand alone, with no lord or master above them."

"That also is true."

"And therefore either our perception of a unified evil, indeed a unified

personification of evil guiding all other evils to our destruction, is wrong, or there is another Lord at work whom the ones we have encountered do not recognize. Or at least they refuse to give him obeisance and to reveal him to us."

With downcast yet intense eyes staring toward the unseen—a gaze revealing a thoughtful mind intently at work—Rórlain presses his palm against his cheek. Then he rubs his eyes with the heels of both hands as if to dispel some of the confusion or frustration or fear that he feels. At last, glancing up for a moment, he says, "But perhaps they did, after all."

"What do you mean?"

"You recall what was said to us by the Lord of Death? He mentioned that there was another, the greatest of their kind. He called him—"

"The Lord of Darkness," Eldárien concludes for him. "Yes. I remember now, though it had slipped my mind until this moment. How hard it is to remember what they say unto us, for the entire time of our converse with them is like an obscure fog or a torrential storm which one can only weather as best one can."

"That is true, and well spoken," Rórlain says grimly. "But at the same time, the lies they speak seek to pierce the soul like flaming arrows, and so they linger long after they are spoken, assailing the heart that would dismiss them."

"Like lightning flashes in the storm. All else is obscured, all goodness, all clarity, all ease of thought, and the mind is pushed into a state of passivity, its ability to resist almost entirely drained. And it is there that they speak their most dangerous word, their most venomous poison. Like a shock it sears the flesh and seeks to paralyze the heart."

"So what was the lie that he sought to speak into us?" Rórlain asks.

Now it is Eldárien who lowers his head in thought as he searches for an answer or even a path toward an answer. Rórlain waits patiently for his response while also joining him in the journey of thought. At length Eldárien says, "The lie is twofold, I believe. There is a deception in what he sought to convey and a deception in what he sought to conceal. He sought to convey that he was the only one whose gaze was turned upon us for ill and that from him alone would come the strife that awaits us. And what he concealed was precisely that there are other forces also at work, alongside his own as well as greater than his own, and that these, too, we must be prepared to combat."

"So we have not seen the last of the Lord of Worms and the Lord of Mæres..."

"I fear not, though we cannot know for sure until we either encounter them or witness the end of this war, whichever comes first." Eldárien exhales deeply and adds, "And thus it is well to be prepared for any eventuality."

"Three Draíon who, whether they themselves know and admit it or not,

are working together for our destruction…" Rórlain says, anxiety and sorrow in his voice. "How could we ever combat such a thing? Even one wields power far beyond our imagining."

"That is true, and yet power also holds us and has been entrusted to us," Eldárien replies. "It is in this that we can put our trust. And the ultimate answer lies, as Sílion indicated while we were with him, not in direct confrontation but in the purging of the very foundations of evil from which the forces of darkness are fashioned."

"And thus the castle from your vision?"

"Precisely. The beholding brought with it the awareness: what I seek is there. There lies the root of the great, wicked plant that is choking out the life of our people. But this does not remove the fact that there are other branches also stretching out to cause harm, branches that need to be pruned, or at least curtailed, if cut from the plant they cannot be. And if I am asked to walk one path, it is your part to walk the other. And may the light remain always with us both."

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While Elmáriyë rests, leaning into the process of recovery that will allow them to depart soon on their journey, Eldárien speaks with Brýma and the council about current events and about his plans to depart.

"So you are saying," Brýma responds after he finishes his account of the vision he received during the battle, "that you beheld an ancient castle and knew, by some gift of awareness, that it was the place that you seek: the abode of the darkness that must be vanquished?"

"Aye, and that my sister was granted the same vision," Eldárien says.

"So you are willing to hinge the welfare of our entire nation upon some spiritual experience, some intangible awareness within the heart?" asks Brýma, the tone of his voice hardly concealing the depth of his incredulity.

"I would not do so if there were any other choice," replies Eldárien quietly. "It is often better to follow the eyes of prudent discernment, the voice of the intelligence, than to trust blindly to the feelings and experiences of the heart. For the heart can be easily swayed by its own selfish wishes and desires, or by its own presuppositions. It can easily convince itself that what it wishes to be true is actually true, or that what it wishes were not true is false. And yet the mind can tap into the current of human thought and experience as it is spread out throughout time, and can learn from the wisdom of others and from the guidance of tradition. It can also gauge values, good or evil, as well as the consequences of thoughts and actions." Here he pauses in the effort to collect his thoughts and his words, and also to give space that what he says following shall have as much effect and import as what he said previously.

When he continues, he says, "All of that is certainly true and important in

its own right, and indeed essential. But there is more to the picture. For it is also true that the mind can constrict itself out of fear or the wish to understand and control everything, attempting to avoid the risk that is inherent in all love, courage, and heroism, the risk in fact that is necessary for life to remain alive and to blossom rather than to stagnate into staleness and death. While the mind rightly has authority over the inner domain of man's subjective life, and over his actions in the wider world, it is also true that the heart speaks with a voice just as deep—indeed the same voice in a different mode—to which the mind itself must listen with humility and reverence. In both, mind and heart, thought and feeling, reflection and seeing, the voice of the divine seeks to resound as a single voice and to speak a single word. And the more humble a heart is, and the softer is the fabric of intelligence and feeling, of willing and acting, the more easily and deeply can this voice resound. In such a way is this word more clearly heard, without distortion or self-imposed interpretation, though such a word also always remains intimately personal, spoken precisely into the contours of the unique heart that has been prepared to receive it."

"I understand the wisdom of your words," Jatíldë says in response, "and myself agree with your assessment from the experiences of my own life. And yet I also agree with Brýma that it would be good to have more concrete evidence before you set out on your journey. We have seen the horrible things that the powers of darkness can do, and I fear that they could sabotage our efforts especially here, leading you away from your true destination on a fruitless quest."

"I wonder what other evidence we could possibly have," remarks Eldárien. "I shared with you what we know from our encounters with the Draíon—with Maggot in Ristfánd, with the Lord of Mæres in the castle in the mountains, and with the Lord of Death here in Onylándun. All indicate that there is yet another power behind them, whatever it may be, which is deeper than their own planning and which yet stands as the ultimate origin of these wicked beasts. So too, even more importantly, spoke the wise Sílion, the great father of the Velási, who told us to embark on precisely such a quest to discover the origin and heart of the darkness."

"Is that really the case?" asks Brýma. "It appears to me that adequate evidence exists that these 'Lords' of whom you have spoken have fashioned—or summoned—these creatures themselves, and use them to wage war against us."

"Was there not a forge in the mountains from which they were born?" Víndal asks. "What has become of this now?"

"It has turned into a fortress of crystal, a tower like the blade of a massive sword piercing toward the heavens," Eldárien replies. "If I were relying on my

own suspicions or my own interpretation, I would have guessed that what I sought was there, in that place of great evil. And yet...and yet I know that this is not the case. What I seek lies elsewhere."

"And how do you know this?" another counselor, the woman Méric, asks.

Eldárien reflects on this question for a while in silence, asking himself the same question internally that was voiced to him externally, and then he answers, "The Lord of Mæres is a petty lord, not only in the domain of his interests and plans but also in the hierarchy of those who set themselves against us. This much has become apparent in our dealings with the Draíon. I cannot believe that it was he who stirred up the Empire to dealings with themselves, and who agreed to yield the vrû'ádach and the other eötenga to their cause. You see, we also encountered a fourth creature—I suppose a Draía—in the barrow of Séra Galáptes, though this encounter was only momentary and at a distance. He was unlike any of the others that we have met. And yet neither is he the one whom we seek, only yet another proof that others there are at work which we do not know. But I believe that behind them all another intelligence is at work. I have felt it in my encounters with these creatures, and I have felt it in the darkness that assails us. It is a heart of indescribable malice and of unutterable power. And unto his stronghold am I called, for there alone lies the conflict and the solution that we seek. So did Sílion direct me, and so does the gift within me beckon me. To occupy ourselves with besieging other strongholds, though it may be part of the war, is not part of its ending. In only one place alone, the very heart of this darkness, can one deal the final blow to our enemy and bring about peace instead of warfare, and light instead of darkness. Yet I did not know where to seek for this 'heart,' or even where to inquire after its whereabouts. Even Sílion did not know, though he was confident that it would be revealed unto me. I believe that what was communicated to me in interior vision by the One who also entrusted to me my task is the answer to my questions and the response to my prayer."

"The citadel of the ancient king itself, overrun by our enemy and inhabited by the ruler of the forces of darkness?" Brýma exclaims. "It exasperates the heart even to consider...though I suppose it also makes a terrible kind of sense, given the nature of our enemy and their delight in desecrating all that is good."

"That is sadly true, indeed," says Eldárien.

"And yet if you and your sister intend to depart on this road, what of your other companions? Shall they too accompany you? You mentioned them not in this regard," Jatíldë says.

"They shall remain behind," says Eldárien. "This path is for my sister and myself alone. I also believe that our companions shall be of more assistance if

they remain among the people, aiding in what way they may. Rórlain, at least, has no choice but to remain, for he alone, besides my sister and myself, can channel the light required to dispel the creatures of darkness in such a way that they cannot take form again from the shadows. And yet I believe that Tilliána and Cirien also shall be of great if humble aid to your people, or to whomever they are sent. And I wish not to endanger them on this path, which surely holds untold dangers. Here the might of man may stand against the power of wicked beasts. But where my sister and I go is rather like walking defenseless into a trap. And yet we seek precisely thus to conquer our enemy's main fortress and stronghold, not with the strength of the arm but with the weakness of the heart and the vulnerability of its love."

"And that is truly what you propose to do?" Brýma asks. "Why not bring a legion of soldiers with you?"

"In such a journey speed and secrecy shall be a much greater boon than more arms to wield the sword. As I said, the battle that Elmáriyë and I go to fight is not a conflict that can be won with strength of arms or might in battle. It is the steep way of compassion for our hurting people and of courage to confront darkness in its very origin, that there it may be purged. You understand, do you not, that I cannot ask anyone to accompany us on this path which has been requested of us alone?"

"No, Eldárien," says Brýma shortly, "I do not much understand. But then again, it is you who bear the signs of the kingship of light and not I. It is evident that you see things that I do not—both with the mind and with the heart. I can only defer to your judgment and to powers greater than my own, which I myself see and feel little or not at all. It may seem a leap into the dark, but perhaps that is my small share in the risk of which you have spoken. And if, beyond all expectation, you return victorious, then I shall not hesitate to give you the role of kingship and to speak of you boldly as king before all the people."

"I fear that many other risks shall yet be asked of you before this war is done," says Eldárien in response. "They shall be asked of all of us. May we find the strength and the courage, the serenity and the surety, to bear them as we ought."

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Elmáriyë, wrapped tightly in cloak and scarf, walks upon the ramparts of the city, her eyes looking often and long into the darkness as if grasping for some hidden semblance of light concealed within it or beyond it. She has been walking frequently during these past days, insofar as her physical weakness permits, seeking a deeper aloneness in which to reflect upon all that has happened within her and around her, and seeking above all to sink into that sacred space of solitude that has held her and accompanied her throughout

her life. She knows that solitude is the native state of every human heart—solitude which is not mere aloneness or isolation, but rather the primal existence of the person in their origin from the creative love of Eldáru and in relation to him who holds them ceaselessly in existence. Thus the deepest solitude is not the greatest isolation but rather the overcoming of all isolation, the deepest and widest communion. It is the blossoming of the relationship that lies at the origin of all relationships and is their rule and measure, the relationship, indeed, which establishes each individual as the person whom they are: seen, known, and loved from all eternity, and sustained in time from conception unto death, until eternity too becomes their home.

And yet the newfound darkness that has penetrated the heart of Elmáriyë militates against this, threatening to crush out this sacred space, this holy habitation, and to thrust her into exile, into a spiral of loss and confusion blurring mind and crippling spirit. She seeks to return, to find some refuge in the storm, some anchor in the tempestuous waves. It is also simply true that she seeks to return because her heart cannot desire to be anywhere else than this, for its own sake and for the sake of others. For what greater gift can she give to others, and for them, than herself in her inmost integrity, a space both of welcome and of gift? And yet precisely here in this space she feels violated, ravaged by wickedness and evil, such that the home at time seems nothing but a horror and the gift nothing but a theft.

But in all and beyond all, even as what she seeks slips from her conscious grasp, she leans into the trust that all of this is only a yet deeper fulfillment of that wish, in the gift that she is from the loving hands of Eldáru, to become gift for others, a living love in which their weary hearts can find security and rest on their journey to the abode of true and lasting peace. With the onset of this anguishing darkness, her relationship with Eldárien has also changed. If it was a new and blessed experience to allow him so deeply into her solitude, first in Ristfánd and increasingly so upon their shared journey, so now she finds herself leaning upon him in her pain. And there is a tension here, for she wants to lean farther, to surrender deeper: to the One beyond humanity, who alone understands all the intricacies of the human heart and in whom alone solitude and togetherness intersect, fully united and fulfilled.

But this tension is fruitful, and she knows it, even as she feels the stretching: of keeping her heart open to the Infinite, a home for the Creator of all and her true Love—who dwells always within her, already given even if unfelt—and also of welcoming into this same heart the frail yet beautiful presence of her brother. In the same moment she feels herself stretched outward toward him, and with him toward all of their people, and indeed toward all the children of humanity near and far. And this stretching, born of her solitude, causes her pain, like the dilation of labor pains. At times it feels like

every last fiber of her solitude is lost, crushed and destroyed by the pained presence of others, and when she turns back toward her own aloneness and seeks repose in the One who is here present, she finds only darkness and anguish. In response to this, all that she can do is trust—trust and surrender in the hope that even in the darkness there is light, hidden but true, and that this light shall bring healing and fulfillment of desire for her and for all whom she bears in the dilated sinews of her heart.

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Tilliána is restless and pained. The pages of life are turning so quickly for her now that she feels as though she hardly has time to read the words inscribed upon them. The realization beggars belief that only a matter of months ago she was in Ristfánd with the members of her family still alive at her side. The time that has passed since she first met Elmáriyë, and shortly after her Eldárien, Rórlain, and Cirien, seems to be a great stretch of years for all that it has borne within it and for all the ways that it has challenged her, consoled her, afflicted her, and changed her. It is surprising to her to realize that the time since then and now is only the passage from early spring to the full onset of winter. Perhaps in fact, she realizes, the depth and breadth of human life is not measured in the passage of hours, days, weeks, and months, in the cycle of the seasons and the passage of the years, but in the journey of the heart and in the shared journey of hearts who walk together. And if that is the case, then she has experienced more "time" in the last months than she has in the entirety of her previous life. For during this period she has suffered more deeply, been loved more radically, received and given more vulnerably —and has experienced more both the joy of the interlacing of hearts and the horror of indescribable evil—than ever before.

And now yet another unexpected and nigh unbearable experience comes upon her, and her heart spontaneously draws back from it as if to erect a wall to prevent her being hurt yet again. For to give her heart is to let it be wounded, to open it to loss and mourning and the sundering of communion, and this she does not wish to bear. Indeed, how could anyone possibly risk such love in the midst of a war that threatens the destruction of a nation and the annihilation of an entire people? But what she fears in this respect is not dying, but rather losing again those to whom her heart has been bound—despite its resistance, fear, and self-protection. And yet this fear is already being fulfilled, as Eldárien and Elmáriyë, the two living souls who are most precious to her in all the world, depart now upon a journey along which she cannot follow. And how little hope is there, in the cold light of her vision—or rather in the all-enfolding darkness that now engulfs the land—for her to see them again when these terrible days are passed. There is a tangible sense of finality to their departure. All of the members of the company feel this,

though almost without exception they refrain from giving voice to it in speech.

Afflicted and preoccupied by these thoughts, Tilliána garbs herself warmly and steps out of the citadel and into the streets of the city, in large part ruined by the assault of the eötenga and the fire of the dragon, though even in the icy cold of the beginning winter the people of Onylándun have commenced both cleaning and rebuilding after the attack. But why? What good does it do? The enemy could return any day without warning to bring even greater destruction. Or the people could be called upon to forsake their city entirely, taking refuge elsewhere or engaging in a hopeless armed struggle against a superior power in lands not their own. Realizing that her mind is poisoned by these despairing thoughts, Tilliána tries to check it in its flight and grasps instead for some stability, some rock of normalcy, when the whole world appears to her now bathed in utter loss and dire danger.

As she struggles within, she walks without, through the city streets, from the citadel through the middle city to the lower city, and then up the stone steps to the battlements surrounding the city and looking out over the plains to the south—though these plains are now cloaked in darkness. As she gazes out into the darkness, Tilliána feels the urge to scream, to release all the pain that she feels inside and to express it both as a rebellion against the darkness and as a lament unto the light that is no longer visible. But instead she simply leans against the stone wall and grips it so tightly with her hands that it hurts, her fingernails scraping against the frigid stone. She imagines the ocean of whiteness that extends beyond her gaze, now hidden by the veil of darkness, in the snow-covered plains below, and she grieves for the loss. She misses the pallor and splendor of the snow that in other circumstances she would have seen as a frustration and an inconvenience, a hindrance to travel and a cause of suffering to the people of Telmérion in the bitter months of winter. But now this snow is hidden such that its miles and miles of shining whiteness is prevented from being seen by the beholding eye, as no light of the heavens nor of the earth can reach it; and even within the city, where torches burn at intervals with flickering red light, only the smallest patches of snow remain after the all-consuming fires enkindled by the dragon's attack.

With these thoughts Tilliána shakes her head, astonished at herself. Why is she allowing herself to be carried by such useless considerations? What does snow matter? And what, after all, does the veil of darkness matter? It is the conflict, the horror, the death, that grieves her and which she fears. But too much to confront directly, too painful to reflect upon with eyes unshielded, she has deflected her thought into symbols and expressed her grief in icons. Stepping back from the wall, she tries to tear her eyes away from the darkness and to fix her gaze elsewhere, but everywhere she looks darkness is all that she

beholds. Exasperated, she sinks to her knees and buries her face in her hands.

In this manner she remains for a long time, her thoughts sinking into thoughtlessness and her grief into an abyss of nothingness, until she is wrenched back to herself through the sound of footsteps drawing near on the battlements. She raises her head and looks up, but she can see nothing in the darkness, not even the silhouette of a figure. Nonetheless she feels a presence, a familiar presence, and she says, "Eldárien?"

"It is Elmáriyë," comes the response from the direction of the footsteps, which then fall silent within a couple yards of Tilliána. "Were you also out walking and thinking?"

Pushing herself up and rising to her feet, Tilliána replies, "Yes, though both have ceased now."

"Would you like to return to the citadel together?" asks Elmáriyë.

But before Tilliána can respond, a sound comes from below the battlements, down in the plains. The echo of a horse's hooves pounding through snow can be heard plainly penetrating through the dull silence that now hangs over everything like a damp and heavy cloth. And as the two women turn spontaneously toward the sound it ceases, only to be followed a moment later by pounding upon the thick wooden gates of the city.

Chapter Seven
A Quarrelsome Messenger

The council hall is illumined by the light of countless lanterns and torches struggling to fight back the pervading darkness as the counselors and their interlocutors gather together, the messenger who has just arrived standing in their midst. After being received at the main city gates, he was offered a change of clothes and a warm repast, but this he refused, accepting only a flask of hot barley tisane and a stable for his horse while the council was gathered together. His whole bearing from the moment of his arrival has been marked both by exhaustion and by haste, and when he begins to speak it is evident to all why this is so.

"I was told that you have ridden from the north with pressing news, is this correct?" Brýma asks. "Please introduce yourself and give us your message."

With a salute, the messenger replies, "My name is Halifást, son of Hroäs, of the city of Minstead. I have ridden through day and night with little rest at the orders of the one who sent me, though barely distinguishable are the two now. The news I bear is this: Minstead has fallen. Close upon two weeks ago, as the sky and the land were cloaked in darkness, a great force assailed us

in bloody combat. From within the city itself creatures attacked us in numbers far greater than our own, and we were little prepared to defend against them, even given prior warning concerning these creatures. Foreknowledge was of no avail, and only complete withdrawal from the city saved us."

"You said that you had forewarning concerning the possibility of an attack such as this?" Brýma inquires.

"Aye, to a degree, at least. We have for months heard reports of affairs east of the mountains, and this both from the mouths of refugees and from official messengers," says Halifást. "But even before they began to appear in our clan-lands, we heard warning from a man named Malrûn Vérdis, a one-time Imperial officer who now serves as a lieutenant of the guard in Minstead. But whether he still lives—or whether any of our people who remain in the said city still live—I do not know."

"Malrûn?" Eldárien interjects. "My companion and I know him. We were with him when he decided to bring word of warning to those west of the mountains."

Turning to Eldárien, Halifást looks intently at him for a moment as if weighing him with his eyes, and then he says, unable to conceal his disappointment, "So you must be the 'righteous warriors' of whom he spoke. It is well to see that you still live, though I would have expected more. You give an impression of weakness that I did not expect, considering the strength of the words I have heard about you. I would ask how your own warning-bearing to Ristfánd fared, but the accounts have made clear enough to me the horrors that have happened there in the days and months of late. Yet now we ourselves are partakers in these horrors in full measure, and the people east and west alike share in the grim fate that has fallen upon the whole people of Telmérion." Then turning back to Brýma and the other council members, he adds, "Am I mistaken in interpreting what I witnessed upon my arrival to be signs that your city, too, has been attacked by the enemy?"

"You are not mistaken," Jatíldë responds, "though by many small fortunes, and by some greater, we have come to experience a different fate than the city of Minstead."

"The attack was repelled?"

"Aye. That it was."

"How?"

"By the courage of the people of Onylándun," Brýma replies, "and also by the light-bearing of these men whom you have called 'righteous warriors.'"

"So that word is true as well," says Halifást, momentarily averting his gaze. "Nonetheless it is obvious that two such warriors, or even a thousand, shall be less than a fraction of what we need to gain victory over the powers of evil that now overwhelm us. Regardless, how strange are the days in which we

live, as if the old legends have begun to live again, and both promises and fears long forgotten come to be fulfilled now in our midst."

"We can speak of such matters later," Brýma continues, "but tell me now: what do you know of the state of the city of Minstead and its surrounds? You were sent to us with warning and with a plea for aid, of this I am certain. But what do you have to tell us of the battle? What was the state of affairs when you departed?"

"I thought that my words were clear enough," says Halifást tersely in response, his voice an intermingling of irritation and grief, or rather of irritation born of grief. "The city has fallen. It took only a matter of hours for these vrû'ádach—and other beasts much more fearsome—to overrun the city. Those who could flee did so, though many more are trapped within the city, made captive...those, that is, who were not already slain mercilessly by the city's new 'inhabitants.'"

"You call these creatures the new 'inhabitants' of the city. Why do you say this?" asks Víndal.

"Because that is what they are. I was sent as a messenger for aid only twenty-four hours after we fled the city, but already it was apparent that Minstead, once the bastion of resistance against the Empire and the home of the rebellion, has now become the fortress of our enemy and the new stronghold of their might. And why they made our people captive rather than slaying them all, I know not. Perhaps they wish to use them as pawns in their own power-games or to seek some profitable bargain for their lives."

"You say that it is apparent that Minstead is now an enemy fortress and that many people have been kept alive in its midst," Brýma remarks. "How is this so?"

"Because they taunted us thus, after we had fled," Halifást answers with bitterness in his voice.

"They taunted you?" Eldárien asks. "Then one of them at least was able to speak?"

"That is right. Their leader spoke as we do, though the rest were mute as beasts."

"And what was the visible appearance of this leader?"

"He was a great winged darkness. I know not how to describe him but thus."

"The Lord of Death..." sighs Brýma, rubbing his brow with the tips of his fingers in grief that the terrifying Draía whom they had only recently encountered here in Onylándun is now at the head of the armies in Minstead. But dismissing the thoughts that seek to fill his mind, Brýma raises his head and asks Halifást, "What of the Imperial forces? You spoke of the creatures of darkness and their taking possession of the city. But what role do the

armies of the Empire play in all of this?"

"Those petty warmongers and their pitiful ruler..." growls Halifást, "I believe that they have received their just deserts, or shall receive such soon enough."

"What do you imply?"

"Have you not heard the rumors of war on the continent of Vælíria, even unto the very seat of the Emperor?" Halifást asks, and hearing this Eldárien and Elmáriyë share a meaningful glance. "Many of the troops stationed near the city of Brûg'hil, and even along the Finístra Range almost to Minstead, have been called back to the mainland. But regardless of this setback for our Imperial enemy, their forces could yet hope for a victory in Telmérion were these creatures to whom they have bound themselves proven genuine allies. Yet such, clearly, they are not, nor have they proven to be."

"Again you speak of something with which we are unacquainted," Brýma says, his voice now touched with irritation, the haughtiness of Halifást wearing thin his patience. "How have these creatures proven themselves thus?"

"You know not of the incident at the Ílma Woods?"

"How could we? That is a long way from here, and little word passes between us in either direction."

"The only surviving hæras of the old clans of Telmérion," Halifást says, his eyes gleaming with mysterious intent, "you must feel so alone and defenseless, now that your brethren are all slain. Such was the last free act, if you wish to express it so, of the leaders of the armies of the Empire in our lands. For the Ílma Woods incident of which I have spoken has forever changed the landscape of the war. For there the creatures of darkness turned on the greatest army of the Empire, with the commander-general at their head, and offered them only two options: death or servitude. Those men who once fought for the Empire of Vælíria in our lands now either lie slain by the beasts whom they sought to recruit to their cause or fight under the directives of leaders of inhuman wickedness.

"With the Empire crippled and the hærási slain, the way is at last paved for the true high king to arise and to take his rightful place. Perhaps we should thank them for decapitating almost every head of this many-headed serpent, the so-called leaders of the clans of Telmérion, who have cooperated so long with the forces of our oppressors. They thought to weaken us but only unveiled our true strength, and then they were themselves struck by those they considered allies."

"I would silence your tongue, you impertinent fool," Brýma says, rising to his feet in rage, "before it is removed from your mouth. Who do you think you are to speak so arrogantly before the seat of a rightful ruler of the people

of Telmérion, and one from whom you wish to plead aid against forces far greater than your own?"

"I am a comrade-in-arms and a supporter of our true king, as I have said," Halifást affirms, refusing to be silenced by the hæras' anger and instead raising his voice in mocking confidence.

"Your true king? You surely do not intend by such a title the same man whom I would wish to see upon the throne," Jatíldë says, her countenance revealing her frustration and disgust for the man who stands before them.

"I know not whom you intend, but I speak of Wýgrec Stûnclad. It is in his name that I stand before you now, and I ask you to join his efforts in retaking his city. If our endeavor is successful and we defeat these foreign aggressors, I assure you that the reward shall be great. Wýgrec forgets not his allies, and he bestows favors benignly upon all who aid him in his ascension."

"Were it not for the valuable information that you bear," Brýma says, gaining control of his temper and yet stepping forward and raising his voice to freely express his indignation, "I would without hesitation send you away from our presence and our counsel, to return empty-handed to those who sent you. If this is the message you bring—that we are to be vassals to your so-called king—then you can leave our council this very moment and never return. How dare you speak in this manner when before and behind you lie such grief, terror, and loss, and when our land itself is cast into darkness? Shall you truly assert the agenda of your leader and his wish to reign in the face of the dire conflict facing our people, risking our ire solely for the purpose of letting us know which man you believe should be the future ruler of Telmérion? Do you not know that unless we gather together in unity to face the powers that are set against us, Telmérion as we know it or wish it to be shall in the future no longer exist?"

These words at last weaken Halifást's bravado, and when he opens his mouth to reply his voice falters, even if only slightly, "M-my apologies, councilor. I knew not that you neither understood nor supported the reforms wrought by the great Wýgrec Stûnclad. Has his courage and leadership not already sent its echoes this far from the center of the rebellion?"

"Oh, may the divines save us from insufferable fools!" cries Rórlain, stepping forward now. As he does so, his eyes interlock for a moment with those of Brýma, whose mouth is open as if to speak. But the latter then closes his mouth and nods to Rórlain, gratefully accepting his intervention. Turning to Halifást and standing face to face with him, but a couple feet separating them, Rórlain stands to his full height and his face and his bearing are so imposing that Halifást unconsciously sinks his shoulders and steps back like a dog scolded by its master. "I once fought for the man of whom you speak," Rórlain says, and the tenor of his voice is strong and steady, neither lost in

anger nor constrained in cowardice, echoing throughout the wide chamber. "Wýgrec found courage for resistance when he saw the ills of the Empire, and when he felt them in his own person. None of us here, I trust, fault him for this. Good he has brought in his fight to free the people of Telmérion from foreign occupation. But it is also evident that the fruits of his resistance have been ill as well, the bitter product of excessive and ill-guided zeal. Surely you, too, can see this. What we now require is not a leader of rebellion but a custodian of goodness, not a man of war but a protector of peace, not a sword of vengeance against our enemies but a shield against the darkness that falls upon us."

Halifást does not immediately reply to this, his face burning with both anger and shame as the eyes of all in the chamber are turned upon him. The gaze of Eldárien, however, is downcast, his heart sorrowing for the man who in his blind zeal offends his hosts and causes such unnecessary and unintentional conflict. He is grateful to Rórlain for intervening before matters became even more heated, but he is also grieved by the fault-lines cutting through the people of Telmérion, which this conversation has so vividly highlighted. And for a moment he feels almost grateful that the path of kingship that he walks may well end, not in rule but in death, and that the new life that he seeks to gain for the people of Telmérion may be something in which he himself has no part. For he wishes to give them life after death and light after darkness, but he has little aspiration to govern and to rule, and in this moment wishes that another could do so. To gain life for them beyond the death of these days, and yet himself to find rest in death and beyond it: this, he realizes, is what he now desires more than anything. When did the fear of death give way to the yearning for death? The change that his heart has undergone startles and surprises him now, and he wonders to himself whether this aspiration is born more of weariness with the pain and loss of life or more of hope for a peace, repose, and life that lie beyond the limits of the mortal world. Yet he is unable to think on these matters now, as the conversation continues and his attention is carried outward again to follow the words of others.

"A custodian of goodness rather than a leader of rebellion?" Halifást asks, his voice revealing a humbled (yet not humble) spirit, and yet also a thread of combativeness that endures even now. "Are these not inseparable in our current situation? And where, after all, would we find that of which you speak? A man who defends yet does not rebel? It sounds like the fancy of the fearful mind, recoiling from the bitter realism of warfare and conflict, rather than a realistic hope and expectation. Unless, of course, you think that *you* are what you propose?"

"I certainly am not," replies Rórlain calmly, taking a small step back and

yet maintaining the fullness of his presence as if it were a shield protecting the rest of the people in the room from the ire of Halifást.

"The man with whom you speak does not claim any leadership or right to rule," Brýma says, "though I gladly entrust the leadership of my warriors into his capable care. And if we go to war at your side, I assure you that he shall be present at the vanguard of our army. But if we are granted to see the end of these bitter days, I warn you that our allegiance shall lie elsewhere than with Wýgrec Stûnclad."

"Where then shall you turn, hæras Brýma Káldvek, leader of the clan of Onylándis?" Halifást asks. "Do you suppose that with the other hærási slain, you shall ascend the throne?"

"Have you not already insinuated such a thing once in this conversation?" Brýma retorts. "I have neither intention nor desire to do such a thing. As we have for centuries, the people of Onylándis owe allegiance to only one man: the promised king in the line of our rightful ruler."

"Galáptes?" Halifást almost spits out the word. "I thought those tales were long dismissed as mere memories of a bygone age. I assumed that Telmérion was at last ready to move into a new age rather than being bound to fragments of a forgotten and shattered past."

"We did not welcome you into our counsel, Halifást, son of Hroäs," Brýma says curtly, "in order to argue over politics. We welcomed you as a messenger of the need of our Telméric brethren in Minstead. And I will not allow a single word further from you unless it concerns that need. So let me say unto you now: we have no reason to ignore the plight of our brethren, especially as we have only recently been spared a similar fate. There is little need for you to convince us of our obligations in this regard."

"We already had every intention of coming to the aid of those in other clans, wherever the darkness was next to strike," Rórlain adds, "and your message has simply shown us where this is to be."

"Well spoken, Rórlain," Brýma says, and then, directing his words to Halifást again for the last time, he concludes, "So if there is no further information you can give us that would aid us in this endeavor, leave us in peace, that we may prepare our hearts and minds for what awaits us, and our troops for imminent departure."

Halifást at last accepts his defeat and, with head bowed, he leaves the chamber and allows himself to be shown to a room that has been prepared for him, where he may take both food and rest, though it is evident to all that for him the hospitality that he expected has turned to bitterness.

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After their quarrelsome guest has departed from the council chamber, the five companions draw near to the seven counselors and a discussion begins in

earnest concerning the affairs of the coming days. "It sounds as if the assault on Minstead was quite precisely planned and executed," Rórlain remarks. "I would suspect that the siege of the city was indeed ordained to provide the eötenga and their masters with a fortress. I fear that this shall allow them to consolidate their power and thence to wage devastating war upon the rest of the settlements of Telmérion."

"Perhaps the words of the Lord of Death implied as much," Eldárien agrees. "I assumed that he meant only the attack on Onylándun when he hinted at worse things to come, but this...this I did not expect. On the other hand, it does not surprise me. Ever since the first attack on Ristfánd, they have never restrained their violence to only one location, but have spread far and wide like a vicious illness or a fire seeking to consume all in its flames."

"And this all-consuming darkness, this scourge that has come from the earth as a veil of blackness, has reached even unto Minstead," Cirien says. "That is ill news indeed. What power must our enemy wield that he can call forth a blackness to blot out both earth and sky across the entirety, or nearly the entirety, of a continent."

"It covers everything," Elmáriyë interjects simply. "When I cast my heart out to the furthest reaches of Telmérion that I might feel the heartbeat of our people, the atmosphere of our land, I find only darkness, the oppression of wickedness and the veiling of the light."

"So then we are indeed to do as we said to Halifást?" Jatíldë asks. "You told him that we shall surely come to the aid of their city, since our plan has been all along to continue the fight wherever the creatures of darkness strike next. But if the city has already been lost is the best course of action truly to seek to regain it? Would our efforts not be better spent trying to protect other cities?"

"Perhaps they would," responds Brýma, "but it is impossible for us to know where the enemy shall attack next. However, seeking to break their power, or at least to distract it and thereby lessen it, seems the best that we can hope to do and the most effective way to protect life as well."

"I agree with this," says Rórlain. "The creatures of darkness, even if they are vast, are not limitless. If we were to lay siege to Minstead, it would force their attention upon us and thus spare, we can hope, many of the other settlements who have little or no means to defend themselves."

"I also believe that there is truth to the words that Halifást spoke concerning those still left alive within the city," Cirien says. "It is likely that many of our brethren are imprisoned now in a place of terrible darkness, and, if it is possible, I would see them rescued."

"Once already have we been called upon to do that, and for a single person, for Tilliána in the castle in the mountains," agrees Rórlain, "and I am willing and ready to do so again. However, if that prior saving appeared

impossible at the time, this one appears even more so. For our numbers are small, and the survivors from Minstead who call for our aid are surely so as well."

"Could we not call on other cities to aid us?" Méric offers. "Shall it not take a fortnight or more for our troops to travel to Minstead? Surely in that time we can send messengers to others who may join us in the fight."

"But to whom? To Brûg'hil? To Winfreya? To Oromardë?" Brýma asks. "Long it would take to reach these places, and longer still for troops to be gathered and to join us. Success or defeat would surely have come by the time reinforcements have arrived."

"I suggest that you send messengers nonetheless," Eldárien urges. "Even if it arrives late or not at all, I would spare you the regret of not calling for aid when you could have done so. And you also know not what the paths of the future may hold."

Receiving these words, Brýma nods gently and replies, "Very well then. We shall send riders out at once to any cities large enough and near enough that hope of help may come. And I shall also take this opportunity, with your permission, Eldárien and Rórlain, to inform them that the king of light has come and wields the power to expel these creatures."

Bowing his head, Eldárien replies for them both, "I understand that it cannot be hidden forever. And even though I shall not be present in the fight, I trust that word of a light standing against the darkness shall give hope to the hopeless and courage to the fearful. As for my part, my sister and I shall depart without delay, even this very day, on the quest that lies before us. I would wish to bring an end to this war by another means before it brings more death and destruction for our people."

After these words a dense silence fills the chamber for a long moment, a silence at last broken by the sound of Brýma's voice giving expression to the thoughts and feelings in the hearts of all, "Our hopes rest in the two of you, bearers of light, alone. We walk unto darkness with little or no hope of victory by might of arms or skill in war. Rather, we seek only to save as many lives as we may, and to prevent further destruction, all the while awaiting the deliverance that you go to seek. What a frail and petty hope it seems, and what an obscure expectation. I admit that it provides no consolation to which one may hold, not even an image or semblance of what it is that you go to accomplish. All that I can do—all that we can do—is trust in your word, as you trust in the word spoken unto you. Please, do not fail us."

"I know not what strength lies within me," Eldárien replies quietly, "but whatever there is shall be devoted wholly unto the salvation and deliverance of our people."

"I speak the same," confirms Elmáriyë, taking a step closer to Eldárien and

locking her arm within his.

"Enough of this," Cirien says. "We all stand face to face with the darkness, and we cannot but grasp for hope in hopelessness, even while allowing ourselves to be stretched to our limit, and beyond it. But look to the light that shines forever undimmed behind the stars, the light seen only with the eyes of the heart. Its beauty lies in part for us now in the fact that, invisible as it is, even when all other lights are obscured, it continues to shine undimmed."

"Such are the consolations of a cleric, indeed, whether they are well spoken or ill," remarks Víndal, and many share his skepticism.

"I say it as well now: enough," Brýma concludes. "Our plan is at last settled, is it not? Let us then put it into effect."

Chapter Eight
The Sorrows of Farewell

The events are at last set in motion which all have awaited and feared, expected and desired, hoped for and yet wished to avoid. As a stone on a precipice high in the mountains is loosed and falls with nothing to stop its descent, so now begin events which shall continue to their conclusion without stopping, whether for good or for ill. Eldárien and Elmáriyë gather what minimal belongings they shall need for their journey, and a great deal of provisions, simple and yet hearty, for they expect to find few sources of nourishment along the path that they now take nor at the destination which they seek. They dress in garb intended to provide as much warmth as possible to combat the bitterness of Telméric winter that descends upon the land with its full ferocity, and into which they walk all but unprotected. Eldárien wears over the other layers of his clothing the tunic that was a gift from Sílion and the tabard and cloak that were given to him by his grandparents in the forest of the Velási; and on his back he slings his bow and a quiver full of arrows, the lightbringer in its scabbard suspended upon its baldric, and a pack whose weight—considering the deep scars upon his flesh—is both uncomfortable and burdensome. Elmáriyë is attired and burdened similarly, though for armament she wears no armor and carries on her person only the bow and the dagger that she has brought from Ristfánd. She does not forget, nor could she, to bring the ring of her mother, adorned always upon her finger, as well as the crystalline lantern that was given to her by her grandparents, and which she expects she shall have cause to use in the darkness that awaits them.

Brýma insists that each of them is given a horse to speed their journey, and they gratefully accept this offer, though Eldárien also replies, "Know that it is

likely that we shall find it necessary to release them into the wild when the terrain grows too steep and too treacherous."

"I expected as much," says Brýma kindly, "but perhaps the wild is indeed the safest place for them now to be, given the state into which our land has fallen. Accept them as a trust and an aid to give impetus to your journey for as long as they may be of assistance."

"You have our thanks, Brýma," Elmáriyë says, "for everything. Your hospitality and your support have been more than either of us could have either expected or desired."

"For my part I did not expect to meet either of you, or to find in my own lifetime the incipient fulfillment of promises made so long past. Consider my aid but a meager effort to respond to such a gift and to stand in the line of my forefathers and their great and honorable deeds."

"And may we do so as well," remarks Eldárien. "May we all stand in the line of those who have gone before us, for if a similar darkness has returned as once did plague our ancestors, so too may a similar honor, fidelity, and courage live among us."

As they lead their horses by the bridle to the main gate of the city, their three companions accompany them, the air around them hushed as well as dark, punctuated only by their soft footfalls upon the road and by the crackling of torches in their hands. At last the time comes to voice their farewells, and the two siblings turn and, in what little light they have, gaze into the faces of their companions, who look back with the same tenderness and heartfelt emotion.

"My companions and my friends," Eldárien begins, "you have all become dear to me in the time that we have been granted to remain together. And I wish that we could have been granted many more days and years to walk together on the paths of this life. But now we go our separate ways, and yet both of us into darkness and the threat of death. Know, however, that you shall remain in my heart, alive within me always, and that in the thought of you I shall find both courage and strength."

"I speak likewise, dearly beloved," says Elmáriyë when Eldárien's voice has fallen silent. "I shall remain always grateful that the fabric of our lives was woven together in this way. And never, I trust, shall it be torn, whatever in the future awaits us. I shall...I shall miss each one of you dearly." With these words her voice breaks, and she is unable to contain the tears that spring to her eyes. "I want to thank each of you. I want to thank you...Cirien...Rórlain...Tilliána...for the person that you are and that you have been for me throughout our journey. I look forward in hope to the day when, by divine mercy, whether in this life or in the next, we shall see one another again, and embrace."

Cirien now steps forward and draws Elmáriyë into his arms. She nestles her head against his shoulder and weeps in the security and comfort of his embrace. "Of all the people whom I have met and loved in the long years of my life," he says, still holding Elmáriyë to his bosom, "the two of you have given me perhaps the greatest delight and the deepest hope. The light has touched you, yes, and has been entrusted to you. But even beyond the gift that you bear for others, what touches me most of all is the beauty and integrity of your hearts. This springs from a light even deeper and a gift even more fundamental. And I pray that it shall not be snuffed out before the end, and that even where human strength and courage fail the strength beyond all strength shall uphold you."

"I have no words," Rórlain says, stepping forward now and placing one hand upon Elmáriyë's shoulder and extending the other to grasp Eldárien's hand. They both look intently at him in response. "Never have I been adept at speech. Never, in fact, have I found it easy to express the voice of my heart either in emotion or in intent. Nor is there more I would say that has not already been said, and I have no wish to repeat such things. Know only that I consider the life-bond that has bound me to Eldárien, and through him also to his sister—to you, dear Elmáriyë—to be as nothing in comparison with the bond of love and friendship that now unites us."

"We affirm wholeheartedly the truth of your words, Rórlain," answers Eldárien, "and you need not worry at the difficulty of giving voice to what is hidden in the silence of your heart. We know it and hold it in reverence."

With this the two men embrace one another, and in this embrace is held the recollection of all the trials and beauties through which they have together passed, and the bond that has so long joined them, and their fear and hope, borne in trust, for the paths of the future. When their embrace has been released and Rórlain has embraced Elmáriyë in turn, all eyes turn tenderly to Tilliána, not in expectation but in simple love. Tears already stain her cheeks and her shoulders are hunched as she suppresses sobs. Elmáriyë and Eldárien both spontaneously step toward her, extending their hands and each taking one of her hands within their own. With their simple touch, her tears are released freely, and she holds them back no longer. For a long moment whose span is accounted by none, she is simply allowed to express her grief and her pain, and all in the company receive and shelter it in their love.

And even though none expect her to speak, Tilliána now raises her eyes and looks directly at Eldárien and then at Elmáriyë. She says, in a voice that begins frail and weak and yet grows in confidence, "I fear that you shall never return from the place to which you now go, my friends. Elmáriyë, a sister beyond hope you have been to me. You have given me a yearning for life when I thought never again could I expect it, and you have given me a security that

I have never known. You saved my life and gave it to me anew. And all that I can say which in any way expresses what I feel is this: that I belong to you. Your heart is mine, and mine is yours. I feel that we are indeed sisters more deeply even than in the flesh, than in the bond of blood. I grieve therefore that what is being asked of you, of us, is so soon tearing us apart. I try to drink in your beauty with my eyes, with my ears, with my touch, with my heart, fearing that I shall never be granted to behold you again, to feel your nearness or your presence. And..." Here her voice falters and she closes her eyes tightly, trying to gain enough composure to continue speaking and to say what she wishes to say. When she opens her eyes, she turns their gaze now upon Eldárien.

She says to him, "Eldárien, you are our true king; this I do not doubt. In my heart I have already long acknowledged you as such. But I know that you depart now not apart from your kingship, but in it. You depart now in order to exercise your kingship, and in a way that none of us could have expected. How I wish that you could have custodianship of us, that you could guide our people through the coming days and years toward a new life after this time of darkness, indeed after these centuries of loss and forgetfulness. But I begin to understand, though it grieves my heart, that kingship can be exercised also in another way. For a king remains with his people, watching over them, caring for them, and leading them along the paths of this world. But a true king is also willing to give even his own life for his people, to confront the deepest darkness in direct conflict, that his people may be free. But if your kingship cannot be both of these things, then I understand which of them it must be." She pauses and sighs deeply before continuing, pushing herself to say the words that she wishes to say but which are so hard to express, for fear that she will not have another opportunity to voice them. "I only lament that what was but a seed of promise shall be taken away so soon. I had hoped to watch it blossom and grow into a great tree—indeed I had even begun to feel my heart, my own life and my own seed, opening to join together with this tree and its growth. But...but now I see that this seed must fall into other soil and bear fruit in another way. And the letting go...the letting go is difficult."

"Dear Tilliána, your words and your heart are received completely and without reserve," Eldárien replies, now himself unable to withhold the tears that spring to his eyes, few in number but heartfelt, and precious to Tilliána as she looks into his face and beholds them. He then embraces her and in silence they bid farewell, an act that is both a gesture of hope reaching out into the unknown and a gesture of surrender and letting-go. After this a similar embrace is shared with Elmáriyë, and then, with a tangible pain in the hearts of all—like the tearing apart of what was never meant to be separated—their farewells have concluded.

Elmáriyë and Eldárien mount their horses and, in the silence of grief that engulfs them all together, they offer a final gaze of gratitude and goodbye before turning away and passing through the gate and into the plains beyond.

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After the heavy gates of the city are closed behind them, they turn their horses to the east and ride on through the darkness and the snow, retracing the same path that they first took on their approach to Onylándun, only in the opposite direction. There is no easy access to the heights of the Teldren Mountains, where lies their destination, and thus it shall be necessary for them to follow along the south and the eastern edges of the range all the way through the Téldyn Pass, along the Stïeka Mára, and past the hamlet of Criseä into the Galas Basin, where the ruined village of Fálstead lies, and the ancient barrow of Séra Galáptes. It feels uncanny to Eldárien that he intends already to return a second time to his childhood home—or even so soon to retrace the steps that he and his companions took not long before on their journey to the Velási Forest and to Onylándun. And yet now the path shall be much changed, not the least because the land now lies in a darkness deeper and more suffocating than the darkness of deepest night. This, combined with the unremitting cold and a landscape of unbroken snow, gives the path that they now ride a tangible sensation of foreignness, almost as if the world that they had left behind in entering the city has changed in their absence, and with their departure they now journey forth into a different world entirely.

And the path before them is long, and haste drives them. But they find hope in the fact that they are but two riders alone on horseback, unhindered by anything but the limitations of existence, while the army of Onylándun, among whom shall be their friends, will be encumbered both by their sheer numbers and by the slowness of human feet as opposed to the hooves of horses. And this is even apart from consideration of the need to make camp each night and to break it again in the morning, making accommodation thereby for the movement of such a great number of persons. Perhaps, then, the two lonely riders can hope to come to the abode of darkness before any further conflict even need occur, and thus may spare their people from further suffering and loss of life. But even as this hope is kindled within them they also feel a conflicting hope and desire: that the army that shall march from Onylándun will find the means to travel with speed in order to come soon to the walls of Minstead and to bring the fight to the enemy, both to rescue those there held captive as well as to offer the diversion that it is their intent to bring.

Their thoughts and wishes are thus conflicted, and they know not what outcomes shall be best, and therefore know not even for what to hope and to pray. But perhaps, after all, this is the manner in which hope is expressed

when it has been weaned so thin by suffering and by darkness, by opposition and by pain, that it no longer has any concrete expectations to which to cling. It can only reach out, in the unknown and beyond it, to the liberation and salvation for which the heart thirsts but which, on its own, it can neither attain nor even conceive.

And so they ride, in darkness both exterior and interior, through the days and much of the nights—which are almost indistinguishable—through the heart of Téldyn Pass, in the wide basin of land that stretches between the Teldren Range to the north and the Yjind Mountains to the south, both of which are visible to the eyes of the body only as blacker bulks of shape against the surrounding blackness, but whose massive presence can be felt even more clearly hovering on the edge of consciousness.

For twelve days they ride, and at a grievously slow pace due to the thick snow that cloaks the ground and burdens the progress both of their horses and of themselves, during those times when they walk to give respite to their mounts. But then at last the bulk of the mountains north of them falls away and the slope of the land in that direction flattens out. They thus turn toward the north and direct their horses in that direction, though keeping the shape of the mountains close to their left for fear that if they stray too far from them all landmarks shall be lost and they will lose their way in the highlands and plains with no indications celestial or terrestrial to help them regain the path again. They therefore find themselves confronted with a frightening conundrum: keeping a straight course in the darkness shall be difficult and uncertain, and thus it is necessary always to have a landmark as a guide for their journey, and yet soon the mountains on which they rely shall give way to the Stïeka Mára, the vast chasm that opened so many centuries ago to shelter and protect the Velási Forest and its inhabitants. The conundrum is this: a hole in the earth is a landmark both unreliable and dangerous, and yet on it they must rely for many leagues, until the sheer walls of stone that bespeak the mountains again rise on its far side. And even though they once passed this way not long ago, memory alone is not enough to guide them surely, for the landscape has no other distinctive features that can direct them, and, regardless, it appears so different in the darkness that now accompanies their travel that it offers them no guidance or help even were they to know it well.

As they sit together after a long day of riding, the ruddy light of a campfire warming and dancing upon their faces, and their horses tethered to one of the sparse trees in the area, they converse with one another. They have spoken regularly since departing from Onylándun, and yet most of their exchanges have been short and simple, and their days have been held primarily by silence, a shared silence that respects the solitude of each even as it allows it to flow into the solitude of the other in wordless communion. Yet now, as

the difficulty of their journey grows in the consciousness of each, and as they stand at their first real obstacle, they seek recourse in speech.

"Do you think the Stïeka Mára shall be enough to ensure our safe and direct passage?" Elmáriyë asks.

"I suspect that the horses shall be able to sense its presence and avoid any mishaps, even though it shall be rather difficult for our weak eyes to see," replies Eldárien. "We can see the silhouettes of shapes around us, forms in the mysterious veiling of this blackness, however dark it may be. But there will be little or nothing to mark out the chasm other than a greater darkness in the blackness of the ground on which we tread, and perhaps not even that. Regardless, we must move forward. We must trust in our senses, in what we perceive, even as pressing beyond mere perception. For many more senses we have than that of sight—senses both of body and of spirit—as when, even with eyes closed, we can sense the size of the room in which we sit, or the wall directly behind us, or the person who walks past. So too do I hope that we can sense the true road before us, both now and henceforth."

"And you do not trust enough in your sense of direction to keep to the north with such feeble aid given by our bodily senses?"

"I fear I am uncertain of even that much. And even if I were, it is not only a matter of direction, for the landscape is such that we could easily lose ourselves in its midst even as we progress in the right direction. It shall be difficult—for me I think impossible—to keep an exact course with no other guides."

"Well, there is always the guidance given in the heart," suggests Elmáriyë with a weak and yet sincere smile, her eyes glistening in the firelight. "You speak of the sense of space, of location, and of presence which we have through our other senses even when bereft of sight. This is certainly true. But there is also the guidance that the heart gives unto itself, or rather the deeper voice welling up from deep within its hidden recesses, which directs us surely in many areas of life where the journey is not one made with the flesh nor guided by the senses of the body."

"The voice that is most authentically our own and yet also most vividly the voice of Another," Eldárien replies, "here we are asked to listen most deeply, most vulnerably, to the voice that is beyond us. We may need to rely on this voice almost exclusively for long stretches of our journey, I am afraid."

"It is a good thing, then, that it is the most sure and trustworthy guide of all," Elmáriyë remarks softly.

"Indeed," agrees Eldárien. "But our senses were also given as companions on the journey, as windows to welcome the voice that speaks through everything and guides us always. So whether it is a chasm, or mountains, or another landmark, or reliance on the hope that we shall not go astray even when

all external landmarks fail us, I pray that our journey may not end in frustration and loss."

Elmáriyë does not respond immediately to her brother's words, but holds them in silence for a few long moments before at last giving the simple reply, "I pray for that as well."

Both of them now sink into an even more prolonged silence as they listen to the crackling and popping of the fire, burning the wood that they have gathered from nearby trees and fallen branches. They are grateful that the snow that had cloaked the earth so heavily on their departure from Onylán-dun and for a good many leagues throughout the Téldyn Pass has now passed away. It seems that the region in which they travel at present was spared snow entirely, and the ground, though bitterly cold, is dry. But they know that in the morning they shall awaken to a thick layer of frost that covers everything from grass and trees to their own packs and blankets; such is the nature of Telméric winter, and rare is the night, from the month of Tíntas to the month of Quártas, when frost does not come in the deep nocturnal repose.

Of course, with the darkness that now envelops the daytime as well, the interplay of day and night has changed, as has the weather, and the warmth ordinarily brought by the full rays of the sun during daytime hours is limited to no more than a slight hint both of temperature and of light that is able to pierce through the massive and unwelcome cloud of blackness that cloaks everything. But amid all the losses that the darkness has brought, both of them feel with a special keenness the loss of the night sky and its countless stars, with its moon and its celestial aurora, and with the hint—seen more with the heart than with the eyes—of the light that shines behind the stars.

"Eldárien," Elmáriyë says suddenly, breaking the silence. "Do you not think that we could channel the light entrusted to us in order to light our way?"

Raising his head he turns and looks at her, and then he replies kindly, "I have thought of such a possibility, but I do not think it is wise."

"I have my doubts as well, but I wanted to ask nonetheless. Why do you not believe it wise?"

"I would like first to hear your reasons."

"Very well," she says. "First of all, I suspect that it would exhaust us, and our journey shall be arduous enough as it is."

"That is correct," says Eldárien. "Though it takes much less energy to channel the light only enough to illumine one's surroundings than it does to smite the enemy, the strain would still be considerable, particularly when extended over any length of time."

"I have done it so little that I was unsure," Elmáriyë admits, "but I do understand that as much as I may from the little experience I have. Another

reason that it would be unwise," she continues, "is that it may reveal our presence to prying eyes."

Eldárien nods without hesitation, and as he turns his gaze upon Elmáriyë the intensity in his eyes almost startles her. "I did not expect you to say that, but I should not have underestimated your intuition," he says. "I have feared that we shall be hunted since before we left the walls of Onylándun, and the fear has only grown with every passing day. I would be surprised were our enemy not to know about our plan or to have in some vague manner guessed it. At the very least, when our foe learns that we have not accompanied the forces to Minstead, and that Rórlain alone wields the light in open combat, I suspect him to cast about looking for us."

"But would this mysterious figure really wish to send his servants and minions to slay us in the wilderness?" Elmáriyë asks. "It seems to me that the way of the Draíon—at least the lesser ones whom we have encountered—is to relish the pain of their victims and to delight in the manner of their slaughter."

Eldárien reflects on his sister's words for a moment, running his fingers along his beard, which has grown thick and full with the passage of time. When he speaks, he says, "To be honest, this thought did not cross my mind. What you say seems reasonable enough to me, and in fact quite perceptive. Perhaps I am merely exercising excessive caution after all that has happened to us and to our people, and considering the importance and delicacy of our quest."

"I in fact believe that the caution is called for a thousandfold, brother," Elmáriyë says. "But we cannot be so cautious as to fail to progress toward our goal."

"Aye, and whatever comes, even if we have no choice but to place ourselves into danger, we must press forward to the end that calls us," Eldárien concludes. "So do not hesitate to harness the light if you ever feel that it is for any reason necessary."

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On the morning of the next day the snow begins. On their rising frost cloaks the earth as they had expected, but all around them flurries also begin to swirl, softly at first and then more vehemently as the wind picks up and blows strong from the north. As they set out and push their horses forward into the darkness speckled with countless gray flakes of fast-falling snow, they soon find themselves riding through a veritable storm. The bitter wind bites at their exposed faces and whips even through their many layers of clothing. Hunching over their horses and covering their faces with scarf and hood, they press on even as the snow becomes so thick that all is painted with its presence, falling through the air and accumulating quickly upon the earth and

upon their figures moving through the gloom.

For a good ten or twelve hours they do not stop, knowing that idleness for themselves and their horses in this weather is dangerous; but all the while they remain alert to any hints of shelter that may provide some refuge in which to pass the intensity of the storm. But what they find instead is surprising: they find the Stïeka Mára. They recognize it first by the sound of a high-pitched whistling as the winter wind dances across the opening and plays upon the steep walls of stone that descend for an immeasurable distance into the earth below. In this respect, at least, the storm is fortunate, in that it has revealed the presence of the vast chasm to a sense that could actually perceive it, and thus has spared the two riders from the danger of a great tragedy. But as they continue cautiously forward, trying to guide their course in the same direction as the chasm and yet a good distance from it, they realize that the snow storm has also benefited them in yet another way as well: by painting the earth white, it has set the Stïeka Mára in stark relief and made it visible to their sight even in the all-encompassing darkness.

Relieved by this turn of events and by the danger that they have been spared, they now turn their minds more exclusively to the other danger now to be resisted, and which becomes more pressing with the passage of time and the full descent of night. They must find shelter soon. Reaching back into memory they are able to call to the mind's eye a vague sense of the landscape that lies on this side of the Stïeka Mára, and they recall groves of trees growing within a hundred yards of the chasm, a meager shelter but the best that they can hope to find in their current circumstances.

An hour passes before they find what they seek, a small depression in the land cradled by three large conifers and two twisted oaks whose branches spread wide and low. Judging this sufficient to provide some shelter from the wind and the snow, they tie their horses to the trunks of the oaks and then gather what wood they can for a fire. Piling the snow beneath them in a circle and unveiling the grassy earth underneath, they create a haven of warmth—as much as they can—in this wilderness. When the fire is burning and their place of rest and sleep has been prepared, they sit together, wrapped tightly in their furs and gazing into the flickering flames, the weight of these terrible days weighing heavily upon each of their hearts.

And though they do not speak of it now, both of them know that since their absorption of the darkness of the dragon another darkness is growing and expanding within each of them—or rather in both of them together, in the meeting of their consciousnesses in a shared mystery. It is a frightening experience, and something both unexpected and painful, even if it is but an extension of the mystery of bearing that they have known, which carries the pain and darkness of human hearts in solidarity and compassion. For the

darkness that they bear now has a different quality and texture, though neither of them can express its nature to themselves. If in human darkness there is a particular tenor of sorrow, of lament, and of longing—speaking even in its deepest loss and darkest darkness of the beauty that is hidden like a seed, oft betrayed and much forgotten, but never wholly lost—then this new darkness bears a tenor of horror, of absurdity, and a crushing weight that seems to blot out all the meaning of existence and to plunge it into nothingness. Perhaps this is the darkness proper to the Draíon and their minions, affixed forever in their sovereign choice of evil, become blackness itself in the wickedness that they have espoused and allowing no light to exist that does not come under the dominion of their own darkness.

Chapter Nine
On the Road to Conflict

When all the able-bodied fighters have been gathered in the city of Onylándun, they stand four-thousand in number. Fifteen-hundred of these are trained warriors, guardsmen, and soldiers, and the rest are simply townsfolk who have volunteered to lend their arm to the cause. Brýma refuses to draft any of the men of his city unwillingly into the force that shall march toward Minstead, but neither does he refuse those who offer their assistance. And the extent of the freely offered support, from both men and women, is far more than he had expected. And in truth without this aid there would be little hope of any sort of victory against the enemy, however meager. But after having witnessed the assault of their own city and the horrors of the creatures that seek to destroy their people, many are stirred to resist—some by remaining at home to guard and protect their families and their city, and others to march forth for the deliverance of Minstead and for the direct conflict with the full might of the enemy, even if this proves to be little more than a diversion to save other settlements from a similar fate.

Rórlain tremulously but with trusting surrender accepts second command over the army, with Sénfyr—following the death of Hínding—now raised to the status of commander. Brýma himself dons a mail hauberk and iron breastplate, with matching greaves and vambraces, and a thick-bladed sword passed down through many generations of the leaders of the clan of Onylándis. Thus outfitted he joins the army, as do four other members of the council. Jatíldë takes Brýma's place as the prime custodian of the city and the clan in his absence. Gathering outside the city gates on the early morning two days after the departure of Eldárien and Elmáriyë, the host is massive and

intimidating to behold—though to themselves, of course, encouraging—with armor glinting in the torchlight as far as the eye can see, a great mass of men and women emerging from the darkness. They know not whether the eötenga can see in the darkness as in daylight, or even if they see at all in the ordinary manner, but for those who behold the army now the darkness seems almost to be in this case a boon, an aid to the secrecy of their march and an advantage in their approach to the city of Minstead, a wave at sea rising up and crashing against the shore without warning in the depths of night. This, at least, is their hope.

Along with the men and women who march for war are five-hundred others, mainly women though there are also a number of elderly men, who accompany them to tend to their needs and to support them in whatever manner they may. Among these are Cirien and Tilliána, for whom the possibility of remaining in Onylándun is not even a consideration. Though they have nothing to offer in terms of military strength or acumen, they both wish to be where the conflict lies, that they may aid those who stand forefront against the darkness. Whether it shall be cooking meals, helping erect and dismantle the camp, tending to the wounded, or offering counsel and presence, it is here alone that they wish to be. And they are also unwilling to allow Rórlain to press forward alone without their support and their companionship, for they know that the burden he now carries is great.

When all have gathered and are prepared to depart, Sénfyr speaks. He addresses the troops in a loud voice, reaching whom he may, while others pass on his words to those too distant to hear him. "A long road lies ahead of us, and our destination shall be more dangerous and more arduous than the road to arrive there. But we march in courage and in compassion, to save and to protect the people of our land, both in Onylándis and beyond. Much shall be asked of us in the coming days, but I am confident that we shall rise to the occasion, as we have once already. So prepare yourselves. Much need have we of haste, and we shall march hard. Let your legs be tireless and your arms be strong, and let your heart not fail, come what may—for we are Telméri, and our spirit shall not be broken."

After these words the great company sets out, and they follow the plains and foothills to the west and then to the northwest, as its leaders guide all steps toward a narrow pass that cuts through a branch of the Téldrens and which shall spare a large number of days, perhaps even an entire week, from their journey. For the three companions who have journeyed from Ristfánd, the experience of traveling in such a large group of people is a jarring change, as the sobriety of the days and the silent intimacy of the nights is replaced by numerous sounds, whether the dull pounding of thousands of footsteps and the breath of many human beings, a cadence resounding on and on as the

long hours of marching wear on, or whether the sounds of hushed conversation at night, and snoring, and campfires crackling to fight away the darkness and the bitter chill.

Fortunately, they pass through the mountains without incident and find the land sloping downward on the other side, and a wide expanse opening out before them—more felt than seen—which shall take many further days to cross. But only across it, far to the north, lies their goal, one both desired and feared: the city of Minstead, cradled in a wide basin of land between rugged peaks, center of the clan of Mineäs and for yearns now a heart of intense strife and conflict. But the nature of this conflict has now drastically changed, and what was once a fight between Empire and rebellion has now become the struggle of humanity for life and survival against the beasts of darkness and death who would rob them of it.

"I feel their fear," Rórlain remarks one day to Cirien as the company stops to make camp. "They have witnessed incredible horror already in the heart of their own city, once a bastion of such safety and security. And yet within only a matter of weeks they march forth toward another city, foreign and unknown, and in order to face what for all indications shall be a yet greater force of evil. The fear of death hangs heavy in the air, and rightly so. I myself fear that many shall fall before the end...if not all."

Nodding as he listens and receives these words, Cirien replies, "A painful path has befallen us, that is certain. Our people face a trial they have not known for ages, and for all that we would wish to spare them of it, all that we can do, rather, is join them in it, and guide them as best we can along the journey that lies before them."

"And in the conflict be a shield to protect them and a sword to sharpen them," adds Rórlain, "a sword imbued with light, which seems to be our only advantage—and one that seems so small and meager—against our enemy."

"Do you have any hesitations about the path that we have chosen?" Cirien asks.

"About the assault on Minstead?"

"I suppose so, yes," says Cirien. "The journey that Eldárien and Elmáriyë take is not one subject to choice, as it seems to have been chosen for them. But before us lies a conflict uncertain both in nature and in outcome. Do you believe that we have chosen wisely?"

"I do not know. But we have chosen, and we have chosen together. All for it now is to follow this course through to its end or until something else is revealed to us."

"For my part I believe that we have chosen wisely."

"Truly?" Rórlain looks at Cirien inquisitively, surprised at the firmness of his words.

"Yes, truly," Cirien replies. "The decision that the council has made is one born of courage, of the willingness to stand directly against the evil rather than to flee from it or to compromise with it. How easy it would have been for them to choose instead to look after their own interests, to build up safeguards to protect themselves and their own, hoping to last through these dark days."

"But that would have been folly, for unless the darkness is stopped it shall only continue to spread."

"Assuredly. But they could have done so nonetheless. And if the journey of our two friends brings any small hope of deliverance, they could have used this to their advantage and refrained from risking further loss for their people and their clan."

"But ever since our arrival in Onylándun," says Rórlain, "their response has been on the large one of generosity and trust."

"Yes. And I shall never cease to marvel at that fact. For I find it quite astonishing, as well as consoling." With these words Cirien's eyes sparkle and he appears to smile even though only a slight change comes to the curve of his lips or his brows.

"I have not given as much attention to it as it deserves," admits Rórlain. "In fact, I realize that I took it too much for granted. But you are right: there is great hope in the people of Onylándun." Then he pauses and lowers his eyes in grief, concluding, "Yet that realization only makes me want more desperately to save them from the pain that awaits them..."

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Their march continues as the mountains fall away behind them, though they remain constant far to their right—to the east—whence lies the Teldren Range silhouetted in the darkness. They move deeper with every passing day into the heart of the Plains of Perélis, a vast expanse of land that extends over a great portion of the western regions of Telmérion, from the Finístra Range far in the north to the Mídfeld Stretch in the south, through which they have just passed (an offshoot of the Teldren Mountains as they extend southwest toward the dual peninsulas of Fénris and Golárion). Little of these plains is visible to the eye since all is bathed in perpetual night; but they are able to glean impressions of a wide land that is largely flat, though punctuated often with undulating hills or shelves of stone and earth on which grow hearty grasses and other plants. The trees are sparse and yet large and ancient, and when the company passes by them the sense of their massive size is tangible, something both intimidating and consoling in its own way.

The company must also cross numerous streams of water, most hardly wider than a few feet though some are veritable rivers weaving their way through the landscape. The more shallow beds of water are frozen solid,

while the others conceal water still flowing hidden underneath twelve to sixteen inches of ice. When the host stops near one of these larger streams, a good number of the men take the opportunity to break through the ice enough to draw forth water in buckets or flasks and to replenish the supply of the travelers. But only a few days into their trek across the plains the weather turns, and a cold and biting wind sweeps unhindered across the land. Light flurries of snow accompany them intermittently for the larger part of two days, and yet this never intensifies into anything more intense, though they suspect it shall do so further to the east or to the south if is not broken up in crossing the Teldren Mountains.

As they continue northward, accompanying the people of Onylándun across the plains toward the conflict that awaits them, two conversations in particular impress upon the companions both the valor and the fear of their people. One is a conversation that Rórlain has with a young man who volunteered to take up arms with his compatriots and the other is a conversation shared by Tilliána and an elderly woman accompanying the caravan, a conversation to which Cirien is witness.

The first occurs several hours after the company has set up camp and while most sleep, recuperating their energy for the next day's journey. Rórlain walks the perimeter of the camp with a slow stride, lost in thought, having just awoken from a dream-filled slumber and finding it impossible to sink back into sleep. He comes upon the young man, set for the first night-watch of the southwest perimeter of the camp, standing unmoving in the darkness, his arms crossed upon his breast and clasping his cloak tight around his body.

"How goes the watch?" Rórlain asks as he draws near, that he might not to startle the young man. Coming closer he sees more clearly the features of the youth, and the person he assumed was a man of perhaps his early or mid twenties appears instead to be a teenager.

"Oh, captain Farâël, is that you? Why come you to the watch?" the man asks in response, the discomfort at speaking directly to a superior officer evident in his voice.

"Be at ease," Rórlain says kindly, stepping to the man's side. "What is your name?"

"I am called Ílthis, sir, Ílthis son of Mendélion...though my father died in the assault on Onylándun."

"I am sorry to hear of your loss, Ílthis, son of Mendélion. You have my condolences and my prayers for your father," says Rórlain. "Too many have fallen already at the hands of these forces of darkness."

"Aye," Ílthis sighs, unconsciously lowering his head in grief. But only a moment later he raises it again and risks a glance at Rórlain, saying, "Yet that is why we march, is it not? We must put a stop to this madness before any

more innocent lives are lost."

"That is exactly the purpose of our march and our striving," answers Rórlain. "Did you join the fighting company for this reason?"

"Yes, Sir Farâël. For that and none other."

"Please, call me Rórlain."

"Rórlain...? Ah, very well."

"I am impressed with your courage, Ílthis, and grateful for it. You are young and yet you step willingly into a place of great danger out of love for your people."

"If a young man shall not be courageous, why should one expect an older man to be?" Ílthis asks, though it is clear the question is rhetorical.

"The boy is the seed of the man," remarks Rórlain. "More life does a young man have to lose in death than a man who has already passed many years in this world. And thus perhaps more courage is required for him to stand face to face with death. Nonetheless you speak true, and more wisely than many twice your age. If only men would recognize that even their adult manhood is still in the process of growing, and still malleable to being touched and transformed, then more would be ready to answer the call of love as you have done. For even in old age can be found the boldness of youth and a readiness to respond with vigor and integrity to what issues to us a call and invitation. And thus we mature, and this maturation in large part consists in a rediscovery of the wonder, the newness, and the radical readiness of youth."

"Perhaps," the young soldier comments, "but I look forward to being a man."

"A man you are already, Ílthis. It is courage and integrity that make you a man, and standing on the side of right and good and innocence. From this all other maturation shall flow."

"You are...you are right," responds Ílthis. "I just do not feel ready to be a man. In truth, I feel younger than I have in a long time, like a crying babe before the shadows of the darkness, alone in his cradle."

"Many of us, I suspect, feel likewise," says Rórlain kindly. "Great are the matters in which we have become involved, and this very fact cannot but make one feel small. Yet are we not always taken up into mysteries beyond ourselves, whether we feel it so or not? And not all of these mysteries are either fearful or dark. There is yet light greater and purer, broader and more glorious than the darkness, and in this too a man can participate, and this too can issue a call unto his heart. Only in knowing this can one discover true strength greater than the measure of man though alive within man."

Ílthis does not immediately respond to these words, but it is evident that he is reflecting upon them in the silence. When at last he speaks he does not respond directly to Rórlain's words, though the latter knows that he has

listened to them deeply. Speaking, Ílthis' voice is strained, "Ma...she is still in Onylándun. I wanted to stay and protect her, to grieve with her the loss of Ta, but I knew I could not do so. I knew I had to march with the company."

"A great sacrifice you have made."

"There was no other way."

"But you made it nonetheless," says Rórlain. "May you behold the fruit of this sacrifice and look again upon your mother's face and upon the faces of the many people whom you shall know and love throughout your life, after these days of darkness have passed."

"You really think there is hope for such a thing?" Ílthis asks, turning now to face Rórlain directly, the intensity of his question harnessing the fullness of his attention.

Rórlain responds simply, "There is always hope, Ílthis. Never cease to believe that love is greater than hatred and light stronger than darkness."

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The second conversation occurs a few days after the first, as the company walks together across the plains in the darkness of midday. Tilliána finds herself in the midst of a group of women, young and old alike, and she cannot help overhearing the conversation that unfolds as they walk. It is a long one, for a few of the women are quite loquacious; yet it is not the length of their speech that pains Tilliána, but the content and substance of their words and of the dispositions from which they spring. They speak of the promise and the rumor of the scarred king, and though Tilliána can tolerate their disagreement and dismissal—after all it is such a rare and unexpected fact that the king of promise has truly arisen from the shadows of history—she is hurt deeply through their disrespect and vulgarity. They not only dismiss the very idea of the prophecy and its meaning, but they curse the faith that would look to gods for the fulfillment of their promises. But shy and quiet as she is, she finds it difficult to voice her concerns. Quite a few minutes pass before she manages work up enough courage to say something, and yet even as she opens her mouth to speak, another woman near her, the oldest of the group, speaks instead.

"I have had enough of your crude and dismissive language, dear ladies," the woman says. The age shows in her voice, which is cracked and crinkled with time, and this causes her interlocutors to smirk.

"Ladies? Why in all the wide world would you think to call us ladies?" one of the more boisterous women retorts.

"You do not wish to be ladies, nor to be known as such? Considering your actions, I suppose it was wrong of me to address you as such."

"Do you have something more that you wish to say, or do you simply want to insult us?" replies another woman.

"It is not my intention to insult any of you," says the first woman. "But whether you use language well or poorly, it must be pointed out that what you say goes against both the intelligence of the mind and the memory and hope of our people. You call these prophecies of a 'promised king' a silly tale fitting only for the youngest of children, and you scoff at the fact that one has arisen among us who claims to be this king, and who bears both the semblance and the power to back up his claim. The least you can do is speak your unwillingness to believe with the reserve fitting to the seriousness of the matter, rather than making a joke of a reality that our people hold so precious and so dear."

"Do you mean to say that you believe in these so-called prophecies?" asks the woman who has been at the forefront of the mockery. "And you believe that such power has truly arisen among us?"

Shaking her head sorrowfully, the elderly woman, after a moment either to collect her thoughts or to make sure that her words are received in the silence that is their due (Tilliána suspects that it is the latter), says, "Whether such power has arisen among us is plain for all to see. We beheld its lights blazing in the streets and houses of our own city. And as for the prophecies, long have they been a consolation and a hope to me. I have believed in the promises since I was a young child, and the hope—and indeed the conviction—of their truth has not lessened with me as I have grown and advanced in years. Rather, the surety in my heart has only deepened. And I know that I am not alone in this hope and this longing. At first I believed in the scarred king because the whole world was bathed in beauty and wonder, because all things were a marvel, and my heart knew that a promised king who would unify and ennoble our people would be the greatest marvel of all. And yet as I grew older I came to believe in the scarred king because the world was marked by suffering and pain, by loss and sorrow. I knew that if ever there was to be a king who would lead the people of Telmérion unto healing and life, it would be one who was scarred, who bore the marks of suffering and of love in his own flesh."

Both the passion and the mysterious logic in these words leave the other women for a few moments fumbling for an answer. Eventually they do what so often happens in such situations: they turn away from the woman who has spoken and resolve henceforth to ignore her, returning to the same manner of speech that had incited her to intervene in the first place. But she has spoken, and, for Tilliána, that is enough.

When the company stops at the end of the day, Tilliána approaches the woman and, reaching out to grasp her hand, says, "I wanted to introduce myself and to say 'thank you' for your words earlier. I desired to speak myself but was struggling to muster the courage to do so."

"I know, my dear. That is why I spoke," replies the woman simply. "Such blindness and disrespect thrives when others witness it and yet choose to remain silent. But then again, each one of us has our own journey, do we not? Perhaps my words meant nothing to those women, nor were they meant to. It is not I nor anything I say that can open their eyes and hearts to see the light of which they so dismissively spoke. But each of those women is at the heart of the narrative of their own story, and the lines written into that story may well lead, even many years from now, precisely to the reality which now they can hardly imagine." The woman falls silent and her gaze becomes distant with the depth of memory and longing so proper to, and so beautiful in, the elderly. "Anyway, darling, by what name are you called?"

Tilliána laughs softly and replies, "Darling is as good a name as any, or perhaps even the best by a large margin. But I am called Tilliána Valésa, a widow from Ristfánd. What is your name?"

"So you know the pain of which I speak, do you? That explains much. My name is Elándra Místrë."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Elándra."

"Likewise."

"You speak of my pain," Tilliána continues hesitantly, "but those women surely know pain too, do they not? Even if they had little taste of it before now, how can they remain so lighthearted after all that has happened in their own city?"

"Lighthearted?" Elándra asks, raising her eyebrows. "No, I do not think that they are lighthearted. Quite the opposite, rather. They are coping with pain and loss in their own way, even if what they are doing is yet hurting them still further. It is the heavy heart that cries out in cynical mockery, that scoffs and belittles, that makes jokes at others' expense. Such is the very opposite of true humor and authentic lightness of heart. Only the heart that looks through the darkness and pain and finds hope for light beyond it can be a heart that is light. I remember vividly a lesson I was taught by one of my teachers when I was but a child. It had a profound impact on me and clearly has remained with me ever since. This man, now long deceased, was an expert in the old language, so marvelous and yet so much forgotten. Or at least I believe it is marvelous. But that may be because in it alone have I read pages of deepest beauty. We simply do not write like that anymore, having forgotten so many beautiful and painful parts of our history. Would you like to hear what he told me?"

"I most certainly would," replies Tilliána, wonder in her eyes at the beauty of Elándra who as she speaks seems to light up with some secret lamp of the spirit hidden deep within her.

"Very well then," says Elándra, "though now it will not seem like much

since I have prefaced it so. For it is really quite simple. He explained to me how two words in the ancient language have the same root, and were perhaps originally the same word, but came over time to have different meanings. One is the word '*illo*,' and the other is the word '*allo*.' Now *illo* means light—as in the light that shines and that we see with our eyes: a singing sunrise or a sparkling sunset, a mellow midday or a melodious morning." She pauses for a moment to savor her own alliterations and to chuckle softly at them, and then she continues, "Of course, *illo* also refers metaphorically to the invisible light, the light of goodness that stands over and against the darkness of evil. We know much about that nowadays, don't we? And now you see, too, why what our friends were saying earlier was so unfortunate. We would all be dead right now were it not for the light! Anyway, let me return to the lesson. The other word, *allo,* means light in another sense: light in reference to weight, the opposite of heaviness, like a floating feather or a whistling wind or a humble heart. Of course, that last one is metaphorical. But that is precisely the point: we pass from the visible to the invisible almost instantaneously and without thought. It is just the way that we were made. And so it is fitting that *illo* and *allo* refer to the same thing, or to aspects of the same thing: to the light that makes us light, and to the lightness that allows us to be docile and receptive to the light."

In response to this all that Tilliána can do is smile and express her gratitude, for the woman's words, in a way both subtle and unexpected, have touched a dark and heavy place somewhere deep within her, and have helped in some measure to ease it and bring it a touch of lightness.

Chapter Ten
The Beginning of the Assault

They draw near to the city of Minstead almost three weeks after their departure from Onylándun, though they know this not through sight of the former city but because they are intercepted by survivors from the siege. The landscape to the south of the city is rocky and rough, with foothills rising to unto the mountains both east and west, allowing only a rather narrow strip of land in the crevice at the feet of the two ranges to connect the plains to the south and the wide valley to the north, in which is cradled, at its heart, the great and ancient city of Minstead, built along the banks of the river Hûras. This terrain is also an ideal place for those who wish to remain hidden from sight, as there are ample places to shelter in the crevices of rock or the caverns of stone that pock-mark the sides of the mountains in great number. Here

the survivors who fled the city have taken their refuge, and thus it would be impossible for the reinforcements from Onylándun to gauge their number were it even the full light of day without this light-suffocating darkness.

Those who fled from the city hail them at a distance, voices in the darkness, at first cautious and then welcoming as it becomes evident who and what is this great company marching from the south. Their commander, with two men at his side, introduces himself and asks to speak with the leaders of the company. As it happens, the person whom he first addresses is Rórlain, who walks at the vanguard with a torch in his hand.

"Greetings, friends," cries the commander, "for that, I trust, is what you are. The sight of living men like ourselves cannot but be a consolation to us after what we have seen."

"Aye, we are friends, for we come at the request of the messenger whom you sent," replies Rórlain.

"Ah, praise the gods. Then I would address myself to your leaders. I am Commander Tûric Sýlfæn."

"I am vice commander Rórlain Farâël. Give me a moment to call our commander and the councilor."

When they have gathered—and sent word to the rest of the company to here seek rest and reprieve from their journey—the leaders sit upon the ground or upon what flat stones they can find, and they speak together. After introductions are shared, hæras Brýma says, "We have heard word from the messenger but would ask you nonetheless to share with us in greater detail what occurred in the attack upon your city and also how stands the situation now."

"I will gladly share, though little of the news I have to share is glad," responds Tûric. "We had little warning of the coming attack, or at least no warning that we knew how to interpret or understand. Before the assault, a great cloud arose from the south, spreading rapidly like a smoke on the wind...only there was no wind. Rather, of its own power, or driven by some unearthly force, it spread and polluted the air until all was turned to darkness. This caused, and understandably so, some degree of panic and confusion in the city. Would that it had also somehow prepared us more effectively for what was soon to come. Do you know the nature of this darkness?"

"It has come to you all the way from Onylándun," Rórlain explains, "for thence it takes its rise, and we are grieved to see that it has reached this far."

"But what is its nature or substance, or the purpose for its existence?"

"Of the former we cannot say precisely, though I believe that the latter is evident to us all: darkness is the home of the creatures who now assail us, and in this darkness our whole land becomes the domain in which they may freely wreak the havoc that they intend. We do know, however, at what moment

the blackness first began to spread. It was summoned forth by a terrible creature of blackest evil, one who wields power far greater than any mortal. It is he, we believe, who also led the attack against your city."

"I know the creature of which you speak, for I have seen him with my own eyes, though only from a distance. He seems composed of living darkness itself, with wings like some great bat from the hidden caverns of the earth or rather some nightmare from the grimmest of imaginings. Any description I would give, however, cannot in truth even begin to adequately express his appearance. It seemed somehow elusive and deceptive, both terrifying and seductive."

"The very same," agrees Rórlain. "We too beheld him, and after we confronted him at the heart of Onylándun, he cast forth this darkness that now enfolds all of us, and he disappeared."

"You said that you confronted him?" Tûric asks, incredulous. "How could you confront such a monster? None of my men could get within ten yards of him without being slain."

"That is another story entirely," Rórlain begins, "but we have not faced him in armed combat. The confrontation was of a different sort."

"You see," Brýma interjects, "the man with whom you speak is one about whom I am confident you have heard rumors. He is a light-bearer, and it was through the intervention of him and his companions that our own city was spared a fate similar to yours."

"A light-bearer?" Tûric says. "We have heard of such, though the rumors said that he was in Ristfánd."

"We were indeed in Ristfánd," Rórlain explains, "but after the assault on the city in those days, the beginning of this terrible time of destruction, we traveled to Onylándun."

"And where are your companions?"

"Two have accompanied me hence, though they bear not the light as do I. The other two, siblings born of the ancient and long-lived people of the Velási, have set out on a journey that is of more pressing importance even than our own. It is their light in which I have been given but a share, and it is to them that we look with hope for the future of our people."

"The Velási? So they still live..."

"Aye, in their secret forest home, though they are near to all of us in a way deeper than proximity of the flesh."

"How do you know this? Have you conversed with them?"

"I have indeed. Before our coming to Onylándun, we crossed beyond the Stïeka Mára and entered the Velási Forest, there spending time with this old and venerable people."

"What marvels are these of which you speak?" exclaims Tûric. "But much

explanation is needed before I understand their import. Please, explain these matters to me that I may grasp their meaning."

And so Rórlain does, with a few comments from Brýma and Sénfyr interjected at opportune moments. He traces his journey from his first meeting with Eldárien in the cavern of the eöten to the present day, dwelling particularly on anything that may be of assistance in illuminating the nature of the darkness that they now face and, even more importantly, the light that has touched them and which they seek to serve. When he has concluded, Tûric shakes his head slowly, not in disbelief but in amazement. It seems that the bizarre and frightful events of the previous days and weeks have made him more amenable to revelations of the unexpected, and in this case the revelations are both good and encouraging, counteracting what until now has been a long and ceaseless litany of ills.

"So you are saying that, in the very time when all of the hærási of our people are slain, a new king arises to take their place?" Tûric asks when he speaks at last.

"Were you to meet him in the flesh, you would speak differently," Brýma says. "For one who steps with so willing a heart into the role that has been set before him, he also has no wish for power or for rule. That one can tell on the very first meeting. Yet it is also true that he goes forth, not to take up his kingship and to accept his crown, but to confront the darkness in its very abode and its origin, in the hopes that through this his people may be set free."

"Aye, but when he returns..."

"It is more, I fear, a matter of *if* he returns," Rórlain interjects. "We must be prepared for any outcome."

"As you say...but if he returns, what then?" Tûric asks.

"His wish is only to see the people of Telmérion discover a new future, a future of freedom and of life. That is the inheritance that he gives to us, and I am committed to seeing it realized whether he returns from his journey or not," Rórlain says, the enthusiasm and ardor in his voice only subtly veiled.

"You know that Wýgrec Stûnclad will stand against him," remarks Tûric.

"We expected as much," Brýma says. "But if the messenger with whom we spoke is any indication, he is a man with whom we would have as little dealings as possible."

Running his hand through his hair, Tûric looks at each of them intently for a moment, his thoughts inscrutable, and then he says, "Many here would agree with you."

"What do you mean?" Sénfyr asks.

"Wýgrec is a zealot, and if we have learned anything about zealots, it is that they cause almost as much harm in their pursuit of a goal as they bring good

in attaining it."

"Where is Wýgrec now?" Rórlain inquires. "I expected to meet him upon our arrival."

Tûric shakes his head again, this time not in wonder but in frustration and disappointment. After this gesture, which seems an unconscious way of communicating what he does not feel either capable or allowed to voice in speech, he says, "He has taken a small company of men to attempt to infiltrate the city and free those who are imprisoned there."

"He...what?" breathes Rórlain. "With how many men does he do this?"

"With three hundred," Tûric replies. "He hopes to gain advantage through stealth rather than through arms. Such tactics have long worked in the battles fought and won during the years of the rebellion."

"But these creatures of darkness—the eötenga—they are far different than living men," Sénfyr says. "Surely you know this, having faced them yourself."

"I sit here before you now, do I not?" is Tûric's terse response.

"That you do," says Brýma.

"But even if his plan is folly I would not willingly allow him to walk unprotected unto his death and the death of those under his command," continues Rórlain. "How long ago did they depart for this covert operation?"

"Only this morning," answers Tûric. "It has not yet been six hours since they left, though that is precisely how long it takes to get from here to the city."

"So you can confirm that there are people who remain in the city, alive but taken captive?" Brýma inquires.

"Aye. That dark creature of whom you spoke made sure that we knew this fact," answers Tûric. But then, more uncertainly, he adds, "unless of course it is a deception."

"It well could be," sighs Sénfyr.

At this moment Rórlain groans in anger, burying his head in his hands, and he is not alone in this emotion, though he is the only one to express it so openly. When he raises his head again, he says, "So we have two choices, do we not? We can mount an assault with all haste, in the hopes of rescuing those whom—we must trust—are still held captive in the city, and also of aiding and abetting the small company under the leadership of Wýgrec Stûnclad. That is one option. The other option is to bide our time and to seek another way to gain entrance into the city, and, as is our deepest hope, to retake it."

"That is how I too see it," Tûric says. "But what good would come of waiting? Are there any other truly viable options before us but direct assault with the numbers that we now have?"

"We sent messengers asking for aid to other settlements," Brýma explains, "but there is little hope that any shall arrive within a time that would be

helpful to us. At the most hopeful estimate it could be a month before anyone arrives in response to our request, and it could in fact be many more, if any aid comes at all. We ourselves departed immediately upon receiving your call for aid, and so at best the messengers that we sent have only just now arrived at their destinations."

"But what of any other plans than direct assault?" Tûric asks.

"You know the city better than we do," Rórlain says. "Is there any other way we might hope to rescue the prisoners?"

"I can in truth think of nothing, and this has been heavy upon my mind since we first fled from the city nearly six weeks past. Minstead is built on opposite banks of the river, with many bridges connecting the two sides. Considering the fact that we only have guesses as to where any captives may be held, the only feasible course to free them is to liberate the entire city."

"And yet the city is now our enemy's main stronghold," concludes Rórlain grimly.

"Precisely..." Tûric sighs in agreement.

The men fall into silence now, each occupied with his own thoughts, inquiring in mind and heart after some solution to this problem or some path ahead that shows greater wisdom than they now see. "Tûric," Rórlain begins, breaking the silence, "can you tell me about the defenses of the city? Is there anywhere that would give us easier access into the inner precincts of the city than the walls surrounding it?"

"You have been here before?"

"Aye, I have. I joined up with the rebellion for a time some years past. But I have since found a better path upon which to set my course."

"You joined the rebellion indeed? That I did not know," Tûric says, his face expressing surprise, though it is evident that this new fact also deepens his trust in Rórlain, for he now knows that this stranger from the south has stood on both sides of the rebellion, and of Wýgrec Stûnclad, and has learned much in this journey. Reigning in his surprise, Tûric then answers the question, "The walls, as you know, surround the entirety of the city, north and south, with a main gate on either side, through which runs the Finístra road. There are lesser gates aplenty, as well. But the larger gates shall surely be heavily guarded, and they have both reinforced doors and portcullises of hardest steel. Considering that the enemy appeared within the city itself, the city walls and defenses are also still in pristine condition."

"But it is also true that the creatures that we fight do not have intelligence as we do," Sénfyr says. "They may well be stationed at the gates, but this does not necessarily mean that they shall defend the city with the same reason and discernment as would men."

"Let us hope that is true," Tûric remarks, "though I suspect that they shall

assail us immediately if we are even to draw close. Regardless, I agree with Rórlain that another way would be better. And," he adds, coming at last to a realization, "I think that there may indeed be one."

"What would that be?" asks Brýma, leaning forward anxiously.

"The river," says Tûric. "At the edge of the river alone is there access to the city that relies not upon walls and gates."

"Do we have boats to take us across, and in such great numbers?" inquires Sénfyr incredulously.

"No, we do not. But boats shall not be necessary. For, you see, along the river on both sides of the city are passageways little known or used. They are spillways built as a precaution against the occasion that the river may flood, to divert its water outside of the city."

"That would be a feasible means of access to the city," says Rórlain, "if their size is truly enough for a man. We could separate our troops into two companies and seek entrance into the city from both sides, east and west, simultaneously. I could lead one company and either Tûric or Sénfyr could lead the other."

"Shall you be able to channel the light to both companies alike, Rórlain?" Sénfyr asks.

"I do not believe it will be a problem," he answers. "In Onylándun I had to do so for the entire city alone, even for those whom I could not see. Indeed I was able to do so even at a distance, when I was in the citadel after the main conflict had concluded. My only concern is the strain that it shall place upon Eldárien and Elmáriyë..."

"Will it truly burden them even at this distance?" Brýma asks.

"The light that I bear does not belong to me. In truth it does not belong to them either. It belongs to no man. Rather, it holds us all alike, ungraspable and free. And yet it has marked them in a particular way and had been entrusted to them; it has been impressed upon their hearts and their flesh for our sake. What I find myself able to do is indebted entirely to what has been given to them."

"Well, we can only hope that they shall find a way to cope with this strain or even learn to share this gift with you in another manner," sighs Brýma. "For our plan has long been made and it is too late to retract it now."

"And we have no intention of doing so," Rórlain says. "I do not express doubt, but only compassion and concern. We shall all be stretched beyond our limits in the days that await us."

"So it is decided, then?" asks Tûric.

"I believe so. I am only loath to lead our people so soon into battle once again," Rórlain comments. "And yet for that purpose we have come."

"And if we choose to wait, we may lose not only Wýgrec's forces, but also

any element of surprise that your arrival has granted us," Tûric says.

"I agree. Let us then, without further ado, begin our preparations."

† † †

In only a few short hours the two companies set out toward the city of Minstead, walking together for a while before following divergent courses through the darkness, one to the west and one to the east. Those who are not armed for battle remain behind, a great number of persons both of those who have come from Onylándun and especially of the many survivors who have escaped from Minstead in its fall. A thousand fighters both trained and untrained stay to guard them. It is difficult for Tilliána and Cirien to watch Rórlain depart, and so many men with him, and not to accompany them into battle. But they acknowledge that they would be meager help in such a situation and would have little capacity to defend either themselves or others. Yet what of the care of the injured and the consolation of the dying? These thoughts fill their minds as they watch the two companies disappear into the darkness and, in the last moment, they gather up what little supplies they can —bandages, medicine, and weapons for themselves—and run after the troops. As they draw near to them, they lock hands for a moment and, nodding to one another, part ways: Cirien to the east, joining the group led by Tûric, and Tilliána to the west, joining that led by Rórlain and Sénfyr.

Thus they pass on through the dark, hoping that it provides secrecy for them as they draw near to Minstead, though this can be no more than an uncertain wish, since it is impossible to know whether the eötenga can see in the darkness as in light, or whether it is necessary for them to see at all for them to mark the location of their victims and to assail them. Or perhaps, after all, they can see only in darkness and it is light that blinds them. This uncertainty, along with countless others, threatens to stiffen their hearts in fear and hesitation; but at the same moment the thought of those trapped within the city stirs them on and enkindles courage within them. However, for many there also lingers a nagging sense of futility, the fear that the risk is not worth the outcome, and that they march with heroic resolve into a bloodbath at their own expense. For these persons it is only the nobility of spirit displayed by their leaders, and the presence of their comrades at their side, which keeps them moving forward from dark unto dark and death unto death, and, could they believe it, perhaps even unto light beyond the dark and life past the threat of death.

Night has long fallen when they come to the walls of the city, and the companies, under the direction of their commanders, navigate past them with a wide berth so as not to be seen. Trees dot the landscape roundabout, sometimes gathered into small copses or even larger groves, and they take advantage of these as best they can to conceal their passage. As they draw near

to the river, becoming aware of this fact through the steady sound of running water, Rórlain glances back over his company for a moment and sees the face of Tilliána in the midst of the soldiers. Surprise and fear wash over him, and his heart recoils from allowing her to walk into the danger that awaits, although he understands fully her reasons. He draws her attention and gestures for her to come closer. When she has done so, he says to her, "I see that you have decided to accompany us into battle, and this grieves me greatly."

"Cirien marches with the other company," she replies quietly yet firmly, clearly uncomfortable with his explicit expression of concern, which she takes also, even if only in a small measure, as a rebuke. "After all that we have seen, we could not remain idle in the camp while men faced suffering and death. Even if we are endangered in the process, we wish to be at hand to assist in whatever way we may."

"I do understand, Tilliána. I truly do," remarks Rórlain wistfully. "I wish that I could command you to return to camp, yet not only is it too late now but I trust you would not listen to me even if I did."

"That is true."

"Then I propose another solution."

"What is that?"

"Remain always near to me, that I may protect you."

Tilliána blushes at these words and turns her head away, taking advantage of the darkness to hide this from Rórlain. Ever since the departure of Eldárien she has felt an increasing sense of fragility and vulnerability, as if, with the loss of his presence, she has lost both a protector and a friend. But this is exactly the truth. In losing him she has indeed lost precisely this, for he has been all of these things for her, and more. And she mourns for this loss deeply with nearly every waking moment, feeling it more keenly than she could have expected; and the depth of this mourning reveals to her the depth of the love that she has received from Eldárien and also the depth of love that has begun to blossom within her heart in return. With this thought the grief, however, only intensifies, for just as love had begun to sprout and grow within her it was exposed again to the bitter chill of absence and loss, perhaps to wither and to die. This is also why Rórlain's words of care and protection now touch her so deeply and cause her cheeks to redden, for they meet her in the very place of her deep fragility, which has been gripping her heart and making it difficult to breathe even as she steps forth in courage to risk her life in order to be of assistance to her people.

"Tilliána, are you alright?" Rórlain asks when she does not respond to his previous words.

"Oh, yes...yes, I am," she replies, looking at him again. "I assure you that I shall remain near to you as much as I can, though we shall both have our tasks

to attend to."

"Aye, that is true," says Rórlain, "but let us do so together, if we can."

"Rórlain," she begins, her voice soft.

"What is it?"

"I am truly moved by the gesture, and I accept your offer gratefully. And yet if there are any wounded to whom I must attend—as assuredly there will be—know that I cannot remain at your side as you press forward in combat. And you too must command your men as best you can and with all of your attention."

Rórlain shakes his head sadly. "In that you are right. Forgive me. As you can clearly see, I am divided. There are so many things at once that I would wish to do, and yet I cannot possibly do them all."

"Worry not for me, then," says Tilliána. "My life is in the hands of my Maker, and if I am to fall this night, then so it shall be. Whether I live or die, there are those whom I love who await me."

"It is as you say," Rórlain agrees tenderly. "I pray that I may find the same serenity in the face of death and loss."

With this their conversation must come to an end, as the company arrives at the bank of the river, the stony earth crunching under their feet and the waters now loudly churning as they surge full and strong to the west. The company now moves in the opposite direction, eastward, toward the city whose walls and buildings loom before them as black shapes in the darkness. When they come to the base of the thick stone walls it is as Tûric has said; they find a narrow spillway about four feet in height and wide enough for three men to progress abreast. It is a poor means by which to get an army into a city, but knowing that there is no feasible option but this, they do not hesitate. Yet before entering the spillway, Sénfyr turns and speaks quietly to those nearest him, "Whatever awaits us within, let us stand strong in love for our people, the fallen and the living. It is for them we fight." Requesting that these words be passed on throughout the entire company, he then enters the passage with warriors to his right and to his left.

Chapter Eleven
Minstead

As they emerge at the other end of the spillway and step into the city itself, climbing up to a wide stone platform a couple feet above the water, which serves as a harbor for small boats, they find nothing but silence and stillness. The city itself, were it not for a pervading sense of restlessness and fear that fills the air, would seem as empty and lifeless as a sepulcher. Rórlain prays it is not as lifeless as that, but holds captives still living somewhere within its bowels, that they may be freed. He dare not hope that it is devoid of foes, however, but he rather looks about desperately to catch sight of the enemy before the enemy catches sight of them. The troops gradually move forward along the harbor, remaining as quiet as they can, while others filter into the city behind them. The more men they can manage to bring into the city before they are spotted the better, for thus they shall have a greater chance of successful combat.

But the silence is confusing and uncanny. Why have they not been seen? As his mind casts about for an answer, a realization comes to Rórlain. Never before have they seen the vrû'ádach lingering about as though living a life of their own, however base and mindless this life may be. Rather, they only appear when they are summoned by their lords. It may be likewise for the eötenga, though he also recalls the troll-like beast who had taken him hostage in the cavern in the Aldéra Highlands. That one lived as much as any other beast of the earth, though drawing its power and life not from the creative and sustaining activity of the Maker of all, but from the twisted fashioning of the Draíon, whose creation is but a mockery and whose sustenance is but the ceaseless pouring forth of evil and malintent in order to project and sustain shadows born of the darkness.

Turning to Sénfyr, Rórlain says, "It is possible that the creatures may not even be manifest at this moment. It could be that only their lord remains within the city and they shall be called forth at his bidding only when we are discovered."

"Is that good or ill?" Sénfyr asks.

"I do not see how that could be anything but ill, at least for ourselves. But it may bode well for the captive."

"But do you really believe that it is so? After all, why would they wish to take the city as their own fortress if they do not require a fortress to defend them?"

"To that question...I do not know the answer." Rórlain turns and looks at Tilliána, her figure dimly visible in the darkness, and, beyond her, at the great number of men and women who are now emerging from the spillway and filling the entire space of the platform. "But if this is the case then I fear that our plan is ill-conceived. If the city is left mostly empty, then less men is better than more, and hope lies not in numbers but in secrecy."

"What then do you propose?"

Rórlain shakes his head, trying to dismiss the sinking feeling of futility and of fear that grips him, that his mind may focus and begin again to think clearly. Laying hold of some answer, however frail it may be, he says, "We should halt where we are for now since we know not what lies before us. I would like us to continue with our plan, but also to have the possibility of a swift retreat if that proves to be called for. Send word to the people behind us of this change. Meanwhile I shall move forward with a few chosen men to scout ahead. Only with such information as that provides can we get a sense of what awaits us and thus of what we should do." Then, remembering that he is only second-in-command, Rórlain corrects himself abashedly, "I mean, if that is what you judge to be most prudent and wise."

Were the situation not so grave Sénfyr would smile at these last words, but instead there is only the subtlest hint of humor in his voice when he replies. "I do indeed think that is prudent and wise, Rórlain, as much as it can be in such a situation. But if we are attacked while you are absent, forget not that we need the light that you channel in order to slay these beasts with any degree of ease."

"Aye," says Rórlain, "I shall not forget. I must do so for the company led by Tûric as well, and my heart is in readiness for when it shall be asked of me. But let us pray it does not come to that."

"You shall feel it when the combat begins, even if you can see it not?" asks Tilliána.

"The floodgates are already opened, if it is appropriate to express it so," answers Rórlain simply. "When blade strikes flesh of darkness, I trust and believe that the light shall come."

A single glance shared between him and Tilliána communicates an agreement: though he wishes her near him so that he may protect her, she is safer now remaining where she is. Thus, and without further conversation, Rórlain picks twenty trained warriors and proceeds down the platform into the unknown that is concealed by the darkness. As the small group presses forward, the harbor platform gradually begins to widen as the wall to their right recedes, and then they find a wide set of stairs leading up toward the ground level of the city above them. As they come to cobbled streets with the figures of stone and half-timber houses looming over them, Rórlain calls to mind the

last time he was in Minstead so as to gain a sense of their location. The darkness makes this very difficult. But as they continue down the streets and the minutes pass, he begins to recognize certain landmarks, and he knows that they are progressing toward the center of the city, where lies the "great courtyard," the *marasýstra.* This is a wide pavilion paved with stone with a gurgling fountain at its center, where market days and fairs are often held, with traveling merchants from nearby settlements coming to barter their wares, and musicians and performers as well. But how different now is the city in this slumber of blackness and despair and loss!

No citizens greet them but those whose bodies still lay in the streets without reverence or burial, untouched for weeks and decaying now with the stench and the appearance of death. Upon seeing this, Rórlain's heart yearns for the deliverance of the city still more deeply, if only to remedy the sacrilege that the creatures of darkness have committed and to take from their grasp what should be a haven of light and peace, but which has been made instead a place of darkness and death. It takes a quarter of an hour for them to reach the great courtyard, and as it comes into view they know that they have found the end of their scouting expedition. Rórlain turns to one of his companions and says to him, "Hurry back to the rest of the company and bring them warning. Bring aid immediately, as fast as your feet can carry you."

The man, shaking with fear to be sent off alone, nods and turns to go, but then Rórlain realizes his mistake and says, "I am so sorry." Looking at two other men standing near, he adds the command, "I ask the two of you also to accompany him on the way. But pause for nothing, and if you encounter the enemy do not fight. Your task is to bring word to the rest of our warriors, and that is all."

When the three messengers have gone, Rórlain and the remaining seventeen warriors make their way cautiously forward along the edges of the courtyard. Before them are many things to behold, though the eyes and heart would wish not to see them. In the center of the courtyard, where the fountain stands, burns a massive bonfire, and though they cannot make out the nature of its fuel at first, they soon realize that it is being fed by fallen bodies and other refuse of the city, which the creatures have apparently gathered together and set to flame, covering the fountain in its entirety and burying it under the mass. It appears that the Lord of Death gloats in his victory and uses his minions as tools to express his own form of sadistic delight. Rórlain and his men also see, however, living warriors standing about the fire, their weapons drawn. They do not engage in combat but stand at the ready, though to all appearances they are defeated beyond hope. For around them in a wide circle stand numerous vrû'ádach, and among them also a few larger eötenga, closing them in and trapping them, making fighting unfeasible and

escape impossible.

"It is Wýgrec!" the man at Rórlain's side exclaims softly. "He still lives, and many of his men."

"Indeed so," responds Rórlain. "Let us hope our messengers return with the rest of our company soon. If they arrive in time, there is yet a chance that we may save them."

"But why do they not fight?"

"I do not know. Let us risk drawing a little nearer, that we may see." With this Rórlain guides the men further into the courtyard, where they crouch behind a large wooden cart that has been tipped onto its side and its contents spilled wildly across the ground. Peering around it, Rórlain gains a better view of the mass of man and beast that fills the center of the courtyard. He sees Wýgrec Stûnclad's face, fraught with terror and yet remaining defiant, looking directly into the face of a figure that at first he cannot recognize, for it is turned away from him. While he squints his eyes and cranes his neck to try and get a better view, the figure turns, as if pacing, and Rórlain immediately recognizes it. The figure is that of Maggot, who calls himself the Lord of Worms. He is speaking and addressing the encircled warriors, though Rórlain and his companions cannot hear his voice.

Let us be grateful that he loves to boast and to parade his own victory, Rórlain thinks silently. *It once served us in the liberation of Eldárien. May it now serve us also in the liberation of these men.* This wish, even as he voices it, becomes also a spontaneous prayer, a deep plea of the heart.

While they wait for the return of the messengers and the arrival of the rest of their company, however, they feel the pressing danger of every passing moment. There is no known reason for the creatures of darkness to allow these men to live unless it be for their own wicked games, and it is only a matter of time before they are either slain where they stand or taken captive. Indeed, as he tries to gauge the number of men still under Wýgrec's command, Rórlain sees that a good half of their number must already have been slain, and only half still stand at his side. But why this stalemate now?

As if in answer to his thoughts, there is a sudden rush of movement among the eötenga, and a roar of sound, and they leap forward to beset Wýgrec and his men once again. Seeing this, Rórlain says to those at his side, "We cannot overcome them all, but perhaps we can distract them long enough that our company may arrive and these men may be saved. Forward now, my friends!"

Rórlain leaps from behind the cart, knocking an arrow to his bow and letting it loose into the mass of eötenga. In the same moment the light streams forth, not only into the arrow that he has loosed, but into all the weapons wielded by the men at Wýgrec's side. This sudden outburst of brilliant light in contrast to the deep and abiding darkness has an overwhelming effect on

those caught in the fray, men and beasts alike, and for a moment they all pause, startled, and look around. Rórlain turns this to his advantage by rushing forward and calling out, "For Telmérion! Let the light be your bane, creatures of darkness!" He releases another arrow into the heart of a vrû'ádach at the edge of the group so that all may see how, on contact with the light, it dissolves into nothingness. A moment later his bow is again over his shoulder and his axe is drawn, his shield of myéllion in his other hand. He collides with the still confused creatures at full sprint, and those who have accompanied him are but a few steps behind.

Upon seeing this, Wýgrec's warriors take heart and begin to cut their way out from the prison of bodies in which they have been held captive. And only a minute or two later arrive the rest of the forces that have sneaked into the city with Rórlain, and they need little indication before they too join the fray, completely overwhelming by their sheer number the circle of eötenga who stand in the midst of the courtyard.

"Whom do I have to thank for this timely intervention?" Wýgrec asks, turning to face Rórlain when the battle has subsided.

"We have marched from Onylándun after receiving the messenger sent to to ask for our aid," answers Rórlain.

"I am Wýgrec Stûnclad, leader of the rebel forces, and you have my gratitude. I know not if we would have been able to fight our way out of that situation alone."

"I am glad that we arrived in time to be of assistance. Tûric told us that you had set off with the hopes of liberating those still held captive within the city, and we came as quickly as we could."

"It all worked out well in the end, then," remarks Wýgrec.

"What do you mean?"

"They told me that attempting assault and rescue with this few men would be suicide, but it all ended splendidly, did it not?"

Rórlain opens his mouth to speak, but he is not sure what to say that would not be either offensive or dishonest, and so he shuts it again and simply nods silently. Thankfully, it does not appear that Wýgrec was looking for a response, and he almost immediately speaks again, "But that bizarre light that came to our aid, tell me of it. Is this the power of which we have heard so many rumors these last months?"

"Aye, it is," says Rórlain.

"Then you must be the one about whom all the people speak?"

"Well, no, that is actually a friend dear to my heart."

"He is here as well, I assume?"

"He is not, as he has embarked on another task altogether, though his journey is for the sake of all of us who here fight. And he has entrusted the

light to me that I may accompany the armies in his stead."

"Very well," sighs Wýgrec. And then, beginning to turn away, he says, "I would hear more of that sometime. But I think we have other affairs to occupy us at present. Can I count on your assistance in rescuing the people of Minstead who have been made captives of the enemy?"

"If I were not to accompany you, I would counsel you to forsake the mission altogether," Rórlain says.

Wýgrec glances back over his shoulder at Rórlain and cocks an eyebrow curiously, remarking, "You think your presence is that important, do you?"

At this moment the company led by Tûric arrives, and their presence brings this uncomfortable conversation to an end.

"Ah, Tûric, you have come as well!" exclaims Wýgrec, extending his arms wide in welcome. "We are about to see what we can do to infiltrate the castle and free those held within."

"Where are the rest of your men, Wýgrec?" Tûric asks, casting his eyes over the courtyard and taking measure of those who stand there.

"What you see is all that remains," answers the leader of the rebellion. "We found ourselves caught in a trap that we were hard-pressed to escape. But that is behind us now, and heroic deeds await us. Our people lie within, and I would see them freed. Shall we go?"

"What plan have we crafted?" asks Tûric. "Shall we rely upon force alone?"

"Look upon our newfound numbers," responds Wýgrec. "This is more than I had expected to receive in response to our summons. I say that we use it to advantage."

"I suggest that you first tell us what we may hope to find, and where these prisoners are being held," Rórlain interjects. "I would hate to see lives lost through negligence or deliberate ignorance. It is better to enter with eyes clear and open than to rush in blindly and to witness later its ill effects."

"As you wish," says Wýgrec. "I know not if, now that we have slain those in the courtyard, any of these dark creatures remain in Minstead at all. But then again, even when my men and I arrived, they were not here. That is how we fell into a trap. They appeared all around us, stepping out from the very darkness itself, and before we even realized it we were surrounded."

"Precisely. And that is likely to happen again at all accounts, and even more likely if we simply charge into the castle relying while upon numbers alone," says Rórlain.

"I agree with sir Farâël," Tûric remarks. "And as for a wiser strategy, I suggest that we split our troops into companies and seek entrance into the castle from different vantage points. Such also was the manner of our entrance into the city. A large number should also remain without to prevent such traps as you have mentioned. Then if they appear around us as we enter the castle, we

can use this to our advantage and besiege them also from behind."

"It is the best strategy at our disposal," says Rórlain, "if any strategy is possible at all against creatures so mysterious and unpredictable."

"And I am unsure of precisely that," says Wýgrec. "But I hear your suggestions and see the reason of them. The fury of battle was upon me and I hardly stopped to think before seeking more beasts to slay."

"And that is unlike you, Wýgrec," Tûric says, "for you have led us for years in successful warfare against the Empire of Vælíria. Do not lose your touch now in the heat of battle against a newfound foe."

This is precisely what Wýgrec needs to regain his self-possession, and he shakes his head as if stirring from a long slumber and says, "From all that we know, and from what we witnessed when these creatures took over our dear city, they are vast in number, more than we possess here, though great indeed we may be. I suggest, therefore, that we have three offensive companies, while the rest remain in the vicinity of the castle, keeping vigil in preparedness. The first company shall seek to enter the main gate, even to confront the leader of our enemy himself, our nemesis and the commander of the dark forces. After all, this may be our best or only real chance to take back our city and to free those imprisoned within. The two tasks, in my opinion, shall indeed prove inseparable, and such was my original intent when I sneaked into the city like an assassin in the darkness."

"Then it is decided," says Tûric.

"Good," concludes Wýgrec. "I shall lead the main group, but what of the other two? They shall enter through the side chambers and aim to come to the prisoners undetected or, at least, to meet the enemy from multiple angles at once and thus to wear down their strength."

"I willingly take command of one of these companies," offers Tûric. "And the commander of the forces of Onylándun, the man Sénfyr, can lead the other. But if you lead the main company, Wýgrec, it is still imperative that Rórlain accompanies you. For he alone, of all men, shall find it possible to slay the enemy commander."

"You believe that?" Wýgrec asks doubtfully.

"I have no reason to doubt it and many reasons to believe it."

"Fine. He can come along."

† † †

The castle keep of Minstead lies across the river from the great courtyard, built on the crest of a sloping mound of earth dotted with houses and trees, porticoes and palaces. This mound, a hill either harnessed to this purpose or itself cultivated by man centuries ago, arises over the rest of the city, which is mostly flat, occupying the central part of the Místrin Plain that extends across a wide distance between the mountains rising around it in all directions.

Nestled as this plain is in the heart of the Finístra Range that reaches from the heart of the Téldrens in the east all the way to the ocean far in the northwest, where lies the city of Brûg'hil, it offers a splendid location for a city to be built. Not only are the natural resources abundant, considering the universal harshness of the land of Telmérion, but so too do the surrounding mountains offer a touching view, standing like sentinels clad in the light and sparkling almost throughout the year with a white crown of snow. Among all the settlements upon the continent, Minstead is one of the foremost producers of metalworks, for the surrounding hills and mountains conceal a multitude of ore-veins, and even in the river itself can be prospected, washed from high in the peaks to the east, silver, and, in rare moments, even myéllion. Such discoveries hint to the even greater riches to be found in the hidden heights of the Téldrens, where few now venture after the collapse of the kingdom of Séra Galáptes, which had its headship precisely in the heights of these mountains. Minstead is rivaled only by such cities as Brûg'hil and the ancient capital of the Galapteäni, the first still thriving, the very capital of Telmérion, though fallen into the clutches of the Imperial occupation and made the base of their operations in Telmérion, and the other long fallen into ruin, nothing but an empty and hollow artifact, ancient stones standing silently in the mountains at the very center of the continent, but a memory of what once was.

At present, of course, such things are neither seen nor come to mind, for darkness presses in around the company and their minds are wholly occupied with the task at hand. A few persons alone, Rórlain among them, raise their eyes longingly and gaze through the darkness, as if to see with the eyes of the heart the splendor and majesty of the mountains now concealed in the distance, and, even beyond them, the sun and the sky shining brilliantly above. Yet the thought comes to Rórlain unbidden: Is Minstead also to become a lasting ruin like the citadel of Séra Galáptes, witness to a glorious past that is no more, the bodies of countless men and women left to turn to dust in her streets, and her stones left to age and crack and yield to nature's growth as centuries of forgetfulness descend upon her? Rórlain resists this thought and urges himself beyond this fear, turning his attention wholly to the needs of the present moment. The vast company moves as quietly as they can through the silent streets of the city, though by their sheer numbers they have little hope of avoiding detection and are prepared at any moment to engage in conflict. And those who have had the most direct contact with the Draíon—Rórlain, Tilliána, Brýma, and Sénfyr—struggle to believe otherwise than that they have already been discovered; and they are thus troubled and confused that the city nonetheless remains so deathly silent and still. But what plan can one make to gain strategic advantage against an enemy who can appear and

disappear in the very shadows themselves, and who neither thinks nor feels, fears nor desires, but is moved solely by the command to destroy every living human heart?

As the company climbs the slope of the hill and comes near to the castle, Rórlain turns and addresses them at length, and his words are shared widely that all may hear. Wýgrec, standing behind him, does not fail to indicate his displeasure at this arrogation of authority, but Rórlain ignores him. He says to his people, "I fear that we walk into an ambush. But such we knew whenever in courage we decided to enter into the city. Our eyes, therefore, are open, and our hearts are ready. Well I know these wicked creatures, and what I know inclines me to believe that they remain hidden now only as a spider remains hidden until its prey is caught in the web, defenseless. I say this not to incite fear in your hearts, my brethren, but to prepare you. We shall walk forward with valor and with honor, with hope and with longing, with compassion and with trust. We shall walk forward for our people and our nation, for our families and our friends. Come what may, we shall seek to save those held captive by the darkness, and we shall seek to liberate the very city itself, that it may be again a city of humankind, flourishing upon the earth. As great as the darkness may be, fear not. Even if we are to die this day, let us stand strong in integrity and refuse to allow the darkness to crush the light within us.

"For a king goes forth to the very heart of the darkness, to the very bastion of our enemy. He goes there on our behalf, with a sister-queen at his side, there to decapitate the force that would rise up against us. Never more beautiful and loving persons have I met, and I am humbled to call them my friends. And it is toward them, the Lightborn, descendants of the ancient king Séra Galáptes and of the people of the Velási, blessed and beautiful, that we look. Yes, not to ourselves but to the light do we turn our gaze, that we may have hope for our victory and our deliverance. Our part is but to stand against the darkness and to resist the despair that its immensity would instill within us. So, my people and my countrymen, my brethren and my friends, let us walk forward beyond fear and beyond doubt, and face what we must with confidence and with faith."

Shout they would in response to these rousing words, stirring up as they do their ardor before the terrors that close in all about them, but instead the members of the company, one and all, place their right hands upon their breasts, bowing their heads in an ancient gesture of reverence and of homage, of gratitude and of entrustment. And then they all turn toward the castle and begin to move forward without delay. Coming to the base of the walls, the company then splits into four parts, one seeking favorable position outside the castle where they can watch and defend, two splitting off to the sides and seeking the entrances that lead into the keep from opposite ends, and the last

braving the main entrance, vaulting doors of iron and wood at the end of a tree-lined avenue now lying in disarray.

When the main company comes to the entrance, they pass within easily, for the doors stand splintered and broken, torn partially from their hinges and hanging loosely, leaving a wide berth for passage. And inside the castle's corridors an eerie silence reigns. Whatever little light from the sky had pierced through the enshrouding darkness outside now also disappears, and they find themselves stepping into complete blackness. Prepared for this possibility, however, they light torches and hold them aloft to guide their way. As they step forward, they find themselves first in a wide atrium with a floor of polished stone, although fallen bodies and other debris litter it and clutter its surface. Beyond this, to the right, left, and center, extend corridors with vaulted arches and domed roofs, though there is little doubt in which direction to proceed. Yet even as the company moves across the floor and toward the passage at the far end of the room, their suspicion of ambush is confirmed, as the creatures of darkness begin to emerge from the deep shadows that still linger at the edges of the room and in the hallways beyond. Their figures, horrific to behold, begin to close around the men, eyes hollow and lifeless and yet gazing with a gaze of death, and flesh corrupt and decayed as if corroded by a deadly poison and yet still moving. Many vrû'ádach there are, but also greater eötenga as well, whose forms tower over the men, instilling terror into their hearts.

"We fight our way through!" Wýgrec calls out. "Stand firm and show these beasts the true nature of their foe!"

And thus the flickering red hue of the torchlight is soon interspersed with bursts of brilliant and pure blue-white, as the light channeled through Rórlain's poverty and openness of heart flashes forth upon the weapons of all. Even Tilliána, in their midst, draws a short sword and lashes out against a vrû'ádach that approaches her location, cutting deep into the arms that reach out to her and dissolving the creature unto nothingness. She slays two more in like manner before she sheathes her blade and occupies herself with the reason that she has come: caring for the wounded by drawing them away from the periphery of the company, where the assault is fiercest, and seeking to save their lives by tending to what ailment they have received. Yet because of the sheer violence and destructive force of the eötenga, for most it is too late, and death is swift in coming.

Regardless of how long they fight and how many of these creatures they slay, their foe continues assailing them with numbers as though endless. For when one eöten is struck down, another appears in its place. Evaluating this situation, Wýgrec calls to Rórlain, "If what they say about this light is true, then let us go now and confront the enemy commander directly. That may

be our only hope of stopping this assault."

"I know not the way," responds Rórlain over the fray.

"I shall show you. Follow me."

Chapter Twelve
Setting Captives Free

Tûric's company passes along the eastern edge of the castle as he leads them, with his expert knowledge of the city, to a low side garden. It is reached through descending five tall steps to a richly tiled area overshadowed by lattices from which, during the warm months, grow richly interlacing vines, though they are now dry and brown. At the far end of this garden is a narrow doorway through which, once again, they find a set of stairs, this time numerous and cramped, leading steeply down into the darkness below the castle.

With a glance over his shoulder to his men, Tûric steps down the first stair. But before he can take another step a cry sounds behind him. Turning back, he beholds the apparition of numerous eötenga from the darkness surrounding his company, and they fast draw near to engage them in combat.

"Fight!" he cries. "Slay these beasts now and bring peace to our city!" And at the very same moment that the last word is spoken, the blue light shines forth upon the weapons of the combined warriors of Minstead and Onylándun, and the battle begins in earnest. As Tûric makes his way from what has now become the rear of his forces to their vanguard, he is intercepted by an unknown man, elderly, with a long white beard cascading to the middle of his breast, wrinkles lining his gentle and surprisingly youthful face like cataracts upon the earth or a thousand little streamlets carved of sorrow and of laughter.

"While you fight here, commander, allow me to forge ahead to the prisoners. I would not wish them to wait any longer, for fear of what may become of them."

"And who are you?" Tûric asks, not intending the question to sound disrespectful, though the haste in his voice makes it so.

"I am Cirien Lorjiës, grandmaster of the order of Nirániel," the man replies kindly, "and a friend and companion of Rórlain."

"Very well then. If that is your wish, go on your way, and may the goddess go with you. I shall send some soldiers with you, along with a handful of my best warriors, for we know not what you shall encounter ahead of you."

"Thank you, commander."

And with that they part, Tûric to the edge of his company where they are engaged in vicious combat with the eötenga who have assailed them from behind, and Cirien to the doorway, through which he steps without delay, fifty men accompanying him, uncertain whether so few shall be enough to face whatever lies before them. But soon he knows that the number was well-chosen, as the stairway is narrow and cramped, and fifty men itself fills up its space for many yards, since only two may walk abreast. Cirien, despite his inability to fight with any skill, stands at their head, a warrior of great experience at his side. He is a man named Hïérin, who has taken upon himself wordlessly the task of defending their newfound leader, regardless of what hesitations he may have regarding his commander's quick-made decision. And in fact he has few hesitations, for he too believes that they should aim to reach the prisoners as quickly as possible, and though he doubts the old man's adeptness and fittingness for such a task, he looks upon him with admiration for his generosity and his courage.

Such courage is proved after the small company has progressed only a hundred yards down the long stairway, as they both hear and see all at once the creatures of darkness who appear before them, hindering their progress. Cirien, on seeing this, reaches into his robes and draws out a long knife and immediately thrusts it at the foremost of the eötenga, a vrû'ádach who at that very moment leers before them, a guttural voice vibrating from its throat in meaningless sounds as if in pain or grief or anger or despair. The blade strikes true and the light flashes forth. Before the old man is overwhelmed by the sheer number of the beasts who surge forward in the wake of the fallen vrû'ádach, Hïérin steps ahead and becomes for him a shield, raising the two long blades that he wields in both hands and engaging the enemy head-on. Cirien for his part steps back and allows other warriors too to move forward.

"We do not want to get caught in the corridor," he says. "How much farther is it until we reach the bottom?"

"Not another thirty yards, I think," Hïérin replies over his shoulder.

"Can we breach such a distance?"

"Your thought and intent are the same as mine, little commander." A fondness stirs in Hïérin's heart toward this mysterious man who has so rashly intruded upon a space that is not his own, and his intrusion is greatly appreciated. For his zeal and his guidance stir the men all around him as if a spark of flame placed among kindling. With cries of ardor they press forward, and the eötenga fall before them or recoil in confusion at the intensity of their foe. In but a matter of minutes the company breaks through into open space, the walls tight to their right and their left giving way to empty air. Looking around in the light of the torches and the holy light blending together in a ceaseless interplay of red and blue, Cirien sees that they have come straight

into the prison.

Here Hïérin begins issuing commands to the small group of men, forming them in a semicircular formation, with shield-bearers at the front, their long and sharp blades extending past their shields like teeth from the open mouth of a predator beast. Behind them stand others with weapons of various sorts at the ready; and yet again behind these stand soldiers whose melee weapons are for a moment sheathed, and they instead draw bows to loose arrows into the enemy from afar. In this position, and with the aid of the many arrows that fly forth over their heads and afflict their foe, the company presses forward, looking almost like a wave at sea cresting as it surges and then crashes down upon the beach, spreading sand before it.

Yet even as they gain respite from the conflict and the many eötenga dwindle in number, they realize that the prison is devoid of prisoners. The cells are empty. "Is there yet nowhere else that we might look?" Cirien asks.

"Aye, there is a yet deeper prison," replies Hïérin without hesitation. "Or rather there is something that may function as such, wherein great numbers may be held. We shall go there now."

Taking yet another stairway, one that spirals downward in such cramped quarters that they must proceed single-file, they progress yet further into the bowels beneath the castle.

"What lies in a place such as this?" Cirien asks as they walk, seeing that in this narrow space the enemy does not assail them.

"It is an ancient chamber older than the castle itself, though the nature of its original purpose I do not know. We use it not at all, for no light makes it into such a place. But it would be the perfect location to imprison those whom one wishes to conceal."

They step forth from the narrow stair and a wide chamber opens before them, its low ceiling illumined by the flickering torchlight though its walls are too far removed to receive even a hint of their luminosity. The chamber is bare, with neither furniture nor decoration, an empty space of featureless floor, walls, and ceiling. But it is also for the moment devoid of eötenga, a surprising but fortunate fact.

And yet even as the company moves deeper into the room, figures are revealed before them, their faces and their forms almost grotesque in the light of the torches borne by the rescue party. The company halts in surprise and uncertainty, startled by what they encounter, for it is the opposite of what they would have expected. For before them stands a small group of men, with one who is obviously their leader at the forefront. They are twenty in number, and they do not appear either relieved or startled at the company's arrival. The looks on their faces, rather, are grim and determined.

"Hail," Cirien calls out, "we come seeking those who have been impris-

oned here." And though by their appearance he doubts it, he also asks, "Are you those whom we seek? Or do you know their location?"

"Aye, we know their location," replies the leader, and his voice is not kind. "But what business do you have with our prisoners?"

"Your prisoners?"

"Such is the task entrusted to us: we are to guard the prisoners even with our lives, though I hope you do not press the issue and bring us to such an impasse. Turn back now so no human blood need be spilled."

"Surely you do not wish to fight," Hïérin says. "We outnumber you two to one. Let us take back our own people, for, as you and I alike, they are men who have no place in this darkness."

"We are not outnumbered," retorts the leader. "A simple gesture and the creatures shall be at our side. But they are restless beings, and they make rational discourse quite difficult. Do not make it come to that. Go now to whence you came, and come not hither again. Count your losses and lick your wounds, and perhaps your lives and the lives of your people shall be spared."

"What reason have you to speak with such arrogance and self-assurance?" asks Cirien.

"What reason? I fight for the greatest power that there is, do I not?" asks the man, though Cirien and Hïérin both detect a strain in his voice.

And even if they had not detected this strain, it would soon have been revealed, for one of the men standing at his side interjects and says, "But Irilóf, surely you do not truly wish to align any longer with these fell creatures of the dark?"

"Irilóf?" Cirien asks, the realization coming upon him like water trickling swiftly down crevices of stone into an underground pool and filling it up with understanding. "You are Irilóf Vándirel, the deputy lawbringer of the Empire of Vælíria."

"Aye, that I am. Or rather that I was," answers Irilóf, though the tone of his voice is unreadable. "The Empire I once served exists no longer, at least not as I once knew it."

"But you are one of the Telméri, are you not?" Hïérin asks.

"I am," replies Irilóf, "but long have I served as an officer in the service of his majesty the Emperor. And people such as my men and I were given only two choices."

"Death or servitude," Cirien concludes for him, having intuited the situation. "Your 'ally' turned upon you and proved to be no ally at all, but an enemy even worse than the one you had chosen for yourself. And now you are forced to fight the people of Telmérion, not in service to an Empire who rewards you, but in bondage to beings of such wickedness and hate that all you can hope for from them is enough time spared of death that you may make

your escape."

At these words the facade projected by Irilóf at last falters, and when he speaks in response his voice quivers, "Y-you are very perceptive, old man. You have named the situation exactly."

"Then let us aid you in gaining your freedom," Cirien says without hesitation. "Many more warriors fight above us, and there is yet hope of victory for our people against these beasts. Renounce your pledge to these terrible creatures and accept a hope of freedom, if only you atone for the crimes you have committed against your own people."

"Hope?" Irilóf asks, and he almost spits out the word, making evident the degree of his despair. "There is no hope. None living can stand up against these monsters."

"If you believe that, then I pity you greatly indeed," Hïérin says, "though I would judge you more harshly than does our pious friend."

Irilóf opens his mouth to speak, but another man behind him steps forward and says, "I will accept your proposal, even if my leader shall not."

Immediately many others do the same, saying "As would I," "Please accept me as well," and other such phrases. The eagerness in their voices is touching, and their fear and desperation are evident.

"Even if you have lost hope of new life in repentance, Irilóf Vándirel," Cirien says, "I would offer it to you nonetheless, and to all at your side. If you despair of receiving it, at least do not prevent your companions from doing so."

"I do not..." Irilóf begins, but even as he speaks his voice falters. "I do not know what to expect any more but death."

"And that is probably what you deserve, if justice manifested itself not also as mercy," says Cirien. "For a just and merciful king has come, and the order that he inaugurates shall be as he is. This I believe. And thus even if you deserve death, I believe that something far different shall you receive."

In response to these words a flicker of light, a spark weak yet true, is enkindled in Irilóf's eyes, long buried and hidden almost to extinction but alive nonetheless, awaiting the revivifying breath of grace. He opens his mouth as if to speak but finds himself at a loss for words. Instead, he simply closes his eyes and bows his head in surrender. Then to Irilóf's great surprise, Cirien steps forward and places two kindly hands upon his shoulders. Raising his eyes to look into the old man's countenance, he sees gentleness beyond telling and beyond hope. And the grandmaster says to him, "Your act this day is received, and I shall stand at your side in whatever judgment awaits you, an advocate to plead that justice be expressed with clemency—though if the king I know judges you, I am confident such pleading shall not be necessary."

"You speak of a king, and yet you speak of him with uncertainty," says

Irilóf. "Why is this?"

"I am not uncertain of his kingship," explains Cirien, "only of his return from the place to which he goes. For he walks unto danger and death in the desire to unseal light for his people—and for you, too, Irilóf." When the latter does not immediately reply, Cirien continues, "And I believe that you know him already. Perhaps it would be wise to return the token that you once took from him, and which you have so proudly—if without understanding—worn around your neck. For he alone can wear it truly, being the rightful heir of the one who wore it so many centuries past."

Now it is upon Irilóf's face and within his heart that realization dawns, and he simply bows his head again, a mysterious and unexpected transformation coming over him—as if the arrogance and apathy, the violence and audacity, that have so long bound him are broken at their root by this undeserved mercy and this unexpected realization. Silently he brings his hands to his neck and slips the amulet of Séra Galáptes over his head, placing it then in the open palm of Cirien. And with the releasing of the amulet, it is as if a great weight falls from his shoulders, and a path through the darkness of his own heart, as narrow and arduous as it may be, becomes visible before him.

"Well then," Hïérin now interjects, "shall you do one more thing as well? We are hard-pressed for time and I would see our people liberated. Show us to the captives, and we shall lead them, as well as yourselves, out to freedom. As difficult as it is for me to say, you shall have our protection until you are safe from these beasts once again."

Looking at his liberators, Irilóf then reaches deep within himself and gives voice to words that he has not said in many years, "Thank you."

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At the far end of the chamber lies a wide door, strongly fortified, and beyond this a vast company of men, women, and children, captives of the creatures of darkness. They blink with confusion and fear in the torchlight that shines upon them when the door is opened and their liberators step into the room. But soon the fear is changed to exultation as they realize what is happening and who it is that stands before them.

"Oh, praise be..." exclaims one woman, rising to her feet and stumbling forward.

A man also cries out, "We had all but lost hope of ever leaving this place."

"The path out is not yet clear, my friends, and yet it consoles my heart to see that you still live," Hïérin says, looking with great emotion upon his people.

"Have your captors harmed you?" Cirien inquires, taking the hands of the woman who has come forward, though his question is directed to all.

The woman, overcome with feeling, is unable to respond, but another behind her speaks and says, "They have not harmed our flesh, but the horror has been enough, I think, to break any man."

"He has spoken to you, then?"

"He...?" the woman asks, though she knows the answer to her own question and so answers it, "Yes, there is only one. He is terror itself, and he came among us promising us tortures beyond imagining. But please, do not ask us to speak of such things."

"Yes, yes," says a woman to her right. "Lead us out of here immediately. I do not want to be in this cage any longer."

Hearing this, Cirien turns inquiringly to Hïérin and asks, "What do you think we should do? It shall be difficult to protect all of them along the way, for they are much greater in number than we. But it is also not necessarily any safer here."

"Let us lead them out as they have requested," replies Hïérin with only a slight moment's hesitation. "If we can rejoin with our company then the defense shall be much easier. Unless the battle has gone ill, surely more have come into the keep in our wake."

"Indeed, that is wise," agrees Cirien.

As they turn to go, suddenly a handful of men step forward from the group of captives, and one of them speaks on their behalf, "Please, we would aid you in the defense. Our weapons were taken from us, but we are warriors and would willingly fight."

"Malrûn...is that you?" Hïérin asks, turning to look at the man who speaks. His long blonde hair is matted with blood, and a scar runs jagged across his face from brow to mouth, twisting between his eyes and across a badly broken nose. It is recent, though not so recent that it has not closed and begun to heal.

"Surely I do not look so different that you cannot recognize me?" Malrûn asks.

"Aye, you are right. You do not," replies Hïérin. "I spoke more out of relief than confusion. It is only that I did not expect to see you. I thought you fell in the battle."

"I nearly did, but my friends here risked their lives to drag me to safety at the last moment," says Malrûn, gesturing to the men who stand beside him. "I am sorry that they were taken into captivity because of it. But that, too, is being remedied."

"And I am glad of both, your saving then and your liberation now," Hïérin concludes. "And weapons you shall have, as much as we can spare them."

When extra swords, daggers, and axes have been distributed to the men—and to others who come forward, untrained but willing and desirous to aid

in their own deliverance—they set off toward the spiral stair and the prisons above and, beyond that, freedom.

But before they have crossed through the upper prison to the stairway that leads outside, the shadows at the edge of torchlight begin to crawl with movement, and eötenga step forth, their bodies in frenzied movement as they attack those at the periphery of the company. The group of liberators and liberated, however, stirred by the proximity of freedom, fight back with equal ardor, refusing with all their might to be felled when the taste of hope again lies frail but real upon their tongues.

Yet few minutes pass and little progress is made by either side before something else happens that changes the nature of the conflict profoundly. It begins as a low rumble, almost like some massive beast growling as it awakens from slumber deep beneath the castle, and then progresses almost to a roar. The earth begins to shake violently, knocking many from their feet and casting them to the ground. Cracks appear immediately in the floor and the ceiling, as the tremors split stone and threaten to collapse the edifice in which they stand.

"Flee now!" cries Hïérin. "Flee up the steps and into open air before the entire castle comes down upon us!"

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Rórlain and Wýgrec cut their way forward through the creatures of darkness, their company following close behind them, as they attempt to clear a passage into the chambers that lie beyond—the chambers wherein, in their most reasonable estimation, would reside the one whom they seek: the Lord of Death. Lusting for power and gloating in every display of such power, where else would a Draía choose to take up residence than in the throne room where the ruler of the supplanted people once had his seat? Rórlain has no time to pay any heed to the uncomfortable fact that he joins with Wýgrec Stûnclad, the leader of the rebellion and the man who desires for himself the title of high king, in taking back his throne. And even if there were time and space for such thoughts, the mere fact of this means little to him. For even if Wýgrec had a thousand thrones, he is not the true and rightful king of Telmérion. Eldárien is, and shall always remain, the king in Rórlain's heart.

At last they attain entrance to the next chamber, and with all of their strength they push open the heavy doors, which groan as they swing inward, grinding on their hinges as they meet opposition from creatures in the other room who swell against them. But with every inch gained, swords are thrust through the breach and arrows are loosed, striking what little flesh can be seen of the creatures of darkness, and, thanks to the power of the light, in large part dissolving it. And yet the toll taken upon Rórlain by the channeling of

light in such great measure is grave, and he feels his strength waning even as they break through into the chamber beyond. Whatever is happening at this moment to Eldárien and Elmáriyë, it seems that they are unable to lend him strength in the outpouring of the light. Or perhaps the great distance that separates them has some effect.

Heedless of this, Rórlain pushes on, summoning reserves of vigor from deep within himself and also taking advantage of the rush of battle to surmount his weakness. But this is not enough. Of course it is not enough. Neither within himself nor in the tenor of battle around him can he find the strength to channel the light, to let his weakness and frailty be amenable to the outpouring of the radiance that is the protection of man and the scourge of the darkness. And so instead he reaches out with his spirit in prayer, in a plea for help from the One who is the author of all light and the very Light itself, uncreated, undimmed, and eternal.

The answer is both encouraging and discouraging at the same time—a summons for faith in the face of fear, anguish, and loss—for rushing in upon his consciousness is a deep awareness of the presence of the two Lightborn. At first he is consoled by this, by a feeling of his dear friends, and of the bonds that always join them, invisible and intangible, becoming in some way for a moment felt and experienced. But in this feeling he soon becomes aware also of their exhaustion and their sorrow, and of a force of incredible evil that at this moment oppresses them even unto breaking. His heart reaches out to them with compassion, but what he feels instead is not his own encouragement and care flowing into them, but rather surging forth from them the light that they bear, the light entrusted to them. It passes into himself as if a gift speaking within him: "The light lives within you now. We have entrusted it to you. Fear not, and yield it in our stead."

And as quickly as the experience has come, it is gone, a mere flash in the darkness. It leaves in its place a feeling both of fullness and of emptiness: a fullness as a newfound energy awakens within Rórlain's heart and flesh, and he finds strength to channel the light anew, and an emptiness because he feels a sense of absence that he has never felt before, though he cannot discern its exact contours. It is as though his heart is reaching out, with sinews stretched and dilated, to a beloved presence which he cannot feel or see, but which remains just beyond his reach. It is like a friend who stands behind a curtain or a lover who is just beyond a door; but if he is to pull the curtain or to open the door, the beloved would flee away, unable to be seen and grasped in such a way. But accepting the veiling, listening to the presence beyond the door, he knows the proximity, the closeness, of both vision and of love flowing in upon him; and in this he awaits the moment when the veil itself shall be drawn by the other, and the door opened, leading to vision and encounter.

All of this takes but an instant, as long as the final push that opens completely the door that the company seeks to breach in order to access into the chamber beyond. And then it is done, having achieved its effect even though the conscious resonance in Rórlain's mind is but a gentle stirring of ripples on water by a whispery breeze, or a leaf falling upon one's face as one lies upon one's back, eyes closed, beneath a great tree, or the interplay of sun and shade as its dappled leaves create a landscape of dancing sunlight and cool shadow upon one's recumbent figure.

The company fights its way into the chamber, though Wýgrec urges them insistently forward to the one beyond, to the throne room itself. Indeed, the haste with which he seeks to lead his men toward the commander of the enemy is both excessive and imprudent, as it leaves many of his fighters exposed further back in the company, opening breaches in the formation by which a man is supposed to be protected from surprise and flanking by his companions.

"Slow your progress, Wýgrec!" Rórlain calls, allowing the warrior to step ahead of him, gripped as he is by the frenzy of battle. "We shall attain the enemy when we attain him. But we cannot stretch the company too thin, or lives shall be lost."

Glancing back for a moment, Wýgrec growls angrily, "And more lives shall be lost by our delay, if not in our company, then in the others. The only answer is to rush forward and slay our foe with the greatest possible haste."

"No, Wýgrec, no," retorts Rórlain, though he that knows his words now fall on deaf ears.

Wýgrec at last comes, with incredible strength hewing down the last remaining eöten who stand before him, to the doorway leading to the throne room. And this places Rórlain in a great dilemma, dragging him in two directions at once: to rush forward with the rebel leader into the chamber wherein awaits the Lord of Death, or to remain behind until the rest of the company has secured the antechamber.

"Wait, Wýgrec!" he calls, but he is too late. The man pushes firmly on the double doors and they swing freely open. As Wýgrec steps through, now seemingly oblivious of his surroundings and with his eyes fixed firmly ahead, Rórlain catches a glimpse of massive black wings extended across the length of the chamber beyond. Crying out in frustration, Rórlain turns back for a moment to the men of their company, and calls to them, "Do not rush ahead. Keep formation and find strength in the men to your right and to your left. Fight hard and fight strong, but remember that protecting your lives and the lives of your companions is worth more than the slaying of these creatures."

And immediately after these words are spoken, he sprints forward and follows Wýgrec into the throne room. As he steps in, the doors swing closed

behind him by some unseen force, though one remains ajar by but a few inches, caught by the person who, unknown to Rórlain, accompanies him from behind.

Even as Rórlain seeks to cross the distance to the Lord of Death, who stands silent at the far end of the room, he is overwhelmed by the sense of evil, of sheer malice, that emanates from him. Wýgrec too seems to feel it, though for him it appears to be nothing but the opposition of one will against another: the will of his nemesis against his own, issuing a challenge to prove who is the greater.

Sensing this, Rórlain calls out, "No, Wýgrec, let us face him together!"

But it is too late. As Wýgrec draws near to the Lord of Death, the latter extends one of his tremendous arms and swings as if swatting away a fly. Wýgrec raises his sword to parry but even as it makes contact it shatters in his hands, and he is sent sprawling through the air until his body crashes into the far wall and slumps broken to the earth.

And thus falls the great Wýgrec Stûnclad, Rórlain thinks in sorrow. *May he find mercy hence, and healing light abundant.*

There is no time for more than this, as the malicious gaze of the Lord of Death falls upon Rórlain, standing alone now in the chamber, axe and shield in hand. And even as they look upon one another, an immensity of evil gazing with suffocating and crushing force upon a frail and flickering spark of light, which nonetheless seeks to stand against it, the Draía laughs.

"When shall you weak mortals learn that no valor or strength can stand against the power of the darkness?" he says, and the terror of his presence invades Rórlain's mind even as he tries to take a tentative step forward, though his feet remain immobile.

"I have long learned that lesson, you monster," Rórlain replies in a voice tenuous with anguish and with fear, and also trembling with anger. "And you should perhaps not be surprised that it was, in part, you and your kind that taught this to me. When the darkness is so great, there comes a point when a man learns that he cannot save himself, cannot gain victory through the strength of his own arm. But he stands nonetheless. And even if you break his body and devour his flesh, he knows—with a seeing that you cannot understand—that you can never break his life."

Letting out a roar that ripples through the chamber, the Lord of Death's eyes flash like fire from a blazing inferno, and he replies, "I shall break you, petty one. I shall break you completely, and you shall know the full extent of my power. Then you shall bow down in worship, acknowledging that I alone am deserving. You shall serve me in death!"

In a flash of movement the Lord of Death lunges forward even as Rórlain, finding his legs free again, steps ahead, raising his shield to meet in desperate

combat a creature far beyond his capacity to slay. And were it not for what happens next, Rórlain would receive the full brunt of the Draía's attack and be broken; but in this moment there is a flash of movement and a sword flies through the air from the open doorway behind him, flashing with blue light, and lodges itself deep into the swirling darkness of the Lord of Death's form. For a few instants the two conflict with one another, the darkness swirling about the light like a suffocating mist seeking to choke out the fire of a torch, and the light sending forth burning rays to dispel the dark and purge it like fog before the rising sun.

Crying out in fury, the Lord of Death grasps the sword lodged within him and wrenches it free, sending it clattering to the ground. Then, raging with hate and with disgust at tasting the vincibility of his bodily form, he attacks Rórlain again, swiping from below with vicious claws. The shield is loosed from Rórlain's hands in his effort to block the attack and then, before he is able to react, the Draía's other hand finds its mark: black claws pierce deep into Rórlain's flesh even as the force of the blow sends him flying helpless through the air until he, too, collapses to the ground where wall and floor meet.

At this moment another voice sounds through the chamber, the voice of Tilliána, crying out in pain and lament as Rórlain is felled. She rushes to him and crouches over him, shielding his body with her own.

The Lord of Death turns to her and to the man she vainly seeks to protect, but even as he takes a step toward them, there is a great rumbling groan throughout the chamber, and the entire castle begins to tremble and to shake in a massive quaking of the earth. Even as he steps forward for the kill, heedless of the sound and the trembling, the ceiling above him buckles and gives way, and comes crashing down.

Chapter Thirteen
Mærdenási

Elmáriyë wakes to Eldárien's voice and to the touch of his hand upon her cheek. In a whisper he says, "Wake up, but remain still and quiet." As the grogginess of sleep fades away, she sits and tries to look at her brother in the darkness, but she can see nothing. The fire has burned itself to nothing but subtly glowing embers. The cold is dangerously bitter, though the wind has stopped and the land about them is cloaked in quiet.

"What is it, Eldárien?" she asks quietly.

"I fear that there are creatures nearby...predators," he explains.

They both listen in the nocturnal silence for any sounds that would reveal the existence and identity of such predators, but for a couple minutes they hear nothing. The horses about them grow restless and whinny uncomfortably, pulling upon their harnesses, which makes the listening more difficult. But just as Elmáriyë opens her mouth to speak again, Eldárien raises his hand —a vague movement hinted at her side—and says, "There! Listen!" And as soon as his voice has fallen silent she hears it: the sound of footsteps on the snow, followed shortly by the low rumble of an animal's growl.

"A wolf?" she asks.

"I fear so, though they travel in packs, so surely more than one."

"Would the fire scare them off?"

"There is no time," he answers simply, and then she hears him slowly and quietly withdraw his sword from its sheath. A moment later she feels, more than sees, his figure rise up into a standing position beside her. For her part, she reaches blindly through the darkness for her pack, and, untying the strap closing it, reaches in and withdraws the gift-lantern, holding it in her left hand. With her right hand she finds her dagger and draws it, wielding it in readiness.

An instant more and the horses spook, rearing up and neighing wildly, trying to break free from their bonds and to fight or to flee. Elmáriyë hears the sound of metal against leather and knows that Eldárien is cutting their reigns and allowing them freedom of movement to do precisely this. Then the first wolf is upon them, a flash of movement in the blackness and a wild and ravening growl; but in response Eldárien allows a flash of light to channel through the lightbringer, and for a few moments the scene is illumined, the shadows of the trees cast far upon the snow like overgrown and elongated shapes, and, at the horizon of darkness and light, the glint of many eyes

prowling in a circle about the camp, and gradually drawing nearer. Catching the wolf in mid-leap, Eldárien thrusts his sword up through its torso; it cries out before slumping to the earth in death. Elmáriyë grimaces at the sickening sound of the blade being withdrawn from its body.

After this Eldárien calls forth the light even brighter, and he allows it to remain, filling the area a good thirty yards around them with radiance. They see numerous wolves—more than they would have expected—snarling and snapping their jaws viciously at the death of a member of their pack.

"I understand not why they do not flee," says Eldárien, his voice tense. "The light should scare them away, if not the slaying of one of their kind. I fear that these poor creatures may be polluted by the dark."

There is no time for further words, as all at once the beasts set upon the travelers with merciless intensity. The horses rear up to fight, neighing and stomping their hooves, and Eldárien slashes adeptly again the wolves that come against them. Elmáriyë, trying to rise up to her feet, is yet thrust down by a wolf that lands directly upon her, its front paws upon her shoulders. The lantern slips from her grasp and her other arm splays out wildly as she instinctively tries to soften her fall; but the dagger remains in her hand. With bared teeth and bloodshot eyes directly above her as the animal closes in for the kill, she swings the dagger up from the side full across the wolf's chest, and it yelps in pain, falling back. It looks at her in fury and prepares again to lunge, but before it is able to strike she brings the blade down upon its back with all of her strength.

Yet even as the wolf collapses beneath her she is set upon by two more of the creatures, and she desperately tries to keep them at bay, swinging her dagger wildly but futilely. Surely these are no ordinary wolves possessed only of the instincts of the hunt. Behind her one of the horses lets out a whinny and then an anguished cry; the snarl of a wolf accompanies it as the creature closes its jaws for the kill, only to be killed a moment later by Eldárien. The other horse, Elmáriyë's, seeing its companion sink to the earth, slain by the teeth of the wolf, raises up on its hind legs and brings its front hooves crashing down on the head of yet another wolf that threatens it; but then turns and gallops away into the darkness. Elmáriyë has no time to heed this, as she must exert all her attention to the beast that now assails her. In like manner to the previous wolf, she is only barely able to slay it in combat that feels more like panicked flailing about than any work of skill. But even as she is does this, fear ripples through her at the awareness of a second wolf toward which she has turned her back. She swivels around on her heels only to see Eldárien's figure in one fell leap descend upon the wolf, the lightbringer flashing brilliantly as its blade comes down in a killing blow. And then all is quiet.

"Are you harmed?" he asks, turning to his sister with intense anxiety in his

voice.

"No..." she sighs in response, and the silence that they then share speaks in a moment more than many words could express.

Raising his sword in the air, Eldárien sends forth a wide ray of light to illumine their surroundings as far as the eye can see and then, beholding nothing, he allows it to dim to no more than a dull radiance cast about them for a few yards. Overcome with exhaustion, he slumps to his knees, breathing heavily. Elmáriyë, for her part, is still crouched in an awkward position in mid-turn, and she allows herself now to sink back into a sitting position. For a moment they take stock of the situation as they catch their breath and look about them in silence. Then Eldárien says, "Those were no ordinary wolves. Of that there is no doubt. But neither is this the first time that I have come to know of the way that the darkness arisen in our land can poison and twist the instincts even of the wild animals. A bear acted similarly when it attacked the homestead of Rórlain and his father. It is frightening...and surprising. Never would wolves attack their prey relentlessly until their entire pack is slain, unless they be driven by some other force—not hunger but the impulse to destroy."

"And the horses?" breathes Elmáriyë, though she knows the answer.

"Aye, that is deeply unfortunate," her brother replies, rising now to his feet and walking through the snow to the center of their camp. He wipes clean the blade of his sword and sheathes it once again, and then he helps Elmáriyë to her feet. "One horse is slain and the other has fled. And I know not how we could hope to find it in this darkness, unless it returns to us of its own accord."

"Should we wait for it, to see if it does so?" Elmáriyë asks.

"I would rather not linger here longer than necessary."

"What about the carcasses?"

"I think we have no choice but to leave them. Other beasts shall find them and devour them." Eldárien pauses and then adds, "But I will, if you feel comfortable with it, take some meat from the fallen horse to replenish our rations. We have but a little salt, though enough to keep it at least for a while."

"No salt shall be necessary in this weather. Long has the earth been frozen fast even in the middle of the day, and I expect it shall remain so until the light returns."

"Of course you are right, sister," says Eldárien simply.

"I do grieve for the loss of the horses," Elmáriyë then says, "both because they were noble beasts and because they were a gift entrusted to us."

Rubbing his face as if to wash away the grief and anxiety and fear that find expression upon it, Eldárien concludes, "And also because the journey shall be much longer and more difficult on foot."

"Yes...and that as well."

Elmáriyë rekindles the fire to provide some light and warmth while Eldárien sets to work retrieving some meat from the fallen horse. Dawn has come, if the slight lightening of the darkness in the east is any indication, by the time that he has gathered what is feasible to carry. When his work is concluded, Elmáriyë extinguishes the remnants of the fire, and they are greeted again by the full extent of the darkness that surrounds them, the sun climbing and commencing day with luminosity hardly more than a night with the slightest sliver of moon, though now bereft of both sky and stars. Slinging their packs again over their shoulders and casting a final, pained glance upon the wreckage that surrounds their camp, they set off to the north.

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The going is difficult now with their horses lost, and with the layer of snow that covers the ground, but they press on nonetheless without halting. In the bitter cold, too, their bodies become stiff, and their extremities begin to ache and burn with the onset of chilblains which shall soon turn to frostbite. The air is so biting and sharp that they also find it difficult to breathe, as though they stand high upon some elevated mountain peak where the air is so thin that no inhalation can bring the life that lungs desperately seek.

As they walk, the hearts of both spontaneously reach out to the west, across the Stïeka Mára and through the woods, to the velstadeä, to the abode of the Velási, who are their people as much as the rest of the people of Telmérion, cherished and desired. In each of them resides a longing to return to that place and to walk again in the peaceful lanes sheltered in the dappled light under the boughs of the ancient trees, and to sit with their undying brethren in converse and in prayer, and to see again their grandparents and the great father whose wisdom and guidance were for them such a boon and consolation.

But haste draws them on through the darkness to the destination that awaits them, and they march, as much as their failing strength allows, paying little attention to the changes of day or night. They rest when they feel that they can go no further, lying close together to keep from freezing, though this feels as nothing more than a failing attempt to delay the inevitable. Even at this painstaking pace, the Stïeka Mára gradually disappears behind them and they come again to the sheer stone walls that, when they were last here, had shone in the light of the moon. Here they stop and prepare to build what fire they can so that they might rest for a time. But as they do so, a sense of great danger and the sickly hand of terror reaches out to grasp their hearts. They recognize the feeling and immediately stop what they are doing, looking around in alarm, though the darkness conceals all from sight. Drawing his sword from its scabbard, Eldárien allows some light to pass into it and

through it, shining upon their surroundings, even though this costs him far more than he had expected. The eyes of both are drawn to a flutter of movement in the direction of the cliff, hovering on the very edge of the circle of light.

Stepping forward then into full light, the unexpected figure laughs with wicked mockery and hollow glee. And even as it draws near and they lay their eyes upon it, its form remains somehow intangible, eluding the fullness of sight, like wisps of cloud slinking into the shadows or mist curling about the hollows of the earth. And yet the figure takes the shape of a man, ever shifting and changing as it walks forward without footprint or sound across the snow toward Eldárien and Elmáriyë, who are frozen where they stand, gripped with terror.

"Do you like the garb that I have put on, that I may speak to you?" asks the figure.

"You are..." Eldárien breathes, but he finds that he cannot express the thought in speech.

"I am the Lord of Mæres," says the mysterious form, still moving forward and closing the distance between them. "I did not think that I would have the displeasure of meeting you again, *lugbuch*. But since it so happens that I must, I wished to bring you a new recipe of terrors. This guise, of course, is the least of them, for the things that are seen are immeasurably less terrifying than those that are unseen. This I have learned in my long time of contemplation. What bliss it was for me to make the hidden places of the mind the playground of my horrors, exploring every nook and every cranny of fear within human hearts. But, of course, you forced my hand and stirred me to again take an interest in the affairs of the world. You can consider it your fault, therefore, that my creatures have awakened in great numbers and now lay waste to the world of men."

"You lie," Elmáriyë replies. "Like all your kind, you lie."

"Oh, you think that I do, little princess?" the Lord of Mæres mocks. "Our kind cannot lie. All we do is speak the truth."

"No, all you do is convince yourselves that your lies are the truth," retorts Eldárien.

"But how readily men believe them, for they are so deeply convincing," laughs the Lord of Mæres. "After all, what is truth but what one chooses to believe? Believing it makes it so. The world itself is but an illusion, but a shadow, as much as is the guise that I wear before you now. I could appear to you as anything that I wish, even in a guise of what you would call goodness. Would you accept me then as one of your own?"

"I pray that whatever guise you choose to wear, I would see through it to the abiding truth underneath, and so act from this seeing as I ought," replies

Eldárien, his voice growing in firmness as his will gains mastery over the fear that seeks to overwhelm him. When the Lord of Mæres does not immediately reply, Eldárien asks, "Why have you truly come? I do not believe that it is I who have forced your hand, but another."

"No. None force my hand. It was but a manner of speech."

"That is not true. Though you may deny it, you are subservient to another, and you must subject yourself to his commands, even if only to avoid the punishment that he would inflict upon you for your disobedience."

"You must think that you are so perceptive," the figure says. "But you are right in this: the Lord of Darkness has sent me to you, just as he called me from my castle into the light of day once more. Of course, this light has now descended into ceaseless night."

"Why did he send you?" Elmáriyë asks.

"Why else but to destroy you? He tires of your meddling and wishes for you to be exterminated," explains the Lord of Mæres. "And yet, so that all may know that I obey none, regardless of any punishments they may wish to inflict upon me, I shall follow my own course unhindered and free." By now the figure has stopped directly in front of Eldárien and Elmáriyë, like a swirling cloud of smoke the heat of which almost scorches their faces and causes the snow all around them to melt. "Would you like to see what I have prepared for you? I think you shall enjoy it."

"No more talking," retorts Eldárien. "We shall resist you here and now."

"No more talking indeed," the Lord of Mæres says.

Suddenly and without further warning, and regardless of any effort that they make to prevent it, Eldárien and Elmáriyë are submerged in a current of power that flows forth from the Lord of Mæres. They feel the shock of the impact overwhelm them as if a surge of electricity or a heavy blow with blunt force, and their consciousness is wrenched from their bodies. They find themselves caught up in a kind of waking dream—or rather a waking nightmare—into the consciousness of the Lord of Mæres. They experience the malice that seeps throughout his very being and feel, in a kind of unified vision, both his superior intelligence and also his profound folly. For a moment they glimpse in some small way what drives a creature such as this, who once was one of the highest of created beings, pure and spiritual and glorified in the radiance of the undimmed light pouring from the heart of the Creator, and now one of the basest beings in existence, capable of nothing but evil and destruction, hatred and pride.

But as quickly as this moment comes upon them, it passes, and their attention is directed elsewhere. Their minds are caught up into the air above the earth and, in passing, they behold their own bodies still standing as though paralyzed in the space between tree and stone, between the feet of the

mountains and the tree-laden wilderness. But then higher they ascend, until they look down upon the land of Telmérion from an incredible height. They see laid out below them the expansive range of the Teldren Mountains, north and south as far as the eye can see, and cradled in their midst, to their left, the Velási Forest, and far to their right, the Galas Basin, in which lies the ruined village of Fálstead and the barrow of Séra Galáptes. Far above these, nestled in the heights of the mountains, is the great and ancient castle of Séra Galáptes, the destination of their journey. As they continue to look out across the landscape, their vision extends even to beholding what lies on the far side of the mountains, where the Finístra Range extends forth from the higher Teldren peaks like a ripple in the earth, until ending in a great city built upon the craggy heights overlooking the crashing ocean, the city of Brûg'hil. Yet nearer at hand, though still hundreds of miles distant, held in the midst of these mountains, is the city of Minstead; and it is in conflict. The figures of men and beast appear before them in combat, swords and claws, light and darkness, dancing back and forth, each struggling for the upper hand.

Then the voice of the Lord of Mæres ripples through their minds and permeates them, ravaging their consciousness like a burst of intense sound tearing eardrums asunder. "I want you to witness, with my own eyes and as I myself behold it, the destruction that I sow. But because you are such frail creatures, and so weak of sight, this is the best that I can do. Still, I wish for you to look with me...and while I delight, you shall despair."

Eldárien and Elmáriyë both, in their own way, seek to respond to the Draía's words, and yet they find themselves incapable, their thought as though bound and held captive by a superior power. Instead, helpless, they are forced to watch the scene that now unfolds before them.

"Come forth, terror of the deep, come forth, hidden division in the heart of the One's creation, and split the earth asunder that all may know that the powers of darkness rule, and that what they sow in the hearts of men is far deeper and truer than the feeble consolations uttered by the powers of light."

After these words are spoken, there is a deafening roar like the splitting of a tree in the forest or a crackle of thunder close at hand, or rather like the splitting of every tree upon the face of the earth and the snapping of the very fabric of the continent. And so it is: before their gaze the surface of the earth begins to buckle and to give way, as if some invisible force is pressing upon it from above, crushing rocks to dust and stones to powder. A long crease appears upon the face of Telmérion like a tear in cloth or leather, and the land breaks open, a jagged scar extending across the face of the earth. It begins from the Stïeka Mára and extends forth to the west, cutting through the very heart of the Velási Forest and crossing through the midst of the mountains—splitting them so thoroughly that half of a peak shifts to the south and half

to the north—and continuing all the way to the northwest, to Minstead, where the chasm closes again.

Before their horrified gaze, the entirety of the Velási Forest sinks into the pit that now opens like a weeping scar upon the face of Telmérion, and it is gone. Next the city of Minstead, lying directly in the path of the chasm, draws their gaze. And yet, as the earthrend reaches it, the tearing turns suddenly to the south, splitting the land not far from the southernmost wall and sending the entire city upward on a shelf of land rising as the continent groans and shifts, accommodating its weight to this new change. From the newly opened chasm fire licks as from a furnace, scorching all vegetation in its vicinity, and from these flames also belch forth poisonous vapors that harm all living things with which they make contact. But even as the flames and the vapors emerge, spreading as if to climb forth from the chasm and to reach their tendrils across the land, a strong wind begins to blow and in but a few moments the destroying forces return into the pit from whence they came. And then, as suddenly as it has begun, it ends. With a deathly hush, all falls into silence. For a moment Eldárien and Elmáriyë feel the exultant triumph of the Lord of Mæres, an intoxicated delight in the extent of his own power and in the destruction that he has effected; and yet in the midst of this triumph there is a thin thread of anger and frustration, though neither of them understands what it means. A moment later both the triumph and the anger, the malice and the incredible evil, release them, and they find themselves again in their own bodies, which collapse now to the earth, shaking and exhausted under the strain of what was done to them.

They look up, now through their own eyes—weak and limited, but deeply cherished—upon the figure of the Lord of Mæres. Filled with grief and fury, Eldárien tries to rise to his feet, tears bursting from his eyes. But he is too weak to move and sinks immediately back to the earth. Elmáriyë, at his side, weeping as well, reaches out and clings frailly to his arm. "They are gone, Eldárien, they are gone!" she cries, anguish overwhelming her. In response he reaches out and places his hand upon hers, his attention divided now between his own pain, his desire to enfold his sister in her agony, and his wish to confront and to destroy the Lord of Mæres here and now. But cloaking all three of these together is an indescribable grief, a grief so deep and wide that it cripples both his mind and his flesh, in the awareness of the sheer destruction worked by this malicious creature who stands before them, this despiser and destroyer of all that is good.

At last Eldárien gains enough control of himself that he is able to speak, and though he opens his mouth to address the Lord of Mæres, to call out and condemn his wickedness and his evil, when his voice finally emerges in his throat, something very different finds expression: "My dear sister, let us

lament for the wound that has been inflicted upon our beautiful land, and for the destruction of unity and life that this despicable creature has wrought. But he is a fool, a petty and selfish fool, if he thinks that he can break by force the spirit that guides the world, and the love that unites deeper than any bond."

Then he rises to his feet, and Elmáriyë rises with him, and they lace their hands together in mutual support, even as their bodies continue to shake with sobs and with grief. "Depart from us, you beast," Eldárien cries. "I refuse to call you by the title that you have chosen for yourself, for it is but an arrogation to which you have no right. Rather, I call you by your true name, and in speaking it I exorcise you from our land. So I say: Midrôchus, begone from us and return to the darkness whence you have come!"

In response to these words, Midrôchus cries out as in anguish, and the shadowy form that he has taken bursts into flames, consuming itself like a dry tree until nothing remains, and his spirit takes flight to other places, cast away by a light greater than his darkness, there to nurse resentment and hate, and yet to be bound forevermore from directly afflicting the people of Telmérion. For though Eldárien, the Lightborn, has spoken, it is the Light that has spoken through him, and thus the exorcism is true, manifesting a power greater than any man, though through man it flows.

When Midrôchus has gone, Eldárien and Elmáriyë, still clinging to one another, walk on through the darkness, illumined only by the light that shines still through Eldárien though he knows it not, until they come to the edge of the chasm that has opened across the face of the earth. For a moment the light spreads wider and they behold something of the chasm's expanse, a gaping pit many leagues deep and wide, with sheer walls of stone undulating down into the darkness.

Suddenly another voice sounds in the air around them, heard by both of them, though the tenor of this voice, and its effect, is the opposite of the voices of the Draíon. It seems as if singing into them with peace and with comfort, like an ocean of compassion flowing into their hearts and holding them in their grief. The voice, which both of them know to be that of the Anaía Hiliána, says unto them: "Where before the earth had been split by the hand of Eldáru to spare the lives of the innocent against the bloodlust of the wicked, so now the earth has been split asunder, and both more widely and more deeply, to bring grief and destruction. What is this but a mockery offered by a lesser power to a greater, like the tantrum of an ungrateful child who tears apart the gift given to him and flings it back at the giver? But, dear children, though you weep and lament, know that life too has been spared this day, beyond your knowing and your sight. For though darkness works evil to destruction, the light works always to safeguard and to heal."

For a few minutes it seems as though the voice has passed, though Hiliána's presence remains, and through her and with her the presence of the One who sent her. But then she speaks again, as if in farewell, though they know and trust that she shall never leave them: "You shall soon walk into a darkness deeper than you have ever known, and the grief that you now carry could be a hindrance to you, weakening your heart and burdening your spirit. Release it now, therefore, in trust, and in this trust walk forward. For where you go, I shall not be able to speak to you, for so it is ordained. But the light shall never depart from you. Believe in this, and know that the greatest wish of the forces of darkness is to destroy the wonder, freedom, and play of the children of the All-Giver, and, could they do so, the wonder and play of the All-Giver himself. Could they plunge him into darkness and blot out his light, they would do so without reserve or hesitation. But this is impossible, for he is light eternal and undimmed. Instead they attack his works and the beloved of his heart. You, children, are the beloved of his heart. Yet know that he shall suffer in you in coming days; yes, he shall suffer for you, but his light shall not be eclipsed. In all and beyond all, the gaze that is his—that you could know it fully, and you shall!—this gaze of ceaseless wonder and delight, shall burn through every darkness, shall pierce through every evil, and shall shine forth, turning all unto light once again, and bathing the world in the playful delight and lighthearted wonder that are eternally his, in the intimacy of joy and the joy of intimacy."

Chapter Fourteen
Ascending into the Depths

Were it not for the encouraging and consoling words of Hiliána, the grief gripping the hearts of Eldárien and Elmáriyë would have crushed them into incapacity. This does not mean that their hearts are not grievously sorrowful and filled with lament for the terrors that they have witnessed at the hands of the one who called himself the Lord of Mæres, Midrôchus, whose presence and power is now cast far away. But regardless of the anguish and consolation that now intersect and collide in their hearts, they intend to leave the great chasm behind and to set their faces to the northeast, following the base of the Teldren Mountains even as their hearts linger with their beloved Velási, with the most wise and loving people whom they have ever known, whose home now lies swallowed up in the depths of the earth.

But instead they find themselves as though bound here at the edge of the great chasm, at the brink of this immense scar in the earth; and here they give free expression to their grief, allowing to flow in upon them an immensity of

sorrow and loss sprung from the rending of the world which they have witnessed, but extending beyond this to experience and to reverberate in contact with the very mystery of evil and death itself. In beholding the tearing of the earth, both siblings have become more vividly aware of a sense that has been growing in intensity, in breadth and in depth, ever since they absorbed the darkness of the dragon in Onylándun, and in particular since they departed from that city to seek out the heart of darkness. Put simply, though it is in fact a multifaceted and many-layered reality, it is that their hearts are being more and more harnessed with each passing day in absorbing and bearing the darkness of the world. They feel the texture of this darkness, its complexity and its innate absurdity, so different than the placid and simple light of goodness, invade their being and sink deeply within them. And what is darkness but evil? And what is evil but a betrayal of the benevolent intentions of the Fashioner of all things, a twisting of his gift through pride and through fear, which brings destruction and pain in its wake, and opens the abyss of death in which the very gift of life, so precious and yet so fragile, dissolves and passes away.

Before the immensity of such evil and the mysteriousness of such death, Eldárien and Elmáriyë feel small and weak, like tiny drops in an ocean of loss, in a seemingly boundless expanse of corruption.

Suddenly Eldárien speaks, asking in a quiet voice, "Why does the All-Father choose to work through such human frailty? The world is so marred, scarred as it were from head to foot, from height to depth, and from east to west and north to south. And we ourselves, the children of men, the chosen of his heart, can be so foolish and so blind! We can do such shameful things and can be so apathetic to the light that would draw our gaze, preferring instead the comfort and control offered by the darkness. And yet there lives in us also such mysterious beauty, such capacity for nobility, for sacrifice, for goodness, and for love. But the light draws so subtly, and his presence insinuates itself into our hearts and our lives so hiddenly, so secretly, that it often goes unnoticed, or it is seen only in its fruits or in the radiance that it casts upon all that surrounds it and all that it touches." He pauses and presses his face into his hands for a long moment in pensiveness and in grief. "I know my own weakness and frailty, and the darkness that resides within me, the brokenness that scars not only my flesh but my heart. How can I be a king with scars such as this? How can I find the confidence to walk this path before us when I know myself to be but a speck of dust standing before a mountain, asked to confront this very mountain and to dispel it? How is this possible?"

Elmáriyë raises her eyes kindly and looks with profound yet tremulous love and hope upon her brother, and she says in reply, "Possible? I don't know

that it is possible. We were never asked to believe that it was possible. All that we may try to foretell, all that we may try to control, is but ashes in the wind. It is rather the enduring truth of being that should alone draw our eyes—the truth that light bathes all things without ceasing, the truth that this world is as it is—a world of beauty and meaning, of glory and majesty, of peace and love—and not a world of darkness, as our enemy would wish for it to be. Not in looking to our own strength do we find courage and hope, but in directing our gaze toward this great mystery that lies even beyond the shadows that enfold us, even beyond the darkness that suffocates us. For even if our land is cast into darkness, even if our hearts are burdened by despair, the light shines ever beyond, undimmed and free. In this alone is our true and enduring hope and our abiding joy."

"You speak true, but I can see it no longer, Elmáriyë," admits Eldárien, voicing to her in words the heaviness of his heart that he already shares with her in the unspoken communion of the spirit.

"Neither can I," says Elmáriyë softly, and as she says so, her voice cracks. "Or rather, it slips away even as we speak. I realize that for a time it must be so, for our hearts are passing into the darkness. We step into a place of profound loss for the sake of all and on behalf of all. How then can we not taste this loss in our own hearts and in our own flesh? Our being must expand, must dilate, to be able to cross over this distance, the distance between the horrifying darkness of evil and the beatifying light of good. Such is the path before us."

"But that space is too wide for any human heart," says Eldárien.

"And yet it is asked of us nonetheless," Elmáriyë says. "As you said, and as we both feel so keenly now: our world is fractured and dark, estranged from our Father's original intentions, and yet it still the bears marks of his beauty and his plan more deeply still. For he is not defeated. So too every heart is broken and wounded, and yet he works in us and among us nonetheless. I believe indeed that he delights to work precisely in this way, because he still loves our world and our humanity even in their brokenness, and he does not despise drawing near to our littleness and working in its midst, making it a vessel of his love; and he works in this way also so that all may know that the salvation, the beauty, the life are his alone, freely given to us and at work within us as his gracious gift. What difference is there, then, between 'greatness' and 'littleness,' when the gift comes not from man, but from the Creator of man?"

After these words are spoken they both lapse into silence, and even as their hearts both experience a slight kindling of hope in response to what Elmáriyë has said—or rather in response to the truth of her words—even as they feel it, a chill wind of darkness and of evil blows over them and submerges this

very hope from consciousness. They feel the pit of darkness opening before them, indeed falling upon them as an oppressive weight ordained to crush them until no life remains. They touch hands for a moment, looking into one another's eyes with overwhelming sorrow and frail hope, and in this look they say what can no longer be said in words or grasped with the mind. And then they lie down to sleep for a while, the wilderness surrounding them and the path ahead of them calling.

† † †

Eldárien awakes just as the sun begins to shine over the horizon in the east, though this is evident to those upon the continent of Telmérion only through the slight lightening of the darkness where the glowing disc of Élda appears, fighting to pierce through a thick black veil. Before sitting up, he opens his eyes and sees the figure of Elmáriyë beside him. She is kneeling with her upper body bent prostrate over her knees so that her forehead touches the ground. Seeing this he is not surprised, for he has seen her in this posture many times, even daily, throughout their journey. So as not to disturb her, he does not move, though he joins his prayer with hers and unites his spirit with her spirit in opening to the presence and the love of Eldáru, and in the trusting surrender that is the very heartbeat of life, in the face of darkness and death and beyond it.

How much his heart has discovered and delved into the mystery of prayer since returning to the land of Telmérion! But even before this, his heart wounded by so much pain and loss, and yet also touched so deeply by the fragments of the one beauty that shines in and through all things, his heart has prayed. For prayer is the true, deep, and native life of every heart, and its discovery and full blossoming the true calling of every person. During the many nocturnal vigils in which he has sat at the edge of camp looking out into the darkness, he has prayed, or, even more deeply, he has felt something, someone, praying within him and stirring and lifting up his own prayer. So too in the many beautiful moments, in the moments of encounter, of heart-sharing with his newfound companions, of unexpected beneficence or undeserved mercy, he has felt something new and profound grow and begin to blossom within him. Even in confrontation with the darkness, with the suffocating and crushing lies of the forces of evil, part of him has been unsealed —unsealed in opposition, in the movement beyond darkness toward the hidden light—and has flowed into the current that has carried him ever more intensely with every passing day throughout the entirety of his life and the wholeness of his being.

All of this comes to him anew as if in a single glance, and Elmáriyë stirs beside him. Without the need for words they both know that in this moment their consciousnesses have again touched, brushing against one another and

indeed interlacing. And he feels deep gratitude for her life and her spirit, her existence and her story; and she feels the same in regard to him, as if the life of each is becoming the life of the other, both unique and yet the two made indivisibly one.

But then another element soon enters into this reality: they feel the anguish of Rórlain, calling upon the light entrusted to them while he fights desperately in a place of utter darkness, and the grief and anguish of Tilliána and Cirien with him. The words that Hiliána spoke echo in them anew: "You shall soon walk into a darkness deeper than you have ever known...but the light shall never depart from you." It shall never depart, yes, but it shall penetrate into the very heart of the darkness and bear the darkness within itself as if it were its own, for only in this way can the darkness be broken and overcome. And feeling the desperate plea in the hearts of their companions tugging upon the light within them, the light that holds them, they let it go, releasing it to flow fully into those who need it, fully into Rórlain who is the chosen vessel to channel the light into the armies of righteousness. And in the same moment as this light streams forth to confront the powers of darkness, it carries them with it, as if bringing them to the heart of the confrontation as well. They are held by the light even as the light, so pure and transparent and deep in the very heart of darkness, slips away from their grasp and their feeling; and in its place they feel the inrush of incredible evil, horrifying guilt, and suffocating darkness.

They both stir now and sit up from where they lie, sharing a look of profound reciprocal sadness and mutual understanding. Then, without words, they embrace and hold one another, lamenting together the darkness that they bear, letting their breath and their tears be their voice and their song. Like this they remain, hardly aware of the passage of time, until the sun has risen high in the sky and its disc can be discerned almost directly overhead. Only then do they release one another and take notice of their surroundings, though the experience is as though being wrenched apart at the very sinews of being, like a cloth torn or ligaments rent or bones snapped asunder. And the darkness lingers. They begin to know what Hiliána had meant in speaking of the deeper darkness. To such a place and such a state they go, to confront this darkness in its very abode, to face the great thief who has stolen the memories and the guilt of men to prevent them from returning to their Maker, and instead turning them into tools of wickedness perpetuating evil in the world by the evil that has once occurred.

No more! their hearts cry. No more! Moved by this anguished sense and by this ardent longing, they rise now to their feet and silently gather their few belongings. Then they set their faces to the north and the east and continue on their journey.

† † †

Eldárien and Elmáriyë pass along the base of the Teldren Mountains and come eventually to the village of Criseä. Even at a distance, in the light of many torches that have been lit within the village itself, they see that many of the houses lie slanted, broken, or even entirely in ruins due to the violent earthquakes that accompanied the rending of the earth. Seeing hurting people milling about the city tending to their wounded and trying to repair what little damage they can of what their village has suffered, both siblings feel a pang of sadness at their first direct witness of the effects of the earthrend upon the people of Telmérion. And though they would wish to stop in the town both to offer aid and to rest from their journey, their hearts urge them on with a pressing insistence, summoning them to haste. And nothing in truth would greet them there but sorrow and grief and the ruins of a village reduced to wreckage both outside and within. And so they turn their faces away and pass the village by a wide margin, following the foothills of the mountains as they begin to ripple upward to the north and to the west.

Thus begins the last stretch of their journey—in a deep solitude and loss in which the darkness steadily increases as the light seems to fade away, and they can only cling with desperate hearts both to one another and to the One whose accompaniment is true even if intangible. Galas Basin at last greets them, and the trees of the thick forest that spans from mountain to mountain—and in which lies nestled the village of Fálstead—reach out and enfold them, as if welcoming them into their embrace. But this embrace only serves to cast them into yet further darkness, as what little light has still filtered from the thickly veiled sky is now almost entirely eliminated by the thick canopy of trees.

"I find that I can summon the light no longer," sighs Eldárien. "We have entrusted it now entirely into the hands of Rórlain, and we must walk ahead without relying upon its luminosity or its strength."

"But it is like a maze in here," Elmáriyë replies. "We must navigate our way through the trees almost by feel alone. This shall greatly slow our progress."

"It is a day or two across the basin if one moves at a good speed. It shall take us longer. But if we can make it to such a place, then we shall climb beyond the trees. Many ages has it been, however, since the path into the mountains and to the ancient citadel of Séra Galáptes has been trod by human feet. We know not what we shall find, nor even if the trail is still amenable to passage."

"I—," Elmáriyë begins, but she is interrupted by an unexpected occurrence. From within her pack a dim light begins to make itself known, shining in bluish rays through the fabric. Swinging her pack off her shoulder and rummaging through it, she pulls out the lantern that was given to her in the

Velási Forest. Within its depths flickers a pure blue flame, and, amplified through the multifaceted crystal that surrounds it, it shines out and gives enough illumination to show Eldárien and Elmáriyë their surroundings for five or ten feet in every direction.

Feeling in his heart the ever growing haste, Eldárien gestures for them to continue on their way without delay. And so they do. As they progress, however, something mysterious in the atmosphere around them changes, at first subtle and almost unnoticeable and then tangible to the point of overwhelming them. Not only does the temperature drop drastically until the snow around them turns hard as stone and the air bites through their layers of fur and clothing almost as if they were nothing, but the veil of darkness summoned by the Lord of Death also intensifies or rather changes in nature. Now when they stop to build a fire that they might chase away some of this painful and life-threatening cold, they realize that it is impossible to do. No matter how much the attempt it, no spark can be ignited and no wood set to heat or flame. The cold light of the lantern of Elmáriyë alone in all the world brings light to them now, and it does not fight off the cold nor prevent what they soon realize could be the death of both of them: the freezing of their bodies in the depths of the wilderness of the Telméric mountains, high above the surrounding land with no sun nor sky nor daylight to warm them.

For a day and a half they walk, speaking little and refusing to pause or to sleep for fear that they shall be unable to begin again. Elmáriyë cannot conceal from Eldárien, though she does not speak of it, that her fingers and toes have now become useless, blackened within her boots and her gloves, and that they shall never feel warmth or touch or life again. Seeing this, Eldárien silently begins to assist her even to walk, allowing her to lean heavily on him as they progress through the darkness. Even so, they come near to the roots of the mountains upon whose rocky slopes, high above, the citadel resides. The trees grow sparse and eventually recede into the distance behind them, though stragglers remain, worn and weathered after centuries of growth, their massive trunks and broad spans casting ghostly shadows behind them whenever the travelers bearing the light of the lantern pass.

Soon the steep cliff-face of the mountain arises so starkly before them that no further progress is possible until they find the entrance to the pass. Yet finding the pass proves immensely difficult in the darkness, and they spend many frustrating and fruitless hours scouring this way and that, looking high and low, in groves of trees and in narrow ravines in which weave streams from high in the mountains, all turned to ice now except for their deepest depths. And even as another day passes, they do not find it.

Their hearts cry out in unspoken prayer, fear and discouragement gripping

them. At last Elmáriyë stops and, sinking to the ground, says, "It seems impossible to find, as if over the ages separating us from the citadel's former glory, it has faded away and become lost in the shifting of time and earth. And yet even if the path was clear before us, I fear that we cannot continue like this. For the darkness intensifies with every moment and shall soon break us. My heart already splits in two from its weight. Regardless of the haste and the burden of responsibility that we feel, if we cannot find some hint again of the light we have lost, we shall not be able to proceed at all..."

Eldárien silently kneels beside her and places a hand upon her shoulder, bowing his head and closing his eyes. He sighs deeply as if expressing sorrow that is far beyond words, but also as if reaching out beyond it for some path forward when the external search has proved fruitless. Yet no light comes, but only an intensification of the darkness and the weight, like a poison gradually spreading through the body and making it sick, spreading through the heart and destroying in it all that is good, beautiful, or true. They are both filled with the feeling that there is no other choice but to remain here, crushed to the earth, and to accept the inevitable fate that now comes upon them, as sad as it may be. And even as they experience this, the lantern held loosely in Elmáriyë's hand flickers, wavers, and goes out. Now they sit in almost complete darkness, blacker now in truth that the deepest and darkest night that the world has ever known.

But at long last Eldárien stirs himself and rises wearily to his feet. Extending his hand to Elmáriyë, he says softly, "Come, sister, let us go. Though we have not yet found the path, we know that it exists. If we seek without tiring, we are sure to find."

"But I *am* tired, Eldárien," she whispers, her voice hoarse. "I am deathly tired. And I can no longer walk alone."

"You have never walked alone, and even now I shall hold you up and support you. And if I must carry you upon my back, that too I shall do."

"You are too weak for that," she whispers. But nonetheless she allows him to take her by the hand and to draw her up. Side by side, they continue their search with hardly more than the senses of touch and hearing. And, beyond all hope and expectation, they find it. The path is indeed ancient and untouched, with two standing stones on either side of its entrance, etched with runes that have now been all but effaced by the passage of time and the hardships of weather. Eldárien feels them under his fingers and recognizes them for what they are, though he cannot clearly make out what they say. Beyond the trees and foliage that have grown to hide the path, they find a hard trail moving upward in an open space. And this trail soon turns to massive stone stairs that seem to have been cut from the living stone of the mountain itself and shaped with a master craftsman's hand.

They climb, therefore, up the steep slope that the steps greatly ease but which, in their current state, proves to be a task almost beyond their strength. For an hour and a half they climb, and the darkness within them grows and intensifies until it feels that they walk through a fog of suffocating death. But eventually they begin to see before them the high parts of the mountain painted a darker black against the blackness of the sky beyond it. Seeing this, they become aware that they come now to the summit, or at least to the crest on which lies the ancient citadel. For in the midst of the broad shape of the mountain they also see the silhouettes of towers and turrets jutting up in the midst of the gloom, harbingers of their destination.

But even as they look on, other shapes become visible, emerging from the castle and becoming blurs of movement in the sky above, circling and circling overhead. But despite their speed and the difficulty of seeing them in the dark, it is obvious what they are: they feel it more than they they see it, black wings etched against the sky, and terror in the earth. They are dragons, perhaps ten in number, swirling like vultures waiting for their meal.

"Why do they not attack?" Elmáriyë asks quietly, hardly able to speak. "Surely whoever sent them knows that we cannot withstand such an assault. Why do they not...just finish us now?"

"Perhaps he does not know of our presence, or perhaps he does not seek to prevent us, but rather to fill us with fear and to weaken our resolve."

"But what of the words of the Lord of Mæres, of Midrôchus? Did he not say that the Lord of Darkness sent him to destroy us?"

"Aye, he did say that. But I suspect it was a lie."

"Why?"

"I feel that perhaps the Lord of Darkness awaits us...even draws us... Midrôchus actions were his way of rebelling against his 'master,' who wishes for himself alone the privilege of destroying us and bringing an end to our quest. I suspect that Midrôchus was rather meant simply to bring us to him."

"So all the destruction that he caused was simply a whim born of his own pride and malice?" she exclaims.

Eldárien does not respond for a long time, but then at last he gives voice to his feelings in words, "Such a degree of apathy, indeed of hatred for all living things, is incredible. And as a chasm has been torn open in the heart of our land, so I feel it has opened in my heart as well, tearing through its very center. And I fear that I am going to fall into it and lose myself in its depths forever."

Elmáriyë sighs sadly, and the exhaustion in her voice is tangible, "Let us not look overlong into those depths, Eldárien, even if our eyes can see nothing else. Perhaps seeing alone cannot guide us now, unless it be the sight beyond sight of the inner heart hidden even from ourselves. Whatever awaits

us, we are coming to the end of our quest. Let us simply keep moving. It cannot be much farther now."

He chuckles softly, though it comes out strained and choked. And he says to her, "I tried to encourage you and now it is you who encourage me. Who shall encourage us when neither of us can find courage any longer?"

Elmáriyë looks at her brother gravely now, as if his words have contained far more than he intended to communicate. And for a long moment he reciprocates her gaze. And then they move on.

Chapter Fifteen
At the Heart of Darkness

"To confront the heart of darkness, now, all we have is our weakness. No longer can we wield the light as a weapon. It is the light itself, alone, far beyond us, upon which we must rely for deliverance and salvation." Saying this, Eldárien looks tenderly at his sister as if he can still clearly discern the contours of her face, as if he is impressing her beauty and her figure on his inmost being, even though all he sees with his bodily eyes is the silhouette of her form in the blackness.

"The light slips from my grasp and from my searching eyes," Elmáriyë replies sorrowfully, squeezing his hand ever so gently. "My heart is not big enough to hold the two together, to see and to rejoice in the light and also at the same moment to hurt in the blindness of the darkness. I am shattered, and I am lost."

"You are shattered, my dear sister, but you are not lost," says Eldárien. "Even if you cannot see the light nor span the distance that must be crossed, only allow the Love within you to do what you cannot."

"If that is how it must be...how it must be to walk this path before us, then so be it. Let us move forward, for the sake of our people and our friends."

The ancient steps climb before them, too high now for the accumulation of snow that has fallen lower in the valleys and plains. Instead they are slick and hard in the stark coldness, and broken in many places and crumbling with the passage of time. Brother and sister ascend, their flesh straining with every step to progress forward as the assault on their minds continues unabated, growing in intensity as they draw nearer to the citadel that stands before them upon the crest of the mountain slope.

When they at last come to the entrance to the citadel, they find themselves standing in what once must have been a wide lawn, though it is now

overgrown with aged trees and high-altitude vegetation. Yet they do not linger here, but draw near without hesitation to the door, which, to their startled surprise, they find hanging open before them, a gaping maw or a portal into the darkness. And that is all that they can see beyond: sheer blackness.

And they enter, with no more than a hair's breadth of preparation, for the waiting shall only make it more difficult to step forward, to plunge into the blackness and to ascend, to ascend to where the heart of darkness lies, simultaneously calling them and resisting them. When they have entered, they see that the citadel is black with the same blackness that they beheld from without, and yet they are able to sense the high walls and the vaulted ceiling above them, even if no light shines from any source.

And complete silence, the oppressive silence of loss and not the abundant silence of life, fills and saturates the citadel like a fever, like a disease that inundates the air and seeps from the walls and the floor, and that emerges from the very air itself. And this silence is all that they encounter. There are no vrû'ádach, no great eötenga, no dragons, no forges. There is only silence and the overwhelming sense of death and loss, a death and loss so deep and so wide that it is hardly possible to conceive of what this citadel once was in the days of its glory, when it was filled with the light, compassion, and wisdom of a righteous king.

In the darkness the halls are like a maze, and the two siblings wander about lost, looking for some way to draw near to the heart of darkness that they sense but which remains just beyond their reach. Even as they come what seems to be a large spiral staircase winding up at the center of a spacious, domed chamber, Elmáriyë stops.

"Brother, are you here?" comes her voice to Eldárien's side, nestled as she is indeed against his breast, though it sounds frail, as if echoing across a great distance.

"I am here," he replies.

"Brother?" She turns her face to look at him as if she has forgotten what it is to need light to see through the darkness. "I feel so alone. Please do not leave me. Please, I cannot go further on my own."

"I am here, sister, I am here," he says, reaching out and touching her cheek. Her flesh is hot as though fevered, and sweat beads upon her face.

"Is that you...? Yes, it must be you," she whimpers. "But why can I not see you, hear you, feel you?"

"It is I," affirms Eldárien gently, pressing her body into his own as if their proximity could break through the dark clouds enshrouding her.

"Is that you...Ta? Are you here?" she whispers, continuing her mysterious dialogue. "I want you. I need you. Stay with me. Draw me to you."

Understanding now, Eldárien guides her forward and begins to ascend the spiral stair. She walks docilely at his side like a little child lost and afraid of the dark, letting herself be guided where she cannot go on her own.

They take the stair and follow it up, winding and encircling itself as it climbs without railing to the high domed ceiling and beyond it, jutting out above the roof of the citadel as the tallest turret. When they come to the top, they find themselves emerging as through the floor into another chamber, perhaps twenty feet across. It is a circular room built around the stairway that they have just climbed, surrounding it like a crown surrounds a head. The first thing that becomes evident as they step into this room is the eerie light that plays upon the walls. No...it is not light, and neither are they walls.

Eldárien looks around and realizes that he is gazing into numerous windows that cover the entire circumference of the circle, the entirety of the walls from floor to ceiling with the exception of the vertical joints connecting the panel of one window to the panel of another. And these windows are not of transparent glass, gazing out into the darkness. They appear to be of crystal like diamond, though now dark and murky, as if filled with black smoke. But within their depths play ghostly images, as if a rehearsal of some dark deeds of the past or some regrets never shared and surrendered, which have locked the figures in a ceaseless cycle of shame and a burden that never moves beyond the self to another. But, Eldárien realizes, that is exactly what they are. As if giving some visible manifestation to what he and Elmáriyë feel, these images —polluting what must once have been a chamber of utter, crystalline light, gazing forth with wide-seeing windows upon a land bathed in light—are now the horrors of all the things that hurt human hearts and stir in them terror, loss, and despair.

The specters of death, the memories of evil and infidelity to the light, deeds blacker than the blackest night, emerge to meet them, playing upon the dark crystal, and they whisper in their ears, penetrating their minds and hearts, with thousands upon thousands of voices crying out in anguish, wailing in hopelessness, moaning in pain. And among the many scenes that unfold before them, they see their own selves, too, their own reflections looking back at them, but distorted and out of proportion, showing only the evil and ugliness that they have done, and painting their features black and abhorrent.

Elmáriyë takes a step forward, raising her hands as if to challenge a foe, and looks about the chamber, her eyes appearing to take in all the details that are here presented before her. Then she says, "Where are you, crafter of wickedness and fashioner of evil? Where are you, petty lord of darkness?" Her voice vibrates with emotion, as if being torn in two in this moment, as is her heart itself. Then, a moment later, Eldárien feels her gaze rest upon him, even

though she does not turn to face him. “Stay with me,” she whispers, “stay with me.”

And then, as if by some mysterious summons, the ghostly images, the dark portrayals, the lingering memories of shame and evil detach themselves from the crystal surrounding them, and stream forth, like smoke blown on a strong wind, and assail Eldárien and Elmáriyë, invading their minds and crushing their hearts. Bracing themselves against the impact, they remain standing, though the air is knocked from their lungs and their flesh trembles. And for a long, anguishing period—neither knows how long it is—the evil that they have beheld externally surges into them and through them, carving its way violently through their interior consciousness, joined together again now as it had been in the absorbing of the dragon’s darkness, and yet even more completely. And what they absorb now, what they bear, is so much more. And even as they bear it, it slips beyond them, as if they are only conduits for it to escape from the place in which it has been imprisoned by the artificer of this terrible war, channeled anew to the space to which it is meant to flow, free and unhindered.

And then, in a moment of deepest insight, Eldárien sees a blazing light of utmost intensity burning at the center of his consciousness like the first star in a black firmament or like the sun through stormy clouds: he understands what must happen. In the next moment the flash of light is gone, but the certainty lingers. He turns to look at Elmáriyë who stands before him, but this is not truly necessary, for their hearts are so conjoined now that he sees her and is aware of her in the communication of the spirit with perfect and crystalline clarity. And it is there that their hearts both turn to face one another, and turn together toward the unseen light that lies beyond the darkness, turn in the gesture of oblation to offer the sacrifice that must be offered to break the stranglehold of darkness upon the people of Telmérion.

The sacrifice must be twofold, though only one: both death and life, two sides of the same mystery, though giving way to endless life beyond all death. Both must live, for they are loved and created for life; and yet both must die, to carry on the mystery of life on both sides of death. And the promise of a kingdom of peace shall thus, and only thus, be fulfilled, by being grounded on a love both temporal and eternal, a love rooted in the beauty of the earth redeemed and a love fulfilled in the joy of eternity given, where all shadows shall pass away. Elmáriyë’s heart pleads, therefore, in the silent cry of its inmost aspiration, and Eldárien hears her as if his own inner voice: *Let me go to him now. Let me go to him, carrying the darkness and anguish of our world, carrying the memories of the fallen, their guilt and their grief...and carrying you, my brother, too. But remain, remain in longing, in longing for him and in the vigilance of a heart in love, and return to our people. Carry the torch of*

this longing and this hope, this vigilance and this love, and become king of the entire nation, leading them anew in unity and harmony where before there was division, and in the ways of faith and love and hope where before there was ignorance, evil, and forgetfulness.

After this, her voice passes beyond sound, in a cry of the heart surpassing the confines of this life, and Eldárien hears it no more. He feels her being pulled away from him, and the sense of tearing is incredible, so deep and so personal that he feels as if he too shall perish under the impact. The darkness pierces her as firmly as a lance, as the jagged and merciless blade of a sword, and yet, in the very midst of the darkness, and burning at its heart, is a flame of purest light, and this light grows as it surges forward, penetrating and permeating her whole being until she has become utter light, and is held on all sides by light.

And then the darkness is broken. Or rather, it is channeled inward and upward, carried by the two frail human hearts who have surrendered to the light, and by the light itself in them and beyond them. This light carries forth all anguish and loss, all guilt and shame, all beauty and ugliness, into a presence in which alone it can be released and healed; yes, it carries it across the ages, across the wide expanse of time, from which emerges, radiant with light inconceivable, with beauty ineffable, with joy uncontainable and pure, peaceful and full of lightness and wonder undimmed, the one who is called Dawnbringer.

And then all has passed, and the darkness has fled away, and in a burst of brilliant color light floods in upon Eldárien's senses, bathing his eyes in beholding, his flesh in consoling warmth, and his spirit in joy.

Chapter Sixteen
Radiance and Wonder

The spring sun shines warm and full upon the face of the land, bathing the mountains and valleys, and the plains rippling away to the east, in a gentle and yet brilliant light. Peaks still capped with snow look down, as if turning a kind and gentle eye upon the small hamlet—hardly more than a group of houses spread about—that resides in the wide plain of Telónis. Among the newly sown fields of grain and the vegetable gardens showing the first sprouts peeking from the earth, among the trees swaying and singing in the soft wind, weaves a path upon which walks a solitary figure, cloak billowing behind it as if delighting in the caress of the breeze.

The figure passes a field in which children play, their voices echoing as they call to one another in some game of their own devising and discovery, which captures them and carries them forth to their heart's content in wonder, as all the while earth and sky encircle, protect, and foster their play. And on the figure goes, down the path, toward a house that lies at the very edge of the plain, with a small field and a barn for animals nearby. And were it the figure's intention to knock upon the door and ask for the those who call the homestead their home, this proves unnecessary, as an aged man and woman sit together upon the shaded porch, watching the figure walk up the way.

"Hail, friend," calls the man, though he knows not whether the figure is such.

The response comes in a voice so kind and so gentle that any caution that they had before is now dispelled. "Hail, dear friends." The man and woman arise and take a few steps from the porch, allowing the sun to fall upon their faces, and they watch as the man approaches them at a short distance, the full light of day like a halo around his head and illumining his kind features as if with enduring light shining forth, not only from above, but from within.

"We welcome you to our humble home," says the woman. "What might be the reason for your visit this day?"

"I thank you for your warm welcome," says the man. "I come bearing news both joyful and sorrowful. Perhaps we should sit somewhere, so that my tale may be told in full."

"If that is your wish," replies the aged man, "though the weather is fine today, and I would not mind remaining outside."

"Nor would I," replies the visitor.

"Then let me draw a few chairs into the sunlight, and we can speak

together in its rays."

When this is done, and they sit together facing one another, the visitor speaks, "I would like to introduce myself, for I know you even though you do not yet know me. My name is Eldárien Illómiel. By grace and mercy, I am the new king of this land, guardian and custodian of her people. I am also the blood-brother of your daughter, whom you loved so deeply even though she was not sprung of your flesh. I would like now to speak to you in her name, and to share with you her story."

† † †

In the city of Minstead great anguish followed upon the tremors caused by the earthrend, even as its ill effects were also turned to good. Despite everything, battle still occurred within the city, though both the eötenga and the forces of men were dismayed by the bizarre occurrences happening around them. And further, the Lord of Death, crushed by the weight of the collapsing roof of the throne room, fled from the city for a time in spirit, leaving his minions in chaos. But in his stead came forth a power far deeper and far more terrifying, one which deigned neither to take mortal form nor to speak in the words of men, but sought only to suffocate out all hope for light in the heart and, casting the spirit into despair, to carry all in an endless train unto death. Fueled, and indeed maddened, by this new energy, the eötenga rediscovered the vigor in battle that the flight of the Lord of Death had caused, and the men who opposed them were pressed to the limit, indeed beyond the limit, in resisting them.

And certain of their number joined with those who had managed to escape from captivity in the bowels of the citadel in another task, as pressing as the former. For many men and women were still trapped in the prison, having been forbidden escape through the collapsing stairwell. Cirien, too old to have the vigor for such a task, nonetheless worked himself to exhaustion in tending to the wounded in a sheltered camp set up and guarded on a side street not far from the citadel.

Tilliána, for her part, with the collapsing of the roof in the throne room, had expected death. And yet soon it became apparent that the ceiling had bowed inward as it fell, creating a wedge that had speared the oncoming Draía and yet had left the edges of the chamber untouched except by the smaller falling debris. She found herself alive, therefore, crouched over the body of Rórlain, which under her touch was unmoving and apparently lifeless. In the darkness, she had laid her hands upon his face and his chest, and felt the slightest hints of breath. Carrying him, therefore, as she had once carried him from the pits of the forge far beneath the earth, she escaped to a side chamber, a small room that appeared to be a bedroom for some minor officer of the city, and there tended to him. He awoke after a few hours, though he

spoke little, and remained frail. She instead spoke unto him, in words of solace and consolation, even as the darkness deepened around them and filled their minds and their hearts to the point of breaking.

When Rórlain slept she would depart for short periods of time to gauge the state of affairs around them, and to assist in what little way that she could. Many there were who were wounded either in battle or in the chaos resulting from the quaking of the earth. But soon she learned that they had narrowly escaped a much worse fate: a great and massive chasm had opened in the earth just to the south of the city, though it spread far into the distance, marring the face of Telmérion for many leagues. Yet of such things she had little time to take thought, for the more intimate and yet more important matters drew her attention: the tending of wounded bodies and hurting hearts. Yet all the while her heart wept within her, both at the visible destruction and spiritual anguish all around her, but also at the agonizing pressure of the weight that lay upon her own heart. And yet in the midst of this, sensing the manner of evil presence that besieged the city, she could not but think with longing and with fear of her dear friends, Eldárien and Elmáriyë, who walked into direct confrontation with precisely this evil.

The turning-point came suddenly and unexpectedly, with no signs to herald its coming. In the midst of the raging battle and the anguished care for the fallen and wounded, a pillar of light had burst forth above the mountains far in the east, joining heaven and earth. And for a long moment it was as though time had stopped. All turned and looked toward the light, the eötenga in horror and the children of humanity in hope. Then an orb of radiance in the form of a man shone forth in the midst of the pillar, as if descending with arms outstretched; and then in the next moment another figure, of lesser light, arose from the earth, and as it ascended met the former in the air. When they met there was a burst of brilliant light that, like an explosion of greatest intensity, spread forth from the pillar. And yet this explosion spread, not to destroy, but to heal. The black veil was cast away like a lingering nocturnal fog before the burning rays of the rising sun. And behold! To the east, they saw precisely this: the sun just now cresting the mountains and showing his warm and consoling face, the first sunrise after many days of darkness.

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For many days they knew not whether their companions had survived the ordeal that they faced in the citadel of Séra Galáptes, in their confrontation with the heart of darkness. All in Minstead attended now to the care of the wounded and to the honorable burial of the fallen, for with the coming of the light the creatures of darkness, one and all, had disappeared into nothingness, and the land was at peace. The hearts of Rórlain, Tilliána, and Cirien,

reached out with longing and with hope, and they wished to go in pursuit of their friends. Yet even if something could be done, the trail was long and circuitous, and more immediate and pressing matters called for their attention. They could do not more, then, than abide in trust and in waiting.

But on the eighteenth day after the ending of the great darkness, Eldárien rode into the city on a steed that he had acquired in the city of Winfreya. Immediately they saw in his countenance what had occurred, for in his eyes he bore a deep sorrow, serene and peaceful, and upon his brow shone a mysterious light, a joy deeper and wider than any they had yet known. At his coming many fell down before him, prostrating themselves to the earth, for in their hearts they knew that he was the promised king. "Hail, savior king," many had exclaimed. "Light has come after this time of darkness, and, when faced with destruction, we have been given instead life and light unto gladness forevermore."

But his dearest friends had another greeting to give to him: the warmth of embrace and the kindness of love that burns in face and heart. But then they spoke together in sorrow of the one who rode not back with Eldárien from the heart of darkness; and he revealed unto them the sadness of her parting and the beauty of her gift. All four companions then bowed their heads, remembering Elmáriyë, their sister, so innocent and so pure, whose presence shall be dearly missed even as her sacrifice, and her radiant beauty, shall be ever remembered. Then they went forth together to the castle wherein the great part of the battle had been fought—and many went with them—and they looked upon the loss and the destruction, and wept.

After this there was a great mourning for all who had fallen in the War of Darkness, and the king led them in prayers for those who had been lost. The fields to the north of the city became the burial place of hundreds, and the remembrance also of the many whose bodies could not be found or had been lost in the prior siege of the city. Stones from the fallen and crippled buildings of Minstead were carried forth upon carts and used to mark the burial-places, with words of blessing etched upon them.

But after the time of mourning had passed—though mourning always continues in the heart as long as this life lasts—the time of rejoicing began. Messengers were sent out to all the towns and cities of Telmérion with the joyous message that the enemy had been vanquished and the land liberated, and that a king had arisen who had led the people from darkness and would be their guide unto light in the dawning future that awaited them. And remembrance of the sister-queen was not absent, either, and she would henceforth be remembered by all the generations of the people, and her name would be forever blessed.

† † †

Eldárien rides on horseback across the land, his sights set on returning to the citadel of Séra Galáptes. But his eyes are for his people. He rides now on the longer way, around the southwest end of the great chasm, the earthrend, and again through the city of Onylándun. He stops along the way at as many villages and settlements as he can, seeing for himself the damage that they and their people have suffered. And in each he does something that he did not before know that he could do. No longer is the light needed to banish the creatures of darkness from the face of Telmérion, but it remains in him nonetheless, an inheritance and a gift entrusted to his care for the sake of those for whom he has received guardianship and a role of guidance. What surprises him now, not in desire but in capacity, is that it is also a role of healing.

For before departing from Minstead he had stood on the battlements of the city looking south across the chasm, whose far end was barely visible in the afternoon light. All the land around the earthrend for leagues was scarred and blighted, the grass and the trees dying or already dead. Though the land was spared, and her people, the scars remained. Moved by this, he had descended from the wall and walked out of the city, to the graveyard and the remembrance of the fallen that lay to the north. Standing in its midst he had looked around, lamenting not only the great number of the tombs but also the deadness of the land.

Many stood about nearby, either mourning for their lost or working to clear the land of blighted vegetation, in the frail hopes that, whether this spring or some other, new life would sprout where death had been. But Eldárien himself knew that it was not to be. The land was sick and barren, all fruitfulness having fled from it with the wound inflicted upon its very heart. Yet what Eldárien did not know was that he could bring healing to this wound. Kneeling down against the earth, he placed his hands against it in a gesture of tenderness and sorrow, as if bidding farewell to the Telmérion that had been. But in a moment, light had begun to spread forth from his hands, curling like water channeling in hollows of the earth, like streamlets widening from a wellspring across a broad and flat plain. Soon the entire field, and beyond it, all the way to the edge of the great chasm, was bathed in light, and glowed gently. And then to the astonishment of all, green buds sprouted up from the earth where but a moment before only lifelessness had been. Trees and grasses, bushes and flowers, all sprang forth and waved gently in the breeze, turning a blackened landscape immediately into an ocean of green.

One man far to Eldárien's left exclaimed, "And it is hardly the beginning of spring!" while others simply laughed in sheer wonder and delight. Tilliána, who stood a few paces behind her king, made the remark, "Telmérion shall henceforth be, by the ministrations of the light, a garden, where death is

replaced by life and barrenness by abundant creativity and radiant fecundity."

And so Eldárien has done in every place through which, on his journey, he has passed, bringing life back into a land that was scarred and poisoned unto death. And all who see him know and are convinced, with the deep consolation of the heart, that their king has indeed come. And so it is that he comes forth again to the great citadel in which the darkness was conquered and the light victorious, and in which his beloved sister departed this world, leaving both peace and painful longing in her wake. He ascends the great stairs up the side of the mountain and beholds the citadel, so different in appearance and feel than it had been in its time of darkness. Now its massive stone walls, ancient and yet so white and pure that their faces shine brilliant in the sun, stand visible like a beacon upon a hill, and the lines and curves of the citadel's architecture show forth not only the work of a master craftsman, but that of an eye that has gazed long and deeply into the light. Henceforth for many ages, people will look up toward the Teldren Mountains and, if the day is especially clear or the sun particularly bright, they will exclaim: "Look! It is the great white citadel, the home of the king!"

For so it is to be. Eldárien returns to the citadel, and many shall follow him there in the coming days. With the destruction of many towns and villages throughout the center of Telmérion, and with the aftereffects of the terrible conflict in which the Empire engaged in its last push for power in the lands of Rhóvas and Mineäs, a new settlement is to be built. In conjunction with the rebuilding that takes place throughout the rest of the land, the ancient seat of the high kings of Telmérion, the people of the Galapteäni, righteous in fidelity and friends both of the One and of the Velási, the gifted custodians of his memory, is being reborn. And even if such people have long passed away in the ages gone and in the calamities of recent days, they still continue to live in Eldárien, their blood flowing in his veins. And this inheritance he receives in humility and awe, allowing it to hold him and to flow forth within him, that he may be a custodian of the people entrusted to his care, the safeguard and protector of their peace, their joy, and the wonder that he wishes to mark every moment of their life.

He climbs the spiral staircase that he and Elmáriyë once climbed in such anguish and darkness, recalling all the while the path that they had walked, and the decisive moments that had unfolded when they reached the crystal chamber. And he looks out now from this chamber, whose windows have now become translucent once again, bathed in a radiant light that comes both from without, from the sun and the sky, and from within, from the blessing that they have received both from their makers long past and from the gift that has been imbued anew into them by the light that there descended. But in looking through these windows, Eldárien does not see as one ordinarily

sees, or rather his ordinary sight is deepened and extended, and he can look out for many miles across the face of Telmérion, a king keeping guardianship of his people with some small share in the vision of the One who is their true Guardian. Eldárien only prays that he may ever share in the love and compassion, the wisdom and the gentleness, of the heart of this true King, and that his kingship may but manifest and serve the reign of the light in the world. Such are his thoughts and his desires as he stands in the crystal chamber and gazes forth upon the land, scarred and wounded but radiant in beauty, that has been entrusted to him.

And as he looks, he sees three riders approaching from the south, directing their horses leisurely through the heart of Galas Basin, the location of the new settlement that shall soon spring up for those who wish to make a new start under the shadow of the ancient citadel reborn. And he knows these riders as much from what he sees as from the sense in his heart as he looks upon them. "My friends," he sighs, and without further hesitation he descends the stairs and makes ready for their arrival.

When they step together into the entrance chamber to the citadel, he embraces each of them in turn, speaking their names with love and with gratitude. "My heart rejoices that you have come so soon," says Eldárien. "I was not looking forward to tidying up this old castle all on my own in the coming days." He smiles softly and adds, "But to speak more truly, I had begun to miss deeply those who have become so dear to my heart. The months of my travel through the land, healing as I went, were long ones. I yearned for your presence and your companionship."

"But especially for the presence of your sister," Cirien says tenderly.

"Yes. And so it shall be henceforth until the end of my life. She has taken me with her where she has gone, and yet she is also here with me where I remain," he says, touching his hand to his breast. "Of this I am certain."

"Never would I have known that our path would lead unto this," remarks Rórlain, his body now fully recovered from the trauma inflicted upon it, though he now also bears scars of his own. "When I first vowed to accompany you to whatever end, I did not expect that it would lead unto the revival of the high kingship of Telmérion—and in the one in whose very flesh live the mysteries of our heritage and of the truth entrusted to our people, long forgotten for many ages, but manifest now and, through you, made to live again."

"It has always lived," says Eldárien in response. "It is only that we had forgotten it, and what great grief such forgetfulness caused. But come, now is not the time to recall the ills of the past, but to let life spring anew in the present and to blossom unto the future. Let us only walk with humility and reverence of heart, with gratitude and with confidence, with joy and the

lightness of childlike wonder, for an inexpressible and eternal Love goes before us, and walks with us every step of the way."

"To that I willingly speak a wholehearted 'yes'!" Rórlain exclaims with a heartfelt and joyful laugh, and in this moment Eldárien is moved to witness the newness of being that his friend has discovered, a lightness found not in any earthly home alone, but in the home of the heart that fills every home while surpassing them all, the true and enduring repose.

"You know, Rórlain," Eldárien begins, a twinkle of affection and wonder in his eyes, "let us go together soon to visit your father. I would like to see him again, and to do so with you."

"That is a wonderful suggestion," agrees Rórlain, "but then I shall come back with you once again. You shall never be rid of me as long as you live."

"Nor would I wish for it to be otherwise." Eldárien says. And then, as if taken by a deep remembrance of the pain and beauty of their journey and its ending, and of the meaning that has lived radiant and pure within it all, he continues: "I once told your father that the measure of a man lies in his home. And I said that this is even more true of the home of his choice than the home of his origin. A man is not bound to his earthly home, whether good or ill, in an absolute sense. It has formed him, fashioned him, affected him, sometimes for good and sometimes for ill. But as he grows into mature fullness, the home that he chooses reveals even more deeply what kind of man he is, and what he values. And I still stand by what I said. Yet I also see now that there is an even deeper truth: beyond what is revealed by a man's choosing is what is revealed in his *being chosen*. Or rather, I would say, by his *being loved*. By his *being desired*. We cannot fashion ourselves however we wish, not only because so many influences go before us on this earth, and we swim in their tide to one degree or another. But even more deeply, this is because our origin, the tender predilection of the Love that gives birth to our very being in this world, and beyond it, contains in itself the capacity for every choice and the hope of every destiny."

He pauses and is for a moment lost in thought, before at last he concludes, "I suppose what I am trying to say is that the deeper truth revealed to me is that the measure of man lies not only in a man's choice of his home, but in the fact that his home has chosen him. No matter what the contours of our life on this earth may be, no matter what the particular nature of the home that we may find in this life—and may we ever provide a home both beautiful and transparent to the people of our land—our true home is both deeper and wider. It alone is unchanging and eternally enduring; it alone reaches into the deepest depths and the highest heights. Yes, this very home in which our heart finds rest is not a mere earthly home—which can never be more than a way-station on the journey—but our very Origin himself, who, because he is

our origin, is also our true destination and our full Consummation."

"In the embrace of infinite and eternal Love," Rórlain replies, and the others nod in agreement as he speaks, "lies the beginning and the end of man, and also his journey throughout this life. I wish for all to know this Love, and to experience the tenderness of his embrace, the sweetness of his gaze, and the blessedness of his communion."

Laughing softly, Tilliána says, "How I delight to hear your words, my friends! But come, we shall have time to speak later in much greater depth and to our hearts' content."

"Indeed, shall you show us to this chamber of which you spoke?" Cirien says. "I would like to see the place in which our dear Elmáriyë departed from us. My heart longs to say a final goodbye, or perhaps better, to reach out and receive her anew, though the eyes of my flesh can see her no more."

"Of course, I will guide you there," Eldárien answers, and he leads his three companions back to the crystal chamber, where they all look together upon the land, and marvel, as in their hearts they pray in both grief and in gratitude for their sister and their friend, whose sacrifice allowed the Light itself, in a land condemned unto death and darkness, to work such marvelous wonders of restoration and of life.

† † †

The day before his official coronation, which occurs one year to the day on the anniversary of the company's arrival in the home of the Velási, he exercises his first official act as the ruler of the realm. As his first act of righteous rule, just mercy he shows unto those men who had aligned themselves with the darkness. Irilóf and the other soldiers and officers of the Empire who had sold their honor in exchange for their lives are granted a sentence that is both healing punishment and merciful pardon. "There is nowhere you may now go in which you shall be welcome," Eldárien says to them. "The Empire of Vælíria has fallen and a republic springs up in its place. Would you go hence expecting to find refuge, when you sided with the very order that they seek to surpass? But you have also made enemies of the people of Telmérion and have brought great ills upon them. For your deeds you deserve imprisonment, or even death, though such is not mine to give, but only for him who is ruler of both death and life. I therefore offer you two choices: you may remain in Telmérion as humble workers aiding in her restoration and her flourishing, free servants of all, rehabilitated in society without titles or stature except those accruing from your good character and the integrity of your actions. Or you can depart from our shores on whatever boat will take you, but henceforth you shall be banished, never to return during the years of your life, though our prayers go with you that you shall find a greater and better home, indeed the true home of every human heart." They all, to a man, decide to

remain in Telmérion and to aid in her rebirth.

And so it is: the day of coronation arrives, and the Galas Basin is filled to overflowing with people from across the continent, who have come with great enthusiasm to witness an event unlike any that has happened in a millennium: the coronation of their king, who is already becoming dearly beloved to the hearts of his people. But this coronation is not just a coronation, but also a wedding. For on this day Eldárien Illómiel receives unto himself in marriage Tilliána Valésa, and she in turn receive him, and she shall henceforth be his wife and the queen of the land, exercising at his side a rule both benevolent and wise.

On a raised dais at the foot of the ancient stairs leading to the citadel, they are wed, the sun shining bright upon them as if to show forth the pleasure and delight of the heavens on this day. And then they sit together, side by side, upon humble thrones erected for the occasion, and Cirien, representative of the people and now great-father of the cult of Eldáru, the One, places upon their heads glittering crowns of gold and silver. And around Eldárien's neck and upon his breast he places the amulet that he had once received, so many years ago, when in fleeing from the destruction of his village he had taken refuge in the barrow of the king, Séra Galáptes, his ancestor.

When this has concluded, Eldárien and Tilliána rise to their feet, hands joined, and they step forth to the edge of the dais. Cheers and shouts of joy greet them, echoing across the basin from mountain peak to mountain peak. The cheers continue for many minutes, as the anguish and loss, the hope and the longing of the people well up into an outburst of relief and of joy, and all faces are streaked with tears, the tears in which mourning and loss give birth to joy and new life.

At last Eldárien raises a hand in gesture, and gradually the sounds return to silence. Then he addresses the people, his voice sounding freely across the basin, "My dearly beloved people, I cannot express in words what my heart would wish to say to you on this day. For this is a day that we had almost lost a thousand time over, and, were we left to our own resources and power, we would surely have lost. But here we stand today, overwhelmed with the goodness and mercy of the One who fashioned us, and who, when our people were sinking into the darkness once again, sent forth his light to liberate and to save, and to mark out for us anew a path from life unto life, even beyond the death that was our fate and our fear. So let us rejoice this day, and every day hence, knowing that this is the reason that we were made, and the deepest delight of the One who made us.

"Rejoice, I say! Look upon the ones whom your heart loves, look upon your friends and the members of your family, look upon all, even strangers and those whom you may not natively love—look upon them from this

happiness, and let joy give birth to newfound depths of love within you. Remember too, in the sorrows of loss, those who have died, and lament their absence; and let the same light of joy beget hope within you that there is yet a land beyond ours, beyond this world itself, which knows no death. I myself do this, thinking of all those valiant souls who have died during the terrible war from which we now emerge, and even of the broken souls who turned from the light. Let us think of them all and pray for them, holding their image before the eyes of the heart. I myself do this in the remembrance of my dear sister, Elmáriyë Siliári, whose adopted parents and siblings are here with us today. We were separated not long after my birth through circumstances far beyond our control or comprehension; but by a plan greater than that of any man, we were reunited and given to understand what had happened to us, and the gift that had been entrusted to our care.

"I remember her as I remember so many others, even those men whom I had slain, or who in my company had died, when in my waywardness I had fought for the Empire in the wilderness of Tel-Velfána. Yes, I share this with you that you may know that I, too, am a recipient of mercy and have found life undeserving. As have we all, my dear friends, as have we all. So let us receive this gift, and let us rejoice. For only in receiving, only in the gratitude that springs up in the heart from undeserved beneficence, can we find joy in the present and hope for the future.

"Let every dawning day be a new hope of abundant life; let every budding tree or blossoming flower thrill your heart with the joy of first discovery; let every moment you live, every word you speak or hear, and the very fabric of time and space that makes up our life in this world, in this land that is ours, be a song of rejoicing and a hymn of praise. That is my wish for you, my people, and that is my intention. And I vow before you now, humbled by your beauty and by your trust, that I shall be the custodian of the goodness that is intended for you, and that I shall ever rejoice in your happiness as if it were my own, just as I join you in your sorrow. Let us walk together, hand in hand, heart joined to heart, toward the land where sorrow shall be no more and endless happiness shall be our lot, in the Love that knows no darkness or dusk, but only abundant and everlasting Day."

Epilogue

The sun sends light slanting through the thick canopy of trees, causing dappled light to dance upon the forest floor, warm and majestic, humble and serene. Hældáris walks through the dense underbrush, his leather boots damp with the morning dew. For twenty years he has lived in the citadel upon the mountain, and for as many of those as he has known how to walk, he has gone into the woods, first accompanied by his mother or his father, and then, later, in a solitude which he so loves and cherishes, for in it sounds a voice unheard. And this he does now, on this morning, as he has done so many times before, the mysterious longing tugging gently yet insistently upon his heart.

His auburn hair glistens and shines in the slanting sunlight, its darker hue made to appear more brilliant, as if afire, in the rays of the sun. Neither of his parents have auburn in their hair, but his father has told him that his aunt, his father's sister, had hair almost the same color as Hældáris' own. He wishes that he could have met her and come to know her, for all that he has heard of her has touched his heart deeply. Yet even so, he feels a kinship with her both deep and wide, and in his heart of hearts he has long welcomed her as a companion of life, to be ever at his side in gladness and in sadness, in wonder and in play, and in whatever the future of his life may yet hold for him who is the heir to the throne of Telmérion.

Drinking in the warmth and brilliance of the light, Hældáris closes his eyes and raises his face toward the heavens. And all the while he opens wide his ears and listens to the rich sounds of the forest, whether that be the rustle of the breeze in the leaves of the trees overhead, or the soft call of a dove in a nearby tree, or the sound of silence itself, encompassing and permeating all.

And suddenly he hears an unexpected sound: the crack of a branch under a booted foot not far away. Opening his eyes he turns around and searches for the source of the sound. He is surprised by what he sees. A woman emerges from the trees appearing almost as if she has lived ever in their midst, hidden by them as one would be hidden by a veil. Her beauty is radiant and pure, of a kind far deeper than beauty of the flesh, though through the flesh it shines.

Drawing near to Hældáris in but a few broad steps, the woman stands directly in front of him and reaches out a hand and gently touches his chest, partly as if pointing and partly as if seeking to make contact, through the body, with his heart that beats deep within. Then her face bursts into a radiant smile that lights up her features in such a way that the very uncreated light seems to shine in and through her. And she seems to be youth itself—as if

sprung but this morning from the womb of the dawn—and yet also old far beyond her years, with a memory reaching back to the very foundations of the earth.

"You are Hældáris," she says, in a voice that enfolds him and seems to cradle him on all sides and to fill him with consolation. "You are the son of Eldárien Illómiel, the inheritor of the conjoined blood of the Galapteäni and the Velási. I knew them both, Eldárien and Elmáriyë, the siblings who in their littleness and humility were the hope of our hurting world. And I rejoice to see them live in you, just as I rejoice to see you, seikáni, child of the light, infinitely and eternally loved."

"W-who are you?" Hældáris manages to say, as their eyes interlock in a prolonged gaze of mutual beholding.

"My name is Relmaríndë," the woman replies, her face still bathed in joy. "I am one of your people, though you see us not. Hidden now from human sight but kept in the shelter of the light, we watch over all of you. In our veiledness, we keep our ceaseless vigil of prayer and of play until the coming of the promised one, the Dawnbringer, who shall fulfill every hope and longing in the intimacy of joy and the joy of intimacy."

I SING OF ARMS TO GOD, THE LAW,
THE ALL-GIVING WORD AND ALL-FAITHFUL,
FOR HIS LOVE AND WRATH AND MERCIFUL JUDGMENT.
WHO I SING TO HIM FOR GLORIOUS VICTORIES WON,
FOR HE IS THE ONLY GOD AND SAVIOUR.
FOR HE IS I AM, HE IS SAMSUNG,
IN THE BEGINNING AND END
OF FAITH, HOPE, AND HEART FOREVER,
FROM WHOM THIS STORY HAS BEEN SAVED
AND IN WHOMEVER SPIRIT, FRAILTY, AND DEATH.
WHO IS ALLOW HIS LIGHT TO SHINE ON MORE BRIGHTLY
IN THE CHARACTERS OF OUR WORD, THROUGH WHICH HE APPEARS,
THAT THIS LIGHT MAY DRAW US ALL THROUGH HIS,
UNTIL IN HIM, IN THE LOVER AS THE LOVED ONE,
FOR FROM HIM WE HAVE BEEN BORN
AND TO HIM, BY SHEER GRACE, WE ARE TO BE SAVED.

A Small Grammar and Vocabulary of Ancient Telméric

(with Parallel Notes and Additions concerning Vælírian)

RUNE	ENGLISH	PRONUNCIATION
	A	Arecha
	B	Bena
	C	Cara
	D	Dea
	E	Ea
	F	Fia
	G	Geka
	H	Hara
	I	Ia
	K	Kara
	L	Lea
	M	Mea
	N	Nea
	O	Oa
	P	Pia
	Q	Quena
	R	Ra
	S	Sera
	T	Ta
	U	Ua
	V	Vena
	Y	Ya

Introductory Note Concerning the Presence of Vælírian in the Following:
This grammar and vocabulary is dedicated specifically to ancient Telméric (from which some idea of the contemporary language of the Telméri of the second and third ages can be deduced). But considering the similarities with the language of Vælíria, which due to the homogeneity imposed by the Empire has remained much closer to its roots, words and rules are also given for this latter language. These are shown following the Telméric in (parentheses), as for example:

Telméric	Vælírian
acóra – seed	(köra)

So too in grammar, for clarity the Vælírian shall be prefaced by "Vl:":

Telméric	Vælírian
– Past participle – remove ending and add -enga.	(Vl: -engë)

The ancient Telméric alphabet consists of twenty-two letters, omitting our current usage of j, w, x, and z. The runes, with their transcription into the contemporary alphabet, are given above. Below can be found the pronunciation rules for each letter.

Pronunciation of Letters

A **–** short, as in the word "walk," under all normal circumstances; i.e. Elmáriyë (el-mah-ree-eh). If there is an exception and the "a" is pronounced differently, it is thus marked as "â" (equivalent to æ) or augmented by a diphthong, as in "ai" or "æ" (though not "aë"). It is also augmented when it is the last syllable of a word, such as in "Ristfánd" and "Miránd," pronounced as in the English word "and."

B **–** same as the English pronunciation; always a hard sound with the lips closed and with no tooth ("th").

C **–** pronounced as a hard c, a "k" sound, when at the beginning of a word, i.e. ciri (though when used in contemporary names, has a soft sound, e.g. Cirien [siri-en]). When appearing between two vowels, receives the pronunciation "ch," as in the English "chase." There are a few cases, however, whenever it appears at the end of a word followed by an "h;" in this case it is pronounced as a more guttural "kh" sound, a blend between k-he and ch-he.

D **–** same as the English pronunciation, though often spoken very softly, resembling a blend between "d" and "th."

E **–** always pronounced as a short "e," as in "welcome," and never as a long "e," as "me;" i.e. belia (bell-ee-ah). When this letter receives the accent, it receives a subtle inflection of the voice, while remaining short. When appearing at the end of a word, it carries the umlaut marking and, when following a consonant, sounds more like "uh" than "eh" (with variations depending on the regional dialect), as in the name Relmarindë (rehl-mah-rihn-dúh). When following a

vowel, including y—and also the letter v—it sounds more like "eh" than "uh," as in the name Elmariyë (ehl-mah-ree-yéh).

F **–** same as the ordinary pronunciation of "f," though hints still linger of an ancient tendency to pronounce this more with the lips closed, thus producing a sound that resembles "pf-." This is very subtle, insofar as it continued to survive as an element of the language at all.

G **–** always a hard "g," even where English would naturally pronounce as a softer "g," as in "gist." There are two exceptions to this: 1) at the base of this "g" sound, there is at times a "throaty" pronunciation arising in the back of the throat, though this occurs spontaneously, and is not necessary. This usually occurs when the "g" is between two consonants, and thus sounds with an inflection of the "k" sound, as in ungden, (ungkden). 2) When two "g's" are together, they are pronounced softly, as in the English word "age," e.g. æggia.

H **–** same as English pronunciation in ordinary circumstances, though when it directly follows a consonant, it is silent. The exceptions to this rule are "t" and "s," after which it is expressed as a puff of air in the throat (a normal h) which augments the preceding letter, rather than as being combined with it, as a "th" or "sh" sound. In order to facilitate clarity with common speech, words using this exception usually provide an apostrophe after the consonant, as in the word thandas, written as t'handas.

I **–** always a short "i," as in the English "pick," and never as in "iceberg." There is no augmentation, as in English, when the "i" precedes a consonant, which in turn is followed by a vowel (as in "ice" above); thus seïka is pronounced as "sey-ee-kah," and not as "sey-eye-kah."

J **–** this letter does not exist in ancient Telméric, and if current words include it, this can be traced back to the presence of the letter "y," which later developed into the two different letters with different emphases of pronunciation (see below).

K **–** always a hard "k" in the back of the throat.

L **–** simple "l" pronunciation.

M **–** not different than English.

N **–** follows the ordinary pronunciation of "n."

O **–** Always short unless augmented in a diphthong. Different than the English in significant ways. For example, it does not follow the rule of the "w" or long "o" sound when beginning a word, as in English "one"; the Telméric word "one" is pronounced "ah-neh," with a short "o." The only exception to this is when the "o" comes at the end of a word, then it is slightly longer, e.g. "poro," "poor-oh."

P **–** ordinary.

Q **–** almost always a soft sound, followed by a "u." The only exception to this is when it occurs at the end of a word; then it sounds like a hard "k," as in tinaq (ti-nak).

R – ordinary pronunciation, though often spontaneously rolled, particularly when at the beginning of a word, or between vowels.
S – ordinary (see above for unique rule when joined with h).
T – ordinary (see above for unique rule when joined with h).
U – always a long sound, as in "tube," but never with a "y" sound at the beginning, as in English words, e.g. "universe." This emphasis, which is sometimes unintuitive for English speakers, is often denoted by the phonetic symbol "û," e.g. the proper name Malrûn (mahl-roon).
V – same as English, with the coming together of the top teeth against the bottom lip.
W – this letter does not exist in ancient Telméric, and was contained within the letter "v," arising only in later development.
X – also does not exist in ancient Telméric.
Y – similar to English pronunciation. Pronounced as a short "i" when between two consonants: e.g. Wýgrec, Fýrir, wylána. All "j's" in newer names and places are pronounced as a "y" sound, since "j" does not exist in ancient Telméric: e.g. Alíja (Ah-lee-yah).

(Note: Unless noted otherwise, all Vælírian pronunciations are the same as ancient Telméric, though the former does include the letters "j" and "w." "J" is pronounced as in the English "joy" when at the beginning of words, and as an "h" when in their midst. For example "duja" is pronounced as "doo-hah." "W" follows the rules as in English.)

Diphthong Pronunciations: *(basically equivalent in Vl.)*
ai – long "a" sound, as in English "rain," (e.g. Rórlain).
aio – "ay-ohn," (i.e. as in English "hay") as in Anaíon and Draíon.
aï – pronounced as two distinct syllables, a short "a" and a short "e", in certain dialects with a "h" sound joining them; an exceptional case in Telméric. Thus the word "aïn" is often pronounced "ah-hen."
ae (usually written as **æ**) – basically equivalent to the Latin, a long "a" sound, often gliding into an "e" at the end of the diphthong pronunciation, similar to the sound of the "a" in the English word "ages." For example, *hæras* (hay-rahs).
aë – unlike the above, this is pronounced with a very clear enunciation of each vowel, "ah-eh," as in *noaë,* "no-ah-eh."
æë (âë) – a rare combination, pronounced as a long "a" followed by a short "e", as in the surname Faræ'ël, pronounced "far-ay-el." For simplicity's sake, this is now simply written as Farâël.
ei – long "a" sound, as in English "stay."
ie – long "e" as in English "eat."
ïe – long "e" followed by long "a," in many dialects with a soft "h" sound joining them, "ee-hay," as in *stïeka,* "chasm."

jia – although this is not proper ancient Telméric, many contemporary names, tracing their roots back, manifest this conjunction of letters; usually pronounced as a "y" sound, the j, when followed by ia, is spoken rather as an "h." Hence: "hee-ah," as in, for example, Rejía.
oë – oh, eh.
œ – long "o" sound, as in "ocean," as in the word *rœdra*.

Grammar

In terms of grammar, for the sake of simplicity (at least for native English speakers), the rules are more or less equivalent with contemporary English. This makes learning ancient Telméric relatively easy, since it is mostly a matter of learning vocabulary, pronunciation, and a few rules, rather than mastering a different grammar (e.g. the declension system).

SPECIAL RULES:

1. Certain pronouns follow a minimal form of the declension system, namely "me" and "you" and "they." These each have three forms, used for the nominative (subject of the sentence), dative and accusative (direct and indirect object), and genitive (possessive) respectively. These are:

– Me: me, mia, melen	(me, meä, meän)
– You: te, ta, tua	(te, tara, tuara)
– You (pl): su, si, sua	(se, sara, seära)
– They: ena, enia, enen	(enna, enneä, enneän)
– Us: noë, noän, noën	(nos, noäs, noën)
– It: ia, iana, iyen	(ita, itan, iten)

2. The order of words is much freer in ancient Telméric than it is in English, and as long as the meaning remains intelligible, order does not affect the meaning of a sentence. For example, the possessive pronoun may go either before or after the object, e.g. "your children" or "children your": *seleánin tua*, or *tua seleánin*.

Accent Rules: *(same in Vl.)*

- Two syllables: accent falls on last syllable, though in most cases emphasis is very light, and two syllables are almost equivalent: elén
- Three syllables: accent falls on next to last syllable: fundála
- Four or more syllables: accent falls on next to last syllable, with some exceptions to the rule: eliáru, kalasteía (exception example: meléndia)

Pluralization rules:

(there are plenty of exceptions, but these rules are generally valid). Word ending followed by suffix, with an example:

- i + -n (sekani, sekanin) (Vl: -si)
- a, n + -si (fæn, fænsi, vela, velási) (Vl: -r. If ending with a, remove the a)

- e, ia (remove a) + -on (brudghë, brudghon, Anaía, Anaíon) (Vl: same)
- most consonants + -i (cæhil, cæhili) (Vl: same)
- (Also, in Vælírian: when eïa or aïa, ending is -rë. Example: aïa, aïarë)
- (Also, in Vælírian: k or ch (also ka, cha) + -si, Example: gaka, gaksi)

<u>Verb tenses:</u>

– Present/infinitive – ordinary ending of each verb as in dictionary
– Past – remove ending and add -at. (Vl: -ara)
– Past participle – remove ending and add -enga. (Vl: -entë or -antë)
– Present participle – remove ending and add -eng. (Vl: -engë or -angë)
– Future – remove ending and add -ata. (Vl: same)
– Imperative – usually just add -s to end. (Vl: same)

Telméric–English Dictionary (with Vælírian Additions)

A

a – to	(same; usually omitted)
acóra – seed	(köra)
ærë – dream	(avánë)
æsa, æsi – wind	(aysa, aysi)
æva, ævi – story	(fræla, fræli)
æn – sigh (noun/verb)	(aïa, aïarë)
alaia – eternity	(nuhændë)
alaie – eternal	(nuhændis)
allo – light (adj. concerning weight)	(gállo)
allacora – lighthearted, light-heart	(galæsta)
aïn – for	(anë)
ædir – before	(eifor)
adéro – energy, stamina	(alánda)
adra – able, capable	(aidra)
adraë – able to (followed by verb)	(adraë)
adria – ability (noun)	(aidreä)
æftir – after	(aftir)
ægge, æggia – urge (verb/noun)	(hûgra, hûgrë)
æggres – anger	(rœra)
æggre – to be angry	(rœrë)
æggresta – aggressiveness	(rœrása)
æreäd – air fairy	(same)
anadraë – cannot	(same)
Anaía, Anaíon – celestial spirit, divinity (no gender)	(same)
andra – wonder	(storma)
andraplera – wonderful	(stormressa)
ainé, ainá – god, goddess	(ánar, anári)
ane, ana – this	(same)
ana – onto	(ona)
anga – delight	(fænga)
ann – a(n), a certain, any (adj)	(an)
annorta – north	(same)
annustra – south	(same)
æpa – upon	(ûpa)
aldes, aldesi – tree	(res)
aras – origin	(æras)
arecha – beginning	(ærengë)
asang – song	(asora)
asta, astási – star	(same)
aska – to be born	(same)

astra – future (anáfa)
asuna – while, during (anúsa)
ata – at (same)
átho – though, although (átho)

B

bánda – death (vorn)
belía – daughter (same)
belós – son (same)
brega, bregási – hint (kávis)
brudghë – cliff, cliffside (cururë)
brugeä – cliff overlooking the ocean (gala)

C

cæhil – city, large settlement (olmlænd)
cæra – to deliver (same)
cakraë – cacophony, noise (same)
cara – peace (misína)
castra – throne (same)
castria – throne (adj) (same)
ciri – humble (siri)
claris – visible (authis)
cora – heart (hausta)
corahas – harmony (foëri)
cris – clean, pure (hûra)
crunæ – discordant (crûca)
crunas – discord (crûcás)

D

dar, dári – gift (noun) (dan)
dal – to give (dana)
den – to mind, to give presence (orasen)
denas – awake (adj) (vaka)
adenas – asleep (adj) (ovaka)
dere – lost (onerë)
dia – from, by (dera)
difë – send (sænda)
dirë – (verb) to direct, guide, bring (mirë)
diya – day (as in 24 hour period) (deïa)
draico – dragon (dræga)
Draía, Draíon – spirit of darkness, fallen celestial spirit (same)
driga – to drink (draga)
dugra – skill (same)
duya – deep (duja)

E

eä – being (noun, ontological), also "to be" (verb) (íä)

eäs – being (noun, concrete) (írä)
ecla – bend, turn (noun) (esla)
efála – dance (both n. and v.) (falá, falás)
eiga – edge, brink (eïga)
el – all (noun) (æll)
elas – love (noun) (elása)
elalándra – philosophy, the love of wisdom (elasándra)
elandra – wisdom (sandra)
elandre – wise (adj and m. and f. noun) (elsándrë)
elementa – generation (gemaïa)
elementar – elder (gema)
elen – to be (iren)
eicta – eight (eiras)
eictanda – eighth (erianta)
eidoch – steppe (tuva)
eliána – good/beautiful, goodness/beauty (same)
eliaru – to love (eliasu)
en – and (et)
ena, enia, enen – they (nom, dat/acc, gen) (enna, enneä, enneän)
endralë – forever (endrasë)
enna – still (ennë)
eng – zero (éro)
entas – behind (honda)
entra – among (henda)
einnen – when (same)
eös – fear, terror (oróës)
eöten, eötenga – creature of darkness (ötûn, ötûnr)
erésa – east (same)
eya – into (esa)

F

fast – nature (as in the natural world) (fæst)
faempir, -i – vampire (stringa, stringr)
faemgrund, -i – vampire hound (stringhunda, -r)
fæn, fænsi – man, male (fûnd, fûndr)
fæna, fænási – woman, female (fûna, fûnári)
fæn – to receive (fen)
fænd, fændi – village, small settlement (holm)
fesk, feski – fish (fæsk, fæskr)
feskar, feskári – fisherman (fæskana, fæskanr)
fel – woods, forest (fæl)
fian, fiana – new (adj) (niy)
feld, felda – old (adj) (oniya)
fra – now (anfa)

fraë – henceforth (anfaë)
fraër – far, distant (anfalóra)
freyja – longing (fræya)
funda – true (adj) (vestën)
fundála – truth (vestë)
fyris – because (ûris)

G

galema, galemi – echo (gaka, gaksi)
ganya – wife (fûnya, fûnyári)
glær – steed (mærr)
gœdi – priest (gôdi, -r)
grafa – to dig (same)
gripa – finger (fipa)
grund, grundi – hound, dog (hund, hundr)
gunnas – abyss, emptiness, hollow space (orchas)
gyalla – string (of bow or instrument) (gjalla)

H

hældár, hældári – moon moth, symbélyia (same)
hæras, i – jarl, chief (háres, harési)
hægra – hope (same)
haifa – have, possess (verb) (háva)
hailæ – dawn (same)
hailændir – Dawnbringer (same)
halánë – joyful (alanë)
hama – shape (haima)
handa – hand, palm (pæma)
harmir – sorrow (hœrmir)
hasa, hasia – praise (noun/verb) (hasad, hasan)
hasío – holy (hjolla)
hata – that, in order that (hjata)
haugera – barrow (hæruna)
haugra – burial mound (hæs, hæsi)
Heillas, Heillasi – Holy One, Blessed One (Hjolland, -i)
henna – flower (falær)
hïen – man (same)
hisa – ice (issa)
hist – husband (hûst)
histria – movement (same)
hûnda – passage of time (as: "in time") (hænda)
hûnd – hour, time, moment (hænd)
hûpa – under, underneath (ûpa)
hvitá – white, resplendent (avíta)
hyarn – snow (hræn)

hyla – hidden, to hide (hila)
hyga – give heed, take heed, hearken (higa)
hyra – to hear (hïera)

I

ia, iana, iyen – it (ita, itan, iten)
iella – to surrender, to give oneself (ella)
iræn – universe, the wholeness of existing things (æran)
ievántyr – adventure (vantyr)
igga – to sleep (líga)
iggya – sleep, slumber (ligánja)
igna – fire (ifær)
ilá – to trust (same)
ilas – trust (same)
il – in (en)
ildrich – flatlands (dorich)
illo – light (noun) (hælo)
illu – teach (verb) (iûsu)
illustre – lamp, lantern (iûssa)
incle – bend, incline (verb) (same)
incla – slope, incline (noun) (same)
irion, iria – continent, landmass (gendered: e.g. Telmérion; Vælíria)

K

ka'el (kaël) – to say, speak (same)
kaina – to acknowledge, to reckon (kána)
kalen – end, goal (lithín)
kalasteia – consummation (lithíntas)
kalla – name (ononë)
kiela – lake (særa)
korda – termination (akas)
kvéda – lament, mourning (noun and verb) (kavæda)
kvisæ – whisper (kaïea)

L

læng – long (lûng)
landa – land, earth (can also mean "region") (lænd)
lementa – age (ærûn)
liëne – free (same)
lika – like, as (illi)
likna – warm (likna)
likü – to warm, to heat (laíka)
lista, -ri – knight, oath-bound warrior (ista, -ë)
luka – plant (noun) (aupta)

M

ma – mama (intimate term for mother) (aïma)

mærdenás, mærdenási – horror, terror	(hœror)
mære – nightmare, bad dream	(hœror ligánja)
mala, malasi – musical note	(maïsa, maïsari)
mande – to offer, to proffer	(same)
mara – (adj) great	(aka)
maris – (adj) very	(mardis)
meara – tenderness	(merenna)
mena (adj) small	(anaka/mæn)
maréa – sea, ocean	(marë)
matra – mother	(mothir)
me, mia, melen – me (nom, dat/acc, gen)	(me, meä, meän)
medlur – shadow, false image	(græmka, -ri)
meldaë – melody	(same)
meldia – melodious (adj)	(meldareä)
melda – five	(melda)
meldanda – fifth	(meldánta)
melen – gentle (adj)	(same)
meléndia – gentleness	(same)
mena, menaë – count, quantity (Telméric currency)	(anaë)
meneris – memory	(menæris)
menes – to remain	(menæs)
midda – middle, center	(same)
mïel – gentle	(hïel)
minne – small, little one (n)	(mæna)
mon, moën – all, every	(mana, manári)
moendas – everything	(mænda)
mora – morning	(mûra)
morda – grove	(tusa)
myska – soft	(myjka)
mykke – large	(mæka)
myr – to heal, to treat	(méra)
myrdalánæ – herb; pl. and s.; lit. gift-of-healing	(mérdas, merdári)

N

na – indeed	(ana)
narië – always	(same)
nata – night	(nûtta)
ne – no	(anû)
nenua – nine	(nena)
nenuada – ninth	(nenata)
net – not	(anûta)
nïera – moon	(nijéra)
nïerana – month	(nijeránda)
nirande – to yield, to give way	(same)

noë, noän, noën – us (nos, noäs, noën)
nua – none (anua)
nu – of (é)

O

obsca – (adj) dark (dorása)
obscur – darkness (dóras)
Oë – "O" vocative address (same)
ohomë – need (same)
ola – soil, dirt (oïla)
olaska – womb (kvída)
olveäd – water fairy (same)
ona – one (œna)
onanda – first (adj) (œnanta)
onba – to wait (bætha)
onbæd – waiting (noun) (bæthrata)
onis – place, location (aris)
onys – each (onis)
onanda – unique (onaris)
oreäd – earth fairy (same)
oro – pleasant, enjoyable (rithra)

P

paras – to confront, to stand against (parra)
passa – beyond (ælta)
patras – father (fæthir)
pænnas – embrace, bosom (penna)
pleras – fullness (ressa)
poro/a – first (noun) (porœn)
proia – to sound (præ)
proya – sound (apreä)

Q

qua – who (qæ)
quanda – fourth (ceänta)
quara – four (ceän)
qui – what, which (qœ)

R

raha – lacking (adj, more pejorative than seni) (same)
raö – mind (noun) (araö)
rego – realm, kingdom (rœma)
ren – strength (strenga)
riënë – river (roënë)
rinda – firm (rinta)
rindaro/a – firmness (rintasa)
rist – rich, wealthy (riska)

risté, rista, risti – nobleman/woman	(norandë)
rœc – hill	(rœrk)
roër, roëra – valiant	(vandémas)
rœdra – office/study, reception chamber	(same)

S

sælis – sun	(aslaë)
saemda – honor	(sûmda)
sama – same	(lasa)
sano – pure (interior reality, adj)	(hûrera)
sara – to paint	(sairë)
saráta – painted (adj)	(sairenta)
seä – to sing	(same)
sed – two	(æto)
sedra – second	(ætata)
segía – to show	(seyya)
seko/a, -anin – chosen	(seäkë/a, -ri)
sek – to choose	(seä)
seïkani, anin – beloved	(seännë/a, -i)
seka – six	(sæks)
sekara – sixth	(sækata)
seles, selea, seleánin – child	(sælë, -a, -iri)
seni – without (adj)	(same)
septes – seven	(sævra)
septanda – seventh	(sævrata)
sera – to live	(sûdra)
slæka – order, congregation	(slyekt)
stadeä – home	(haem)
stïeka – rift, chasm	(stûka)
sorda – strife	(asorda)
su, si, sua – you (plural)	(se, sara, seära)
sura, surana – life	(sûda)
surë, surá, suría – person, people	(surë, surá, suríri)
svas – sweet	(same)
svatá – to sweeten, to make sweet	(svára)
sýstra – courtyard; also castle bailey	(sístres)

T

ta – papa (intimate term for father)	(aba)
tan – the	(átë)
tareä – faith (noun)	(afeä)
tarë – faith (verb)	(afrë)
Telmérin, Telméri – citizen of Telmérion (still used)	(same)
tera – three	(tirda)
teranda – third	(tirdata)

t'handas – companion, friend-at-hand (tæhan)
théstas – hidden treasure (tréstas)
tillë – cultivate, also n. for garden (same)
tillae – cult (of worship), noun (i.e. religion). (tillaë)
tina – to plow (same)
tinaq – plow (n.) (same)
tinda – to fall, to be lost (tænda)
tinta – ten (tæn)
tindanda – tenth (tænta)
tinde, tinda, tindási – fallen, lost (noun) (tænd, -a, -ari)
toralë – to take (same)
torda – to remove (tœr)
torvéla – to unveil (tœrvélë)
tratë – (verb) to move (same)
tu, ti, tua – you (nominative, dative/accusative, genitive) (te, tara, tuara)
tæn – beast (tûn, -r)

U

ûlra – hearth (hûlra)
ûngden – hurt, hurting (ûnka)
ûfor – under (metaphysical) (ûfra)
ûrésa – west (same)
ûvéla – face (ûvæla)

V

varás – spring (væras)
vas – spirit (same)
vecca – feast (vïeca)
vel, velí – veil (same)
vela, velasi – veiled one(s) (same)
vellen – bosom, breast (bresen)
ven – to come (ven)
vengr, -i – serpent (vænga, -r)
ventrás – winter (uïntas)
visa – to know (væsa)
visíndi – knowledge, understanding (væsinti)
voä – cry, plead (same)
voll – plain, flat stretch of land, meadow (vollra)
vrŭ'ádach – humanoid eöten (vornknost)

Y

ya – an expressive form of "en" (and), inseparable conjoining (aya)
yad – high or tall (aíad)
yahë – final (sahë)
yé – gracefulness (ayë)
yfir – above (æfir)

yin – mountain	(loth)
yora – valley	(vald)
yovar – younger (noun and adj.)	(œvar)

NUMBERS

The first word is the name of the letter (e.g. one, two); the second word is the descriptor (first, second).

0 – eng	(éro)
1 – ona; onanda	(ena, enasa)
2 – sed; sedra	(æto, ætata)
3 – tera; teranda	(tirda, tirdata)
4 – quara; quanda	(ceän, ceänta)
5 – melda; meldanda	(melda, meldánta)
6 – seka; sekara	(sæks, sækata)
7 – septes; septanda	(sævra, sævrata)
8 – eicta; eictanda	(eiras, eiranta)
9 – nenua; nenuada	(nena, nenata)
10 – tinta; tindanda	(tæn, tænta)
11 – ona'te; onatanda	(enatæ, enatata)
12 – seda'te; sedatanda	(ætotæ, ætotata)

DAYS OF THE WEEK

Eldarídia *(Sunday)*	(Enadeïa)
Mornwýdia *(Monday)*	(Morndeïa)
Toroánia *(Tuesday)*	(Tordeïa)
Haelínia *(Wednesday)*	(Hældeïa)
Neréthia *(Thursday)*	(Neredeïa)
Meléngthia *(Friday)*	(Melendeïa)
Niránia *(Saturday)*	(Telmodeïa)

DIRECTIONS ON THE COMPASS

(same in Valírian)

annorta – north
erésa – east
annustra – south
ûrésa – west
erë-annorta, ûrë-annorta – northeast, northwest
erë-annustra, ûrë-annustra – southeast, southwest
orta-erésa, ustra-erésa – northeast, southeast
orta-urésa, ustra-urésa – northwest, southwest

MONTHS

The connection between the Telméric months and our contemporary Gregorian calendar is only approximate, as the Telméri in fact counted the winter solstice the beginning of the year, and thus the first day of the month of Fiándas, though for us this falls in mid-December.

Telméric		Vælírian
Fiándas *(January)*	-	Nævas
Sedrás *(February)*	-	Olírion
Téras *(March)*	-	Hûnding
Quartás *(April)*	-	Érnach
Meldrás *(May)*	-	Mærnach
Sesémas *(June)*	-	Allána
Septémas *(July)*	-	Alléssa
Eicta *(August)*	-	Onúrion
Nenás *(September)*	-	Nenæras
Tintás *(October)*	-	Ilístras
Onátas *(November)*	-	Místras
Sedátas *(December)*	-	Ventéras

Regional Maps

The Galaptéä Region

The Rhóvas Region