

ALL ASANO A?A \*ELMERION

*A SONG FOR  
TELMERION*

*DAWNBRINGER  
BOOK FOUR*

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ISBN: 9798322215097

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## 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 Valyrian 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 of 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 in with more noble aspirations. And through the very act by which the Empire sought to prevent rebellion it actually 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 *trogan* and *derelyon*, though they originated in the land of Telmerion far to the east, where they were called *eötenga* and *druadach*—and they sought some way to harness these powers on their side, in fear of suffering the destruction they might bring were they to find access to the overworld. Yet 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 stair, centuries, perhaps millennia ancient, by which those exiled by the Empire could again escape 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 turn all around it ablaze. Just as the Empire learns how to find the druadach that still live in the land of Telmerion, and to join with them in warfare against a rebellious nation on distant shores, at that very same time rebellion sparks 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 Valyrian Empire and the birth of a new order.

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Elmariyë 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 Valyria far across the sea. How she knows this she cannot explain even to herself, but she simply knows, and cannot doubt it. What she has seen is true, and the conflict now blazing in the land of Valyria is just as visceral, just as real as that now playing out in their own land, crippled as it is in the two-pinned 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 over 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 a subtle pre-dawn light that filters in through the large window looking out over the city below.

Her mind and heart are preoccupied with the impressions left from 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 Telmerion are now immersed. This, of course, was obvious on first glance, but Elmariyë 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 Eldarien. 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 answers her gentle knock on his door almost immediately.

“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.”

“To mine as well,” agrees Eldarien, and then, with a glimmer in his eyes, he asks, “Is there something on your heart, or something that you needed?”

“There is indeed something on my heart. You see, I had a dream last night...but it was unusual. It wasn’t like a dream, but 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 Valyrian Empire. I would have doubted them were they not 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 Eldarien. “There has always been a great deal of censorship regarding what the officers of the Empire allow to cross the waters and to reach us. It seems that is always the case with such totalitarianism—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 Elmariyë. “And I fear that many think of the Creator in a similar way: 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, no communion, can it appear as anything but an excessive demand, made with force of will, with the power of might?”

Eldarien nods sadly to this, but then, looking up into Elmariyë’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, the society of humankind, would follow such a truth,” sighs Elmariyë. “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 Valyria. It appears that those who prove a danger to the 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 utilized as a massive prison for the undesirables.”

“A prison?” Eldarien asks. “How can people make a living beneath the earth?”

“According to what I beheld, they can little do so, and many perish. But those who survive have become hardy and strong, and have also risen up in rebellion—and freedom they have found at last.”

“Freedom?”

“Yes,” says Elmariyë. “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 Valyrian Empire?” asks Eldarien. “How do you know this is not of the past or of the future?”

Elmariyë 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

“There may be a way. We just need to discover it,” Eldarien says.

“Another thing needs to be said, however, about what I saw,” continues El-mariyë. “It seems to answer some questions that we have had, you most of all. I hope that somehow it may also give us light for the path going forward, though I know not yet how, precisely.”

“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 that is how the plan was first conceived to join with them in order to quell the rebellion here in Telmerion,” Eldarien 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 El-mariyë with a shrug of her shoulders.

After this Eldarien lowers his head, leaning his chin against the palm of his hand, and he thinks of the import of El-mariyë’s dream. She too leans in, bringing her head nearer to his as if such proximity would aid them both in thinking, though in fact she is drawn by the implicit desire to be closer to him in this place. At last, after many moments have passed, Eldarien 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 Telmerion 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, then adds, “To be honest, if anything, it causes me to feel more overwhelmed. For if I am called upon to expel 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,” El-mariyë says. “And yet...and yet will it really 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.”

Eldarien 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, the darkness in this world, remains regardless of whether it is fashioned into eötenga or not,” El-mariyë says, hesitantly following this train of thought. “And that, no human gift alone can atone. If I recall correctly, Silion was very clear about this truth. Your task is another, lesser role, a small share in a greater work and a humble preparation for



the true Dawnbringer...the one whose name is most rightly and truly Lightbringer.”

Eldarien nods. “You are right. Silion 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, 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 Elmaryë. “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 it may be, enduring light awaits, undimmed and unbreakable.”

† † †

“Yes, the druidach appeared directly in the city with the coming of the night. Normal methods of resisting siege, therefore, are useless against them.” Rorlain and Eldarien sit in council with *haras* Bryma. At this moment he is questioning them concerning the assault on Ristfand in hopes of aiding and abetting the preparation for a coming attack upon Onylandun. 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 combating 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, how then can I protect my people?” Bryma 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 would that not only expose them to danger upon the road?”

“If the attack is aimed at the city, then flight is a viable option,” answers Eldarien. “Those who flee could escape the notice of the druidach, 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 and torches. Brilliant natural light is the only 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 druidach, while those unable to fight directly take refuge inside. So it was in Ristfand.”

“That is true,” Rorlain 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 arose from the depths of the earth—we know not what other forms of *eöten* we may encounter. I fear that our strength of arms will be far from enough.”

“That is my fear,” says Bryma. “For even a single dragon has been able to wreak havoc among my people, and has eluded all our efforts at resistance. I am

afraid that flight is the only viable option that I see before me, unless it be relying upon the light that you wield.”

Eldarien and Rorlain share a meaningful glance for a moment, and then Eldarien, turning to Bryma, says, “The light indeed has the power to dispel many of these creatures at once, but I fear that—for the simple limits of our presence and our strength—it shall not be enough to defend an entire city.”

“The limits of your strength?”

“Yes. 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.”

“Or perhaps worse,” Rorlain comments quietly.

“What then do you recommend?” asks Bryma.

“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 Rúmdil are still looking into the matter,” Eldarien says. “But my 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 think we are being watched?”

“Considering the nature of our enemy, I would think it almost certain.” After a deep sigh, Eldarien 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 druidach 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 find the origin of their power, even if its nature I can in some way guess.”

“So there is no hope?” asks Bryma.

“There never was much hope, at least not immediately visible to the eyes or stored up in the resources of our own hearts.”

“Then we stay and give what resistance we can?” Bryma offers, the regret and despair evident in his voice.

“I suggest so,” says Rorlain, and Eldarien nods as well. “And we should give unto all, citizens and warriors alike, weapons and flame and light. The druidach 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, 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. However, the problem is that he may command them from a distance.”

“Enough...” Bryma sighs, and then, more forcefully, “Enough! I have heard enough! In all that you say, I hear one thing: it is impossible. There is little to no hope, but we have no choice but to resist anyway. Fine...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 Eldarien. “I wish 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,” Bryma responds, making an ef-

fort to calm himself. “I know that you are doing all that you can. It just does not seem to be enough...not nearly enough.”

“It is not enough,” says Rorlain, “but it is all that we have.”

Eldarien ventures further words, even though Bryma 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 the beginning—the beginning of fruitful resistance to the forces of darkness.”

“It is very difficult to believe that such could be the case,” Bryma remarks.

“And yet so we must believe, if we are to act at all,” replies Eldarien. “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, Rorlain shall head up the defense of the city from the bulk of their forces. This we have already discussed.”

To this Bryma 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 Bryma it appears only to be strength and courage. For being the sole surviving *heras* of the people of Telmerion, 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 has made his heart and his city an open and hospitable space for the one who stands revealed before him as the promised king. And Eldarien, 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 Eldarien 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 Eldarien—granted a gracious conclusion to these terrible days, becomes the future king—is so vividly aware of his own role of stewardship, how can Bryma not recognize that his role has also always been one of steward? That, at least, is the way that Bryma sees it, and he is not even aware himself of the degree to which this disposition is a mysterious grace fashioned within him by invisible forces 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,” Bryma 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 something more than courage, something that I can only term hope, born of faith. I can only 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 engulfed in the anguishing darkness that grows day by day, threatening to swallow up our people in endless night.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### UNDER THE CITY

Eldarien and Elmaryië both feel it: the attack is coming 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 Ristfand pale in comparison. Sharing this word with their companions as well as with the council of Onylandun, 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 number, and placed in sconces throughout the streets and alleyways of the city, to be lit to dispel the shadows from which alone the druidach appear. Handheld torches are also given to each family, in accord with the number of persons in each household, so that none may 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 assault 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, uncountable, and their preparations remain founded upon guesswork or frail hopes and intuitions rather than upon the certainty of what awaits them. Yet they have no choice but to so prepare.

Eldarien 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, 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?” Eldarien 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 Eldarien 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 be docile to the light: with open hands and open heart,” Cirien says, not responding directly to Eldarien’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 dims and darkens and blinds the heart, narrowing it from the wideness for which it was made, preoccupying it with its possessiveness, with its foresight and control, and with the pleasures and passions of life. To stand poor, with heart open and vulnerable, is to suffer both 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 Eldarien.

“This you must do on behalf of all,” agrees Cirien, placing his hand upon his friend’s shoulder for a long moment. “I would wish that this battle were already concluded, that you could follow your course to its end. I know that it beckons you, draws you ardently from deep within. I see it and feel it.”

“I wish I knew where to go, as well as the path to arrive there.”

“As do I. But it shall be shown unto you. Of this I have no doubt.”

“But when the time comes, and when I depart,” says Eldarien, “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 way 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 indebted to others, and can be aided by them. 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 Eldarien.

“Go not without Elmariyë,” 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 and sharing with it the whiteness of its pallor whose purity stands in sharp contrast with the darkness that the citizens fearfully await. Tilliana 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 Tilliana 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 Ristfand, which has left a deep scar upon her heart which 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. Though she must also admit to herself that the thought of them deepens her fear, not perhaps intensifying it but giv-

ing it another color, another level of intensity and seriousness. For she fears not only for herself, nor only for the people of Telmerion, the beauty of whose existence is being so cruelly caught up in the lusts 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 Tilliana 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 to healing and to the guidance of the light. She thinks of Eldarien most especially now, however, and of the hopes and uncertainties of the future.

Suddenly, her thoughts are interrupted by the sound of footsteps coming down the hallway behind her. She turns slightly to look and sees Elmariyë approaching. They share gentle smiles as a greeting and then the latter passes on, continuing down the hall. But then, after a moment of hesitation, Tilliana says, "Wait a moment, Elmariyë."

"Yes?" she turns back and looks at her friend.

"I wanted to...I wanted to share with you something that weighs upon my heart," begins Tilliana, uncertain of what precisely she wishes to say and yet knowing that she wants to say it.

"Of course," Elmariyë replies with a kind and tender expression, and she steps forward until she is close to Tilliana. 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," Tilliana stutters, struggling to begin. But then she finds her voice. "I don't know 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 like I am standing before an abyss over which there is no 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 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 Eldarien, Rorlain, and Cirien."

Seeing that Tilliana pauses, Elmariyë asks, "Do you wish that you had more time to grieve their loss in solitude?"

After thinking about this for a moment, Tilliana responds confidently, "No. That is not it at all. I think it was best this way. Yes... I don't 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 Elmariyë, "whatever the future may hold."

"And that...that is what worries and afflicts me so deeply." Tilliana sighs and turns back to the window, and Elmariyë 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, Tilliana turns back to Elmariyë and continues, "I am afraid that I shall lose so quickly and so totally what I was so quickly and so freely given. And I do not want such loss and such pain. But above all, I do not want to see you suffer. Eldarien and

Rorlain stand face to face with the powers of darkness; they walk straight into the darkest of darks and stand in 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 Têlmerion shall be when this war is concluded, if Têlmerion as we now know it shall still exist at all.” She pauses and hesitates for a moment, but, consoled and invited by Elmaryë’s loving gaze, she continues. “I fear believing in any promises for the future, or leaning into any hopes, for fear that in their very birth they shall be stillborn, snuffed out like a candle in mere moments.”

“You fear losing those whom you have come to love,” Elmaryë responds, “and this keeps you from opening your heart fully to the promises that such love makes?”

She nods.

“There is nothing I can do to assuage such fear,” continues Elmaryë. “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 it, and your very grappling is showing 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 Elmaryë steps forward and takes both of Tilliana’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, without leaving this position, Elmaryë 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, of 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.”

† † †

On the following day Cirien and Rûmdil discover the traces of the cult beneath the earth, in a sewage tunnel that passes the entire length of the lower city. Before entering, they ask Eldarien, Rorlain, and Bryma 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, this 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, functioning 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 the blood of the dragon’s victims. 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 is Cirien, perhaps the only man who, without having any acquaintance with such cults and their activities, is nonetheless well-versed enough even in the darkness to understand their secret runes. A grievous 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 Bryma, 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 Bryma 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 write out the runes in their given order upon the paper given to him, and then, for another quarter hour, dwells upon them, 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 runes 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 anything, Cirien turns to his companions and says, “That was much easier than I expected it to be. Once I was able to discern the gist 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 Eldarien 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, Eldarien 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 buchsa,  
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,” Eldarien sighs 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 felt as such, even though I knew not the words.”

Shaking his head sorrowfully, Cirien replies, “And you were right to feel so. For I will give you the words, translated as best I can in a short moment, into our tongue, though they don’t 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 Draion ascend, let the Anaion 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, faltering 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 Eldarien 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 Draion have long known of the coming of a promised king and also that they have had every intent to destroy him. As he opens his mouth to stammer out some response, he is interrupted by Rorlain, who says, “Well, that is not encouraging in the least. But I suppose we could have expected nothing less.”

“Indeed,” says Cirien, placing a consoling hand on Eldarien’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 hate of creatures who have become so corrupted from their original purpose that they know nothing but hatred and envy.”

To this Eldarien 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 with this 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, without any prior indication, it widens and opens out into a vaulted chamber with a ceiling fifteen or twenty feet high and a good forty across in both directions.

“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 long while.”

“I would not interpret the evidence in such a way so easily,” says Bryma. “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,” Rorlain 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.”

And so Rûmdil and Cirien do, until the room is bathed in the warm and flickering light of more than a dozen mounted lanterns, and 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 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 drawing or an 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?” Rorlain 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 really think we confront more than that,” Eldarien 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 cared for by the Anaion 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, with power and its capacity to use any violence to achieve its ends.” Then, turning to Cirien, he extends his hand and asks, “Could I hold your torch for a moment?”

After Cirien gives it to him, Eldarien 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 runs of the Cycle.

“It is the same as 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 looks like 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 Eldarien’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,’ of 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, the sickness that lies within it like a virus. But then Eldarien 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. Instead, there is something like an impenetrable shadow, a place of utter blackness, which refuses the light.

“What about the light of Hiliana?” Rorlain asks.

Eldarien 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, and 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, almost like a battle of two fighters, of two forces, is being enacted, and the visible light and darkness are only reflecting this encounter. But only a moment later there is a brilliant flash of light bursting forth from the center of the dais, and all of the men spontaneously step backward in surprise. The light returns into Eldarien’s hand and then all returns to normal, 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. But as if the darkness was not enough, 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 Rorlain 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 enough 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 druadach 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 like shadow given form than like a 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 it all 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 paradox 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 none of the men are able to hear anything, and they fear that their hearing capacity has been broken by the intensity of the sound. But gradually hearing 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 subdued, tones.

“*Lugbuch gordas lug*, you come here with failing hopes and faltering strength, and you seek to set yourself against forces far beyond you.” The beast faces Eldarien 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.”

It 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, stirring lust, or like 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, 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?” Eldarien manages to say, though his voice is hoarse and strained with the effort.

“I thought that is what I just said,” the creature responds, “though many have also lain dormant for centuries, only to be awakened again. And you aided in this, did you not, stirring up what had been slumbering? Well, old and new 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, Rorlain 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 a way. You must 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, that 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 direction. Surely you have glimpsed the delightful destruction that I have already worked in the very heart of this city? Poor Bryma, such a pitiful ruler,” he says, turning slightly so that his gaze falls more directly upon the *heras* of Onylandis. “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 given me 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 so a cycle it seemed unto them. But I know the deeper truth. They thought in circles, and so came to seek escape. 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. Oh no, 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 darkness. And yet a moment later, as if by instinct, the eyes of Eldarien and Rorlain interlock, and then together they open what hidden depths of their hearts still remain open to the light, and call it 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, their bodies shaking and weak, they look around. 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 cries—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 wound in the earth, and they immediately learn that the same light that had enfolded the five men in the chamber 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 instantaneous.

Eldarien receives this news with a mixture of relief and of regret. The light, called upon by his and Rorlain's conscious will, had nonetheless spread to protect 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? Why had this happened, and what was its import? Indeed, why had this explosion occurred at all? 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 Bryma 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 shall share more information with all of you soon."

"Bryma, it was not—" Eldarien begins softly, whispering in his ear. But Bryma 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 Bryma, 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 groans and shakes 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 Telmerion, black mist begins to belch 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 Bryma 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 a grayish orb in the midst of a black sheet overhead.

And then something even worse than the external darkness comes. Eldarien and Rorlain 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 begins to emerge a creature not unlike the druidach, but much larger, with muscle rippling across its taut flesh. It climbs out of 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 looks almost like 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, with fangs bared, hungering for prey. The creature steps forward and calls out in the black language words of command, to which respond immediately its companions, eötenga in great number, of all shapes and sizes, crawling forth from the crater as spiders from their secret lairs. There are druidach not unlike those that they have encountered before—in the barrow of Sera Galaptes and in the siege of Ristfand—though they look to 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 on the upper arms and legs, which evidently serve as armor. In addition to these druidach, there are other eötenga as well, whose great variety and grotesqueness surpass description.

“And thus it begins...” sighs Eldarien, 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 Bryma and Cirien and says, “Have everyone evacuate the lower city to the upper portions, and seal off all access between the two. I know not how or where they shall 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, all of it. 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 Bryma. They turn and lay their eyes upon a soldier of the guard, his face lined 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 Bryma in anguish.

“The very same as I said,” insists Eldarien. “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. Rorlain is at his side, his axe already blazing with bluish light.

“We must be sparing,” Eldarien manages to say before they engage the en-

emy. "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 Rorlain, and then he sweeps forward, his axe blazing, leaving a trail of light lingering in the air where three drudach are felled in a single blow.

Without being asked, a company of soldiers does join the two men, though Eldarien 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 assails 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, Eldarien places himself in the path of the largest beast, whose flesh roils with snakes dancing left and right and preparing to strike when it steps into proximity with the soldiers of the guard. And they do strike out against Eldarien 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 horrible sound that causes the eardrums to ache. But then they are silent.

Eldarien falters, feeling the strength leave him, and he leans for a moment upon his sword to regain his balance. 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 Eldarien in combat. In an instant its upraised arms are intercepted by Rorlain, who leaps through the air and with a wide swipe removes both of its hands from its body. These two dissolve to nothing as soon as they touch the earth. Howling in anger, the eöten raises its head into the air and calls out. Without hesitating, Eldarien 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, Eldarien's eyes see behind it more creatures of similar size and form climbing forth from the crater, all of them roaring in triumphant rage, their bodies as though fashioned to be weapons of both danger and terror by a malicious will and a mind that delights in twisted forms.

"We're going to be overrun, Eldarien," Rorlain calls from a few feet behind him. "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 upper portions of the city which lie only perhaps a hundred yards to the north.

"But the arrows will not be enough," laments Rorlain. "Unless they strike the heart, they shall do no good."

"If only we could..." Eldarien breathes, but his voice dies in his throat.

For a moment, before the enemy engages them again, Rorlain catches Eldarien'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 Rorlain extends his arms and closes his eyes, rapt in intense concentration. Immediately Eldarien feels power passing through him, surging through his heart and his flesh as it flows into Rorlain, and through Rorlain 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 they dissolve, defeated, even if the arrow that struck their bodies only grazed them.

Eldarien allows himself to be encouraged by this sight, even though he feels the weakness grip him still more strongly. He hesitates for a moment, but, 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 with them, overwhelming the heart and deadening the body even as it tries to resist.

† † †

Tilliana and Elmaryë rush through the upper city, lighting lights and encouraging wavering spirits as the battle rages below. Evacuees from the lower city—women, children, and the elderly—are aided in their flight to the citadel and its surrounding buildings, until there is no longer any room; 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 training, 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, or are already together with Eldarien and Rorlain 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 fray, not to fight 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, though 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 Hinding. Senfyr, the captain-vicar, also accompanies him in leading the men. They come to the aid of those fighting with Eldarien and Rorlain 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 Hinding, it is hardly more than a quarter of an hour before the guards of Onylandun are pushed back to the base of the stone wall upon which the upper city stands.

“We cannot hold them any longer!” Rorlain cries to Eldarien through the fray, his axe still blazing with light in his hand, though his voice is ragged and betrays the exhaustion that threatens to overtake him. “There are too many. If we stay here any longer, none of us will survive.”

Eldarien 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 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 Ristfand. Eldarien indeed has the vivid sense that the only thing keeping the creatures of darkness from emerging at will is the light that stands against it, the light entrusted into the care of Rorlain 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 words that once emerged from within his own heart during a moment of deep realization, a realization that has continued to carry him through many places of darkness and remains with him even now: *I am not the light, but am in service of the light.*

This remembrance allows him to accept Rorlain’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 Rorlain then lead the company up the stone steps to the upper city—calling out for Hinding’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 Rorlain confers upon them.

“What else can we do?” Rorlain says, his voice constrained with anguish, when the gate closes behind them.

“I don’t...I really don’t know,” answers Eldarien, wiping the sweat running 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?” Senfyr asks, joining the conversation. At his side stands Hinding, though the latter’s attention is directed to his men, whom he addresses in words of encouragement.

“We would need to find their leader and to break his power,” Rorlain answers. “But I have seen none who might be such.”

“If it is the one who called himself the Lord of Death,” says Eldarien 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. 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,” Senfyr says, “where was he and what happened to him?”

“He was hidden in the underbelly of the city, summoned here 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 in the same place again?” Senfyr asks. “I know it sounds foolish, but...if they are still emerging from the same place, could he not still be there giving life to them?”

Eldarien and Rorlain think about this for a moment, and then the former says, “I doubt it. Proximity has little or no effect on the power of 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 Senfyr’s suggestion.”

“What truth do you imply?”

“I wish I knew...”

At this moment Hinding finishes speaking to his men and turns to the three, interrupting their converse. He says to Eldarien, “You are the one of whom all now speak? The one gifted with light and claiming to bear the blood and heritage of Sera Galaptes? 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 accusative, but rather merely inquisitive.

Eldarien 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 keeping them from entering the upper city.

“We have little time,” Rorlain says. “Is there any way that I can assist you, Eldarien?”

“I...I need to be alone for a moment, to concentrate,” 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.*

For a long moment after this, time seems to stop, and Eldarien feels suspended in expectation, a dense silence and darkness enfolding him, not now as 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 Telmerion, 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 Onylandun 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 Eldarien's place 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—Eldarien feels a sense of oppressive evil, of inexpressible wickedness and malice, and also a sense of impending danger, not only to the people of Telmerion 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, ignoring 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 the 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 had come, the vision ceases, and Eldarien's consciousness returns to the guardhouse, where he kneels with his forehead to the floor, the sounds of fear and battle echoing through the walls that surround him. He rises to his feet, trying to allow 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 Eldarien now, as he pushes open the door of the guardhouse and steps into the crowd of soldiers that stands at 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 Rorlain 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,” Eldarien says to Hinding, 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 Eldarien, making sure his words are loud enough to be heard by Rorlain and Senfyr also. “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 hope of restoring peace yet.”

“And yet is there hope of holding them off?” Senfyr rejoins, his voice laced with doubt. “One of the larger of these beasts is worth thirty men.”

“Aye, that is true,” Rorlain accedes, “and yet, with the power of the light, one man may be worth thirty druadach, and even a good number of the greater eötenga, provided we can gain an advantage.”

“But what advantage could we possibly gain?” Senfyr asks.

“It is our city,” interjects Hinding. “So let us use it for our purposes. We have little time, however. The gate shall not hold much longer.” Then turning directly to Eldarien and Rorlain, 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 Rorlain. “But what about the people of the city? Many have 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 it, it shall be up to our best fighters to defend them,” replies Hinding. “But we must let our archers know also to aim most especially to prevent the houses being breached.”

Just as these words have left Hinding’s mouth, there is a high splitting sound and the gate near which they stand gives way beneath the blows of a massive troll-like eöten.

“Senfyr, put my words into effect immediately!” cries Hinding, 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. Hinding fearlessly steps to the front of the line of soldiers and engages directly with the enemy, his sword hewing down one creature after another. Rorlain and Eldarien 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 forth through the rift, it is very difficult to restrain them in order to give Senfyr the necessary time to set in motion their plan of defense. But they fight to the utmost of their ability—Hinding like a wild tempest sweeping against the creatures of darkness, and Eldarien and Rorlain 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 energetic resolve.

Yet even as they fight, the company of soldiers is gradually pushed back further from the gate and to the center of the city. The sheer 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, and to engage them from this distance. Eventually Rorlain slips his axe back into his belt and takes his bow from his back, loosing arrows upon the enemy until they are all spent. Eldarien, on the other hand, remains always in the vanguard of the forces, with Hinding 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 one rises to take its place. The druidach pose less threat, however, 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 eötenga 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 bears 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 electricity that brings instant death to all whom it touches. Dismayed at the sight of this beast, Eldarien 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!” Eldarien 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, Hinding calls to Eldarien, and says, “Its hide is too thick for arrows!”

“But it is impossible to get close enough to strike it,” Eldarien 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, Eldarien 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 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. Eldarien 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, Rorlain reaches out for Eldarien, and says, "Let me help you up."

But as soon as Eldarien is to his feet, and Rorlain 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, with Senfyr 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 Hinding and his company.

"Where is Hinding?" Rorlain asks.

"His company must have been forced down a different street," answers Eldarien, leaning on his friend as he tries to regain his strength. "I am wearying, Rorlain, I am wearying."

"Allow me to carry the load alone for a while," is Rorlain's tacit response. "I can channel the light still, so allow me to do it."

"It will be much harder without my assistance," retorts Eldarien.

"Let me try it nonetheless."

"...Very well." After this, Eldarien 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, trying to reach deep within himself in order to draw upon strength where his own fails, and where even the strength that had flowed within him before seems to be inadequate to the task of continuing when his fatigue has reached such a level of intensity.

Even as he focuses in this way, he is interrupted by the words of Senfyr, "What about Hinding? I fear for his company, separated from the rest."

"I..." Eldarien looks up and opens his mouth to speak, but is interrupted by a sound that echoes across the sky above them, sending waves of terror into all alike. All know that sound, though they had hoped beyond hope never to hear it again.

"Until now it had only been taunting us," Senfyr 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 with a burst of light as fire rains down upon the city in a steady stream from one side to the other, igniting soldiers and buildings alike.

"Get off the roofs! Get off the roofs!" Senfyr cries, rushing forward and calling out to all who can hear his voice. "Find whatever cover you can!"

Rorlain, rushing away and disappearing onto a side street, picks up Senfyr's

words and relays them to others.

For his part, despite the fact that his flesh fails and his heart is choked with fear, Eldarien cries out, “Courage, men, courage! We have the light, and we have 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 now as the presence of the dragon is added to the blackness that already envelops all things and the violent assault that already presses upon them. But as afraid as he is, Eldarien 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 Rorlain, seeking to join his friend in whatever he aims to do.

† † †

Despite the efforts of the soldiers of the guard, the upper city is now almost entirely overrun by the forces of darkness, and the druidach have begun to batter and break the doors to the houses and to enter into them, their wicked intent 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, Senfyr 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 amid 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 a war cry in response to Senfyr’s words, 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. 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, Elmariyë 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, Elmariyë draws in a deep breath, though her chest is constricted and her lungs constrained. For a moment the fear of death vibrates through her being like a violent 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 Niraniel with whom she had shared daily life, and who had weathered the assault on Ristfand 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 Rorlain and of Ciriën, of Tilliana and of her brother, Eldariën. And in this moment all that she wants to do is to hold them close and never let go. Yes, face to face with death, she does not wish to let go, to leave them behind and to behold them, touch them, and love them no longer 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 them to be extracted without tearing.

But then Elmaryë 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 strong 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 druidach 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 Elmaryë calls upon the light within her—this light that she has felt flowing ceaselessly since the siege began, channeled by Eldariën and Rorlain—and she summons forth what measure she thinks necessary. It pours forth from her upraised palm, a shower of radiance meeting the incoming druidach 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 calls out.

“For now...” Elmaryë replies, stumbling in exhaustion from channeling the light, an act with which she is entirely unacquainted. It took almost everything she had to do it. But she says, “Help me to barricade the door again, before more seek to enter.” Even as she speaks more druidach break off from the main company that fills the street outside and step into the house. She reaches for the light again, but she feels through it the faltering weakness of her companions, and her heart hesitates. Does 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 to channel the purging light into the weapons of the city guard? 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 that she knows is that their lives are threatened, and that she has the power to protect them. And even as the dru-

adach 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 earth 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 druidach 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 worried face of Tilliana looking down upon her.

“What—?”

“They were able to hold the druidach off for the present,” Tilliana 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 need to flee into the streets.”

Receiving this revelation, Elmariyë sighs, “From death into death... May it not be so.”

“Indeed, may it not,” says Tilliana, 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 Elmariyë, placing her hand in her friend’s and allowing her to raise her up.

† † †

Eldarien sprints a dozen yards behind Rorlain, 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 Rorlain 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, Eldarien realizes. He seeks to slay the dragon.*

Climbing the steps at a much slower pace, Eldarien joins his companion and stands at his side, his sword resting at the ready against his shoulder.

Without turning his gaze from the sky, Rorlain remarks softly, “My attention is divided, and is waning. It is difficult to push so strongly against the goad, 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?” Eldarien asks.

Rorlain does not reply for a moment, lost in thought, and then he says, “Wait for my word. I can bear it for now.” Yet he sighs, and adds, “But I may need your help with the dragon.”

“I would not allow you to face it alone even if you asked.”

So the two men look out over the city together, awaiting the beast as it returns to blast the city again with 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.

“Here it comes!” cries Rorlain, as the figure of the dragon appears before

them, 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, keeping 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 hollow of a wide street.

"No!" Eldarien shouts in anguish, seeing the torrent of flames cover both men and eötinga alike. "We need to bring it down!"

Rorlain 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 it. There is a burst of light as the arrow 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 be coming around again," Rorlain breathes. "Could we summon more power? Its armor is too strong."

"I don't know..." sighs Eldarien. "Perhaps an arrow is not enough, either way."

"It is too high, and too fast, for me to trust my skill with a javelin," replies Rorlain. "I don't know any other way to stop it."

"Is there some way that we could force it to land and confront us directly?"

Rorlain thinks about this question for a moment, but all the while shakes his head. "I really don't think so..."

The dragon passes over the city two more times and each time they loose another arrow at it. The first time Rorlain misses, 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 perfect," Eldarien 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, Eldarien 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 if he is grasping nothing but empty air, and an answer does not come.

† † †

Elmariyë and Tilliana 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 fleeing from the wreckage of the burning buildings. There are stray druidach assailing these people, though a handful of brave men and women with makeshift weapons are resisting them. The two women join them without hesitation. Tilliana 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. Elmariyë bears the dagger that she has carried from Ristfand, with a bow and quiver of arrows over her shoulder. For the moment she does not call upon the light again, fearing another collapse, but charges vigorously into the fray and plunges her dagger deep into the chest of a druidach who assails a young woman who cowers

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before it, trying to shield her infant child. And even as Elmariyë's blade pierces the creature's flesh, it flashes forth with bluish light not of her own channeling.

Turning back to Tilliana, she says, "They are getting much stronger."

Tilliana nods silently in response, joining her companion and looking at her for a moment, only to be interrupted by a druid who draws near to her slashing its wicked claws wildly. Stumbling back with a fearful cry, Tilliana slashes her sword and parries the claws, though they continue to bear 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 druid, embedding it deep into its thigh, in a space where two armored spines meet. The light blazes again and reduces the druid to nothingness.

Elmariyë helps Tilliana 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 Eldarien and Rorlain," Tilliana replies, catching her breath and trying to still her heart from her confrontation with the druid. "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."

Elmariyë 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, Tilliana 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 help them, it is you."

"I... So be it," answers Elmariyë, a glimmer of love and fear in her eyes. "But please be careful."

To this, Tilliana simply bows her head in acknowledgment.

And so Elmariyë turns away and hastens down the streets, all the while opening wide her heart, listening for the reverberations of Eldarien's presence which could guide her to him. She has just 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 like two opposing currents or like thunderheads meeting in the sky and threatening to burst. However, the eötenga are much greater in number than the dwindling company of men, led by the man Hinding, whose face is bloodied and whose armor is scratched, even as he continues to wield his sword with adeptness and energy. Seeing Elmariyë, he cries out, "Get away, young lady! This is no place for you!"

Any further words exchanged between them are drowned out by the vicious onslaught of the eötenga as they press forward against the warriors. Elmariyë hesitates in uncertainty and then turns to run, to follow the sense of Eldarien's consciousness that is tugging upon her heart—a consciousness that she knows now is on the point of collapse, having expended itself both in martial combat and in channeling 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 Hinding fall to the ground, the claws of a great eötenga thrust into his throat. It is too late, and his death is immediate. The company of his men falters upon witnessing the felling of their leader, and the eötenga seize upon this opportunity to press their advantage.

Conflicted in her mind and heart, Elmariyë is for an instant paralyzed in in-

decision, 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 and indeed holding all things even though no longer visible, all the eötenga in the street have vanished. The men of Hinding’s company look at her in astonishment. But, getting a grip on herself, she says to them, “G-go... There are many people now in the streets, as the houses burn. And they need to be defended.” And with this she turns and sprints away.

As she runs, she reaches out to Eldarien with the tendrils of her mind, trying to communicate with him. *Brother, can you hear me?*

There is no response.

*I am here, Eldarien, and I am coming.*

After a long silence: ... *Elmariyë?*

*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?*

*Amazing... I did not know that you could...*

*The duress has pushed me to it... The very darkness has pushed us to a deeper mode of communication.* Elmariyë pauses, and then she concludes, *But I do not know how much longer I can sustain it.*

*Then be silent, Eldarien urges. I shall see you soon.*

† † †

In the heart of Eldarien’s remembrance of the vision he had in the guard-house, Elmariyë’s voice has broken through, and he knows that with her arrival will come an answer.

“Elmariyë is coming,” he says to Rorlain. “I think she may be able to help us.”

“Very well,” Rorlain replies, even while knocking another arrow to the string of his bow. “The dragon comes again now. 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, Elmariyë’s voice bursts into Eldarien’s mind again, and with it time seems to stop, suspended by the pressing importance of their dialogue.

*Eldarien*, 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, yet 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 Onylandun.

*There is no time*, Elmariyë says within Eldarien’s mind. *The dragon’s flames spew forth at this very moment upon the street in which Tilliana 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 it.*

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 Elmariyë, 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 very 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 Eldaru.

In this act of opening, Eldarien and Elmariyë 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, Elmariyë collapses in the street where she stands, and blackness cloaks her vision, while Eldarien staggers and almost falls off the wall where he stands, except that Rorlain 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 the heart of each 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 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. 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, so 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, infidelity so terribly ruptured.

*My brother,* Elmariyë 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 and pain and exhaustion overtake her.

## CHAPTER FIVE AFTERMATH

Eldarien 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 dragonfire; he sees mangled bodies and slaughtered men, and he sees Rorlain firing arrow after arrow at the reptilian beast that flies overhead. Finally, he beholds in his inner vision the form of Elmariyë, white against a black background, and yet hemmed in on every side, assailed, until the darkness devours her as well. He sees himself, radiating 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 Rorlain close to Eldarien's side.

"You fought well," sounds the voice of Tilliana from his other side. "All in the city are indebted to you."

"They are indebted also, and especially, to our two friends," replies Rorlain. "I don't know what they did, but they saved us from utter destruction."

At this Eldarien 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 torches 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, sitting on either side of his bed, leaning forward as they converse together.

"The darkness..." he says, finding his voice again, and trying to sit up, "it endures even now."

"Oh, you're awake!" cries Tilliana, turning to him.

"How do you feel? Are you able to sit up?" Rorlain asks, seeing Eldarien's efforts.

"Yes...the weakness has in large part passed," says Eldarien, and with little support from Rorlain he eases into a sitting position while Tilliana positions 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 changed, and that the scars from the absorption of the darkness remain with him, having forever changed him. "Is Elmariyë alright?"

"Yes," answers Tilliana with a gentle smile. "She awoke not long ago, and she walks now through the corridors of the citadel. She said she needed some time alone."

"It is good to hear that she is well. Though I would like to speak with her myself."

"Of course," Rorlain says.

"But first, tell me what happened after I lost consciousness. And how long

have I been asleep?”

“Not long, considering past incidents,” answers Rorlain. “It is only afternoon of the day since 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 caused by the mist?”

“No, it did not.”

“I heard that all the enemy forces were defeated,” Eldarien says. “By that news I am surprised and yet relieved. It seemed to me that we were almost entirely overrun.”

“We were,” Rorlain 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, as well as dissolving 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, 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 for its substance.”

“That is...rather accurate,” remarks Eldarien, recalling the intense, timeless moment that he and Elmaryë shared in their confrontation with the darkness.

“What exactly happened?” asks Tilliana.

After pausing for a moment grappling for an answer, Eldarien responds, “I don’t know that I could put it into words. Suffice it to say that Elmaryë 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 Rorlain 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 Eldarien.

Rorlain shakes his head. “That is not true. They seemed dazed for a moment, 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 confused and thrown into disarray. Yet it seems that whatever you did with the dragon also effected the origin-point in the crater. 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.” Rorlain 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.”

“Oh yes, without Elmaryë and myself that task fell to you alone,” Eldarien acknowledges.



“Aye, it did. But it was one that I was glad to fulfill.” With this Rorlain 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 grateful,” says Eldarien, 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,” Rorlain 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,” Eldarien says. “I recall what happened in the depths beneath the black castle of the Lord of Mæres.”

Rorlain nods in acknowledgment.

“So go, my dear friend. Go and take some well-deserved rest,” Eldarien says. “Any other questions I have, I am sure Tilliana shall be able to answer.”

With this Rorlain takes his leave, and the two remain in the room alone, the darkness silent and still between them for a few minutes. At last Eldarien says, “I am glad that you survived the battle.”

With a shadow of grief crossing her features, Tilliana replies, “And yet so many did not.”

“Yes...the losses were so great. Did many more perish after I lost consciousness?”

“It was horrible for a long time, as we tried to save as many people as we could from the fires. Those unable or unfit to fight have spent the last day combating the flames and rescuing survivors of the battle, both in the streets and in the buildings. The upper 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 was occurring...and where most of the population had taken refuge.” She sighs and runs her hands slowly through her hair, looking at Eldarien with a glint in her eye, 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 one pass over the citadel level, and most of the buildings here are constructed entirely of stone, so it had little effect. Yet the upper level, the focus of his attack, is now but a skeleton of what it once was.”

“Do we have a count of our losses?” Eldarien asks quietly, compassion in his voice.

“The city was home to almost twenty-thousand,” replies Tilliana, “and we have a count neither of the living nor the dead. But if I had to guess, I would say that half of us have been slain, and half of us still live.”

“A terrible loss,” breathes Eldarien, bowing his head in mourning, not as an empty gesture but in true acknowledgment, as 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, looking intently at Tilliana he 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 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 is not my place to lead the people through this anguish, and if it is 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 have loved.”

“And the loss of those whom you loved is still fresh, unsoftened by time,” Eldarien 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. I revere this and affirm it. But I also think that perhaps it is not fully wise,” says Eldarien 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 want to feel the pain of all as if it is your own, but I think that is the prerogative of the One who made us, alone. Even our own pain is too much for ourselves, unaided.”

“But I cannot hold them at arms’ length!” cries Tilliana. “What kind of person am I if I close my heart off from others, if I make myself insensitive to the waves of suffering and loss washing over them...all so that I am not burdened or overwhelmed?”

“I would never ask you, Tilliana, to close off your heart from others,” Eldarien 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.”

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After their conversation has concluded, Eldarien 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. His pants and tunic are of thick and strong leather, padded on the inside with softer cloth. His undershirt is of a starched white, tied at the breast with loose strings. Beneath his tunic, however, and over his undershirt, he wears his usual gambeson, which has accompanied him now all the way from Tel-Velfana and which he still wears, the one piece of ordinary attire that has not been replaced. Set to the side of the rest, washed and folded, are the tabard and cloak that were given to him in the Velasi Forest, but he does not now dress in them and leaves them where they lie.

Eldarien’s body is sore from the combat during the preceding day, but there is an even deeper exhaustion that 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, 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 weight of evil and malevolence that weighs upon the world and threatens the well-being and freedom of human hearts. He does not

linger on any of this now, however, as he is concerned for Elmariyë, and wishes to see her as soon as he can. But even as he leaves his room in search of her, Tilliana 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 Telmerion, 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 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 Eldarien's heart: What is love but love for a single person? Even love for a community, for a nation, for all of humanity, 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 any other person, special and unrepeatable. And yet the paradox is that precisely this love for individuals opens the eyes of the heart to the love of all, to the abiding awareness of the beauty of each one of the children of Eldaru, to all persons not only in the land of Telmerion, 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, Eldarien 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 Eldarien 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 Velasi, 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 upon 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 born of a creative Love, then its truth 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 according to its beautiful illumination at every moment.

As he walks the halls of the citadel, occupied by these thoughts, he comes upon Councilor Jatildë. Lines of weariness crease her face and her eyes are downcast. Walking in the opposite direction, she almost passes by without

noticing him, but looks up at the last moment and an expression of surprise crosses her face. “Oh, it is you, Eldarien Illomiel,” 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 honest gratitude and grief in her heart.

“Your words are kind, Councilor Jatildë,” replies Eldarien. “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, and yet accepting his words nonetheless, she answers, “Thank you for your kindness, as well as for your aid.” Then, raising her eyes again, she adds, with a touching vulnerability, “When you first came to Onylandun, 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 Sera Galaptēs, the prophesied ‘Scarred King.’ But when you came bearing his likeness both in appearance and in power, I did not want 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 rulers who have sought to rule, and have delighted in this rule. The coming of a man who accepts governance out of obedient service is like a breath of fresh air in a place of suffocation.”

Bowing his head before her, Eldarien remarks with a corresponding trust and openness, “Your words, again, are kind, lady Jatildë, perhaps too kind. But I accept them as well. For me it has never been a temptation, or 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. In fact I think that no burden is ever meant to be born 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, Eldarien, that make me hope that you will indeed someday become our king,” says Jatildë, “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,” Eldarien 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 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.”

Nodding slightly, Eldarien 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 Jatildë, her gaze wandering wistfully down the hall, and Eldarien 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 your faith,” says Eldarien softly.

And thus their converse concludes and they continue on their way, 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, ever striving to hold back the encroaching darkness, Eldarien comes upon his sister. She is seated upon a stone bench with her head leaned back against the wall, her eyes closed. Nonetheless he need not say anything or give any other indication of his presence, for as soon as he draws near she opens her eyes and turns to look at him, 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 collide, must conflict, 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 ploughs 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 only a space of deeper love.”

“I hurt for you, sister,” says Eldarien in a gentle and quiet 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, that must plough 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. It must be acknowledged as such,” he rejoins.

“Rightly so,” Elmaryë says. “Yes, you speak wisely and truly in many ways. For I am young, though only twelve years younger than yourself. But it does feel like 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 am to cherish it, protect, and foster it with every act. And especially I know that I

am 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 Elmaryë places her hand to her breast, over her heart. Yes, he remained hidden, and in large part unknown, but it has always been as if I retain 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 there. 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 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 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 Elmaryë 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,” Eldarien replies. “Only lead the way.”

She leads him only 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 Eldarien 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, silhouettes among a sea of darkness interspersed with pinpoints of flickering light from torches 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 fog has spread?” Elmaryë asks, keeping her gaze directed outward upon the city.

“It is impossible to know,” replies Eldarien 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 Telmerion?”

“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 like the silence of the seaside or like the silence of prayer’s sanctuary; no, it is rather

like the silence of fear and death, of suffocation and loss.

“Eternal and endless night,” Elmaryë 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 dialogue...crying out for another and yet finding one’s voice muffled, stifled into nothingness, and bringing no response. All beauty is shadowed, 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 Eldarien’s, and he holds it tight. “This, I understand, is what our enemies would seek to do to 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, Elmaryë,” says Eldarien 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. I can only join you in the same mystery, knowing that what we feel, what we bear, is but a participation in the pain 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, Eldarien. Nothing that I say is foreign to you now, for you bear it also in your own heart, just as I bear you in mine.”

“When we absorbed the darkness of the dragon,” Eldarien 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, Elmaryë, 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,” Eldarien breathes, astounded at the ease with which they are able to name what has occurred between them, occurred within the heart of each of them, and yet also at how, in naming it, it also seems to slip away and to elude their grasp—a mystery not to be 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 Anaia, can bring us there. It is the prerogative and the capacity of the One alone, who in creating us can also fulfill us,” says Elmaryë. “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 also, that we have betrayed in our infidelity, and yet which he promises to grant anew in undeserved mercy.”

“This promise,” Eldarien sighs, “it is inscribed into the heart of each one of us, is it not? The whole of our life is stretched between two abysses, and yet passes through a third—and in this lies its whole drama and mystery. 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. 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. In other words,” Elmariyë says in conclusion, her voice vibrating with emotion, “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, Elmariyë 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, Eldarien turns to Elmariyë 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 Elmariyë.

“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,” remarks Eldarien, “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 Tilliana, and so I shall not hesitate to walk through whatever darkness in order to bring relief and salvation to our hurting people,” Elmariyë 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 Eldarien. “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,” Elmariyë 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,” Eldarien 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 Sera



Galaptes, 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 Eldarien pauses and fades into silence, almost as if withdrawing into himself, such that even his physical form seems to sink into the shadows. Elmaryë 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, Elmaryë. I fear for our journey, and I fear for the people of Telmerion. 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,” Elmaryë 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 Bryma, and perhaps 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 be of assistance to us in finding his lost citadel.”

“And what of our companions?” Elmaryë asks, unable to conceal the emotion in her voice.

“You know as well as I,” answers Eldarien in a whisper. “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 Onylandun, occupied with the recovery of their bodies which sustain abiding trauma from the events of the siege and the absorption of the dark, and with aiding however they can in salvaging some sense of life for the people after so much death and loss. Elmaryë's recovery in particular is difficult and prolonged, and she lapses back into what appears to be a mysterious illness, but which she and Eldarien know to be the result of the darkness that she has taken within herself, and 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 drawing 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, because, deep in the hearts of all, they knew that it was necessary and awaited it. Tilliana is silent, withdrawing further into herself in the grief of another loss, and Cirien bears the news with wise and knowing equanimity; it is Rorlain who is vocal about his concerns and about his feelings. He speaks alone with Eldarien as they sit in the bedchamber of the latter, the hearth burning quietly between them, the wood popping and crackling steadily beneath the flames.

"It is difficult for me to allow you to depart," begins Rorlain. "I spoke truly when I said that I intended to pay the life-bond by remaining at your side always, 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 weren't so."

"As do I," says Eldarien, "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 Elmaryë? Could not others accompany you on this path?" proffers Rorlain, uncertainty in his voice.

"I am not certain that it is the only way, but it is the way that I have chosen," Eldarien 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," Rorlain says, "that the path you walk may be no more dangerous than anything else."

"I wish that were so, but I am confident that it shall be otherwise."

"What do you mean?"

"We walk into darkness and strife, not out of danger but into it," Eldarien explains, "and only in this way can we hope to spare others, our people, from

darkness and strife.”

“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, Rorlain. 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 Rorlain. “But I ask you also not to forget me, and especially to never lose sight of the people and their conflict, for which you walk.”

“You have the pledge of my heart that I shall remain vigilant always, insofar as is in 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,” Rorlain sighs. “I have been thinking much about what awaits the people of Telmerion in the coming days, and about what should be my response. Am I merely to remain here in Onylandun 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 only 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?”

Eldarien 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 from the same attitude of reflective asking, from which Rorlain’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 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,” Rorlain 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 assail us in coming days. After all, has that not already been the case? With our departure from Ristfand, did we not leave the people throughout the lands of Rhovas, and even farther north, bereft of our aid and the light we could bring?”

“That is sadly true,” agrees Eldarien, 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 Ristfand to the departure of Elmariyë and myself from Onylandun. They are along the same trajectory, the same movement, which

leads from the superficial conflicts 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, Eldarien," says Rorlain. "And I had not thought before of the continuity between Ristfand and now. It is just...it is just difficult."

"Terribly difficult, enough to tear the heart in twain," Eldarien 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," Rorlain answers. "I think of the Lords of the Draion whom we have encountered. In standing before them, it felt like I was facing a force so much superior, and filled with such malice and will to destroy. And each seemed a lord and leader in his own right. In my inner heart, it seems that they are all, nonetheless, converging into a many-headed beast intent on wiping out the people of Telmerion."

"You fear defending against one head while another strikes elsewhere," remarks Eldarien, and though it is not voiced as a question, Rorlain 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 Eldarien.

"I am certain that he spoke lies," replies Rorlain 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 himself. Nor does what I have encountered of the Lord of Mæres convince me that 'his day is past.'"

Eldarien thinks on his friend's words for a few moments, and then nods, saying, "I must agree with you. There is something that puzzles me about all of the Draion 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 converge into 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, intense eyes staring toward the unseen—a gaze revealing a thoughtful mind intently at work—Rorlain scratches his beard, and then, glancing up for a moment, he says, "But perhaps they did, after all."

"What do you mean?"

“You recall what the Lord of Death said? He mentioned that there was another, the greatest of their kind. He called him—”

“The Lord of Darkness,” Eldarien 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 like a torrential storm which all one can do is weather as best one can.”

“That is true,” Rorlain agrees. “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.”

“Indeed...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 fight 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?” Rorlain asks.

Now it is Eldarien who lowers his head in thought, searching for an answer, or even a path toward an answer. Rorlain waits patiently for his response, while also joining him in the journey of thought. At last Eldarien 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 also other forces at work, alongside his own as well as greater than his own, and that these, too, we must fear, and prepare 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.” Eldarien sighs, and adds, “And thus it is well to be prepared for any eventuality.”

“Three Draion who, whether they themselves know and admit it or not, are working together for our destruction...” Rorlain 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,” Eldarien replies. “It is in this that we can put our trust. And the ultimate answer lies, as Silion 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?”

“Aye. 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 Elmaryë rests, leaning into the process of recovery that will allow them to depart soon on their journey, Eldarien speaks with Bryma and the

council about current events and about his plans to depart.

“So you are saying,” Bryma 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,” Eldarien says.

“So you are willing to hinge the welfare of our entire nation upon some spiritual experience, some intangible awareness within the heart?” asks Bryma, the tone of his voice hardly concealing the depth of his incredulity.

“I would not if there were any other choice,” replies Eldarien quietly. “It is usually 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, and can also gauge values, good or evil, as well as the consequences of thoughts and actions.” Here he pauses, collecting his thoughts and his words and also giving a space so that what he says following shall have as much effect and import as what he said previously.

When he continues, he says, “And yet it is also true that the mind can constrict itself out of fear or the wish to understand and control everything, trying 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 of his actions in the wider world, it is also true that the heart reveals 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, the softer is the fabric of intelligence and feeling, of willing and acting, the more easily and deeply can this voice resound, and the more clearly is this word heard, without distortion or self-imposed interpretation, though such a word also always remains intimately personal, spoken precisely into the contours of the heart that has been prepared to receive it.”

“I understand the wisdom of your words,” Jatildë says in response, “and myself agree with your assessment from the experiences of my own life. And yet I also agree with Bryma 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 Eldarien. “I shared with you what we know from our encounters with the Draion—with Maggot in Ristfand, with the Lord of Mæres in the castle in the mountains, and with the Lord of Death here in Onylandun. All indicate that there is yet another force behind them, deeper than their own planning, which is yet giving ultimate origin to these wicked beasts.”

“Is that really the case?” asks Bryma. “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?” Vindal 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,” Eldarien replies. “If I were relying on my own suspicions, 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 Meric, asks.

Eldarien 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 Draion. I cannot believe that it was he who stirred up the Empire to dealings with themselves, and agreed to yield the druadach and the other eötenga to their cause. You see, we also encountered a fourth creature—I suppose a Draia—in the barrow of Sera Galaptes, though this encounter was only momentary and at a distance. He was unlike any of the others 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 summoned, for there alone lies the conflict and the solution that we seek. So did the wise Silion 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 Silion did not know, though he was confident that it would be revealed unto me. I believe that what was communicated to me by those who have also entrusted to me my task was 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?” Bryma exclaims. “It exasperates the heart even to consider...though I suppose it also makes sense, given the nature of our enemy and their delight in desecrating all that is good.”

“Sadly indeed,” says Eldarien.

“And yet if you and your sister depart on this road, what of your other companions? Shall they too be accompanying you? You mentioned them not in this regard,” Jatildë says.

“They shall remain behind,” says Eldarien. “this path is for my sister and I alone. I also believe that our companions shall be of more assistance if they remain among the people, aiding in what way they may. Rorlain, 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 Tilliana 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 dan-

gers. Here the might of man may stand against the power of wicked beasts. But where I go, it is like walking defenseless and alone into a trap, like seeking to conquer our enemy's main fortress and stronghold with only two swordsmen."

"And that is what you propose to do?" Bryma 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. The battle that Elmaryië 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, Eldarien," says Bryma 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 be asked of you yet, before this war is done," says Eldarien 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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Elmaryië, 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 Eldaru, 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 Elmaryië 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, ultimately, than herself in her inmost integrity, a space both of wel-



coming 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 Eldaru, to become gift for others, and 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 Eldarien has also changed. If it was a new experience to allow him so deeply into her solitude, first in Ristfand 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—while the shadows of this mortal life remain—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 indeed with him toward all of their people, their Telmeric brethren, 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 present there, 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.

† † †

Tilliana 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 Ristfand with the members of her family still alive at her side. The time that has passed since she first met Elmariyë, and shortly after her Eldarien, Rorlain, and Cirien, seems to be a great stretch of years for all that it has borne within it, and 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, been open both to receive and to give more vulnerably—and has experienced 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

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upon her, and her heart spontaneously draws back from it, as if to erect a wall of protection from being hurt yet again. For to give her heart is to let it hurt, 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 race? But what she fears in this respect is not dying, but rather losing again those to whom her heart has become bound—despite its resistance, fear, and protection. And yet this fear is already being fulfilled, as Eldarien and El-mariyë, the two living souls who are most precious to her in all the world, are departing on 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, Tilliana 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 Onylandun have commenced both cleaning and rebuilding after the attack. But why? What good does it do? The enemy could return any day without warning, bringing even greater destruction. Or they could be called upon to forsake their city entirely, taking refuge elsewhere or engaging in a hopeless armed struggle against a superior force. Realizing that her mind is poisoned by these despairing thoughts, Tilliana 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 upper 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, Tilliana feels the urge to scream, to let out all the pain that she feels inside and to express it as a rebellion against the darkness, 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, hidden by the veil of darkness, in the snow-covered plains below, and she grieves for the loss, missing 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 Telmerion 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, Tilliana shakes her head, astonished at herself. What is she doing, allowing herself to be carried by such useless considerations? What does snow matter? And what, after all, does the fog 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 unveiled, 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.

Like this 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 can see nothing in the darkness, not even the silhouette of a figure. Nonetheless she feels a presence—a familiar presence, and she says, “Eldarien?”

“It is Elmariyë,” comes the response from the direction of the footsteps, which then fall silent within a couple yards of Tilliana. “Were you out walking and thinking too?”

Pushing herself up and rising to her feet, Tilliana replies, “Yes, though both have ceased now.”

“Would you like to return to the citadel together?” asks Elmariyë.

But before Tilliana 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 piercing through the dull silence that now hangs over everything like a damp and heavy cloth. 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 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 tea 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?” Bryma asks. “Please introduce yourself and give us your message.”

With a salute, the messenger replies, “My name is Halifast, son of Hroas, 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?” Bryma inquires.

“Aye, to a degree, at least. We have for months heard reports of affairs east of the mountains from the mouths of refugees as well as from official messengers,” says Halifast. “But even before they began to appear in our clan-lands, we heard warning from a man named Malrûn Verdis, a one-time Imperial officer who now serves as a lieutenant of the guard in Minstead, though whether he still lives—or whether any of our people who may remain in the said city still live—I do not know.”

“Malrûn...” Eldarien 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 Eldarien, Halifast 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 Ristfand fared, but the accounts have made clear enough to me the horrors that have been happening there in the days and months of late. Yet now we ourselves are partners in these horrors in full measure, and the people east and west alike share in the grim fate that has fallen upon the people of Telmerion.” Then turning back to Bryma 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,” Jatildë responds, “though by many small fortunes, and some greater, we have come to a different fate than the city of Minstead.”

“The attack was repelled?”

“Aye. That it was.”

“How?”

“By the courage of the people of Onylandun,” Bryma replies, “and also by the light-bearing of these men whom you have called ‘righteous warriors.’”

“So that word is true as well,” says Halifast, lowering his eyes momentarily. “Though 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 have come to be fulfilled now in our midst.”

“We can speak of such matters later,” Bryma 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 Halifast shortly 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 drudach—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 as slaves...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 Vindal.

“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,” Bryma remarks. “How is this so?”

“Because they taunted us thus, after we had fled,” Halifast answers, bitterness in his voice.

“They taunted you?” Eldarien 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 that.”

“The Lord of Death...” sighs Bryma, rubbing his brow with the pads of his fingers in grief that the terrifying Draia whom they had only recently encountered here in Onylandun is now at the head of the armies in Minstead. But dismissing the thoughts that seek to fill his mind, Bryma raises his head and asks Halifast, “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 Em-

pire play in all of this?”

“Those petty warmongers and their pitiful ruler...” growls Halifast, “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 Valyria, even unto the very seat of the Emperor?” Halifast asks, and hearing this Eldarien and Elmariyë share a meaning glance. “Many of the troops stationed near the city of Brug’hil, even along the Finistra Range almost to Minstead, have been called back to the mainland. But regardless of this setback for our Imperial enemy, their forces could hope yet for a victory in Telmerion were these creatures to whom they have bound themselves to prove genuine allies. Yet such, clearly, they are not, nor have they proven to be.”

“Again you speak of something with which we are unacquainted,” Bryma interjects, his voice now touched with irritation, the haughtiness of Halifast wearing thin his patience. “How have these creatures proven themselves thus?”

“You know not of the Sillion incident?”

“How could we? That is a long way from here, and little word passes between us in either direction.”

“The only surviving *haras* of the old clans of Telmerion,” Halifast 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 Sillion incident of which I have spoken has changed the landscape of the war definitively. 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 Valyria 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 neither human nor compassionate.

“With the Empire crippled and the *harasi* 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 Telmerion, who have cooperated so long with the forces of our oppressors. They thought to weaken us but only unveiled our true strength, and then were themselves struck by those they considered allies.”

“I would silence your tongue, you impertinent fool,” Bryma 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 Telmerion, 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,” Halifast affirms, refusing to be phased by the *haras*’ anger and instead raising his voice in mock confidence.

“Your true king?” Jatildë says, her face unable to contain her frustration and disgust for the man who stands before them.

“Wygrek Stūnclad. It is in his name that I stand before you now, asking 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. Wygrek forgets not his allies, and bestows favors benignly upon all who aid him in his as-

cension.”

“Were it not for the valuable information that you bear,” Bryma says, gaining control of his temper and yet stepping forward and raising his voice to freely express his indignation, “I would put you without hesitation in the dungeons beneath us, bound by your own stupidity while your cause progresses without 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? You shall truly assert the agenda of your leader and his wish to reign in the face of the dire conflict facing our people, and risk our ire solely for the purposes of letting us know which man you think should be the future ruler of Telmerion? Do you not know that, unless we gather together in unity to face the powers that are set against us, Telmerion as we know it or wish it shall in the future not even exist?”

The words at last weaken Halifast’s bravado, and when he opens his mouth to reply, his voice falters, “M-my apologies, councilor. I knew not that you did not understand or support the reforms wrought by the great Stūnclad. Has his courage and leadership truly not sent its echoes this far from the center of the rebellion?”

“Oh, may the divines save us from insufferable fools!” cries Rorlain, stepping forward now. As he does so, his eyes interlock with those of Bryma for a moment, whose mouth is open as if to speak. But the latter then closes his mouth and nods to Rorlain, gratefully accepting his intervention. Turning to Halifast and standing face to face with him, but a couple feet separating them, Rorlain stands to his full height and his face and his bearing are so imposing that Halifast unconsciously sinks his shoulders and steps back like a dog scolded by its master. “I once fought for the man of whom you speak,” Rorlain says, and the tenor of his voice is strong and steady, neither lost in anger nor constrained in cowardice, echoing throughout the wide chamber. “Wygrek 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, perhaps, in fighting to free the Telmerins from foreign occupation. But it is also evident that the fruits of his resistance have been more than mixed, the bitter product of excessive and ill-guided zeal. Surely you, too, can see this. What we need now 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.”

Halifast does not immediately reply to this, his face burning with both anger and shame as the eyes of all—or rather most—in the chamber are turned upon him. The gaze of Eldarien is downcast, his heart sorrowing for the man who in his blind zeal is offending his hosts and causing such unnecessary and unintentional conflict. He is grateful to Rorlain for standing up and speaking before matters became even more heated, but he is also grieved by the fault-lines cutting through the people of Telmerion, 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 Telmerion may be something of 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 wants more than anything. Since when did the fear of death give way to the yearning for death? The change that his heart has undergone startles 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 things 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?” Halifast 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 suppose that *you* are what you propose?”

“I certainly am not,” replies Rorlain 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 Halifast.

“The man with whom you speak does not claim any leadership or right to rule,” Bryma 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 Wygrec Stûnclad.”

“Where then shall you turn, *heras* Bryma, leader of the clan of Onylandis?” Halifast asks. “Do you think that with the other *herasi* slain, you shall ascend the throne?”

“Have you not already insinuated such a thing once in this conversation?” Bryma retorts. “I have neither intention nor desire to do such a thing. As we have for centuries, the people of Onylandis owe allegiance to only one man: the promised king in the line of our rightful ruler.”

“Galaptes?” Halifast almost spits out the word. “I thought those tales were long dismissed as mere memories of a bygone age. I thought that Telmerion 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, Halifast, son of Hroas,” Bryma says curtly, “in order to argue over politics. We welcomed you as a messenger of the need of our Telmeric 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: 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,” Rorlain adds, “and your message has simply shown us where this is to be.”

“Well spoken, Rorlain,” Bryma says, and then, directing his words to Halifast 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 immi-



nent departure.”

Halifast at last accepts his defeat, and, with his 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,” Rorlain remarks. “I would suspect that the siege of the city was indeed ordained to provide the eötenga and their masters with a fortress, a sort of ‘base of operations.’ I fear that this shall allow them to consolidate their power and thence to wage devastating war upon the rest of the settlements of Telmerion.”

“Perhaps the words of the Lord of Death implied as much,” Eldarien agrees. “I assumed that he meant only the attack on Onylandun 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 Ristfand, 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 black fog, has reached even 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,” Elmariyë interjects simply. “When I cast my heart out to the furthest reaches of Telmerion, to 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 Halifast?” Jatildë asks. “You said 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 more cities?”

“Perhaps they would,” responds Bryma, “but it is impossible for us to know where the enemy shall attack next. Perhaps seeking to break their power, or at least to distract it and thereby lessen it, is the best that we can hope to do, and the most effective way to protect life as well.”

“I agree with this,” says Rorlain. “The creatures of darkness are not limitless, even if they are vast. If we were to lay siege to Minstead, it would force their attention upon us and 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 Halifast spoke concerning those still left alive within the city,” Cirien says. “Many of our brethren are imprisoned now in a place of terrible darkness, and I would see them rescued, were it possible.”

“Once already have we been called upon to do that, and for a single person, for Tilliana in the castle in the mountains,” agrees Rorlain, “and I wish to do it 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 Min-

stead who call for our aid are surely so as well.”

“Could we not call on other cities to aid us?” Meric offers. “It shall take a fortnight or more, correct, 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 Brug’hil? To Winfreyya? To Oromardë?” Bryma asks. “Long it would take to reach these places, and even longer 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,” Eldarien urges. “Even if they arrive late or not at all, I would spare you the regret of not calling for aid when you could have. And you also know not what the paths of the future may hold.”

Receiving these words, Bryma 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—Eldarien, Rorlain—to inform them that the king of light has come and wields the power to expel these creatures.”

Bowing his head, Eldarien 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.”

Following these words there is a dense silence in the chamber for a long moment, which is at last broken by the sound of Bryma’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. 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 hold onto, 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,” Eldarien replies quietly, “but whatever there is shall be devoted wholly unto the salvation and deliverance of our people.”

“I speak the same,” confirms Elmariyë, taking a step closer to Eldarien 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 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 Vindal, and many share his skepticism.

“I say it as well now: enough,” Bryma concludes. “Our plan is at last settled, is it not? Does anything else need to be discussed?”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### THE SORROWS OF FAREWELL

And so the events are 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. Eldarien and Elmaryië gather what minimal belongings they shall need for their journey, and a great deal of provisions, simple yet hearty, for they expect to find little sources of nourishment along the path they now take, nor at the destination which they seek. They dress in garb intended to provide as much warmth as it can, to combat the bitterness of Telmeric winter that descends upon the land now, and into which they walk unprotected. Eldarien dons over the other layers of his clothing the tabard and cloak that were given to him by his grandparents in the forest of the Velasi; 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 shoulders—is uncomfortable and burdensome. Elmaryië 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 Ristfand. She forgets not 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.

Bryma insists that each of them is given a horse to speed their journey, and they gratefully accept this offer, though Eldarien 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 excepted as much,” says Bryma, “but perhaps the wild is 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, Bryma,” Elmaryië says, “for everything. Your hospitality and your support have been more than either of us could have either expected or desired.”

“Well, 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 Eldarien. “May we all stand in the line of those who have gone before, for if a similar darkness has returned as once plagued our ancestors, so too may a similar honor, fidelity, and courage.”

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,” Eldarien begins, “you have all become

dear to me in the time that we have been granted to be 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 into darkness and the threat of death. Know, however, that you shall remain on 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 Elmariyë when Eldarien’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...Rorlain...Tilliana...for the person that you are, and that you have been throughout our journey. I look forward in hope to the day when, by divine mercy, whether in this life or the next, we shall see one another again, and embrace.”

Cirien now steps forward and draws Elmariyë into his arms. She buries 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 Elmariyë 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 is a light even deeper, 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 strength shall uphold you.”

“I have no words,” Rorlain says, stepping forward now and placing one hand upon Elmariyë’s shoulder and extending the other to grasp Eldarien’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 Eldarien, and through him also to his sister—to you, dear Elmariyë—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, Rorlain,” answers Eldarien, “and you need not worry that you cannot voice 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 Elmariyë too has stepped back from Cirien, all eyes turn now to Tilliana, not in expectation but in simple love. Tears already stain her cheeks and her shoulders are hunched as she suppresses sobs. Elmariyë and Eldarien 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, Tilliana now raises her eyes and

looks directly at Eldarien and then at Elmaryë. She says, in a voice beginning frail and weak and yet growing in confidence, “I fear that you shall never return from the place to which you now go, my friends. Elmaryë, 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 Eldarien.

She says to him, “Eldarien, 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 would 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 am beginning to understand, though it grieves my heart, that kingship can be exercised in another way as well. 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. Forgive me for speaking so openly. But...but now I see that this seed must fall into other soil, and must bear fruit in another way. And the letting go...the letting go is difficult.”

“Dear Tilliana, your words and your heart are received completely, and without reserve,” Eldarien replies, now himself unable to withhold tears that spring to his eyes, few in number but heartfelt, and precious to Tilliana 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 also a gesture of surrender and letting-go. After this a similar embrace is shared with Elmaryë, 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.

Elmaryë and Eldarien 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.

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 coming to Onylandun, only in the opposite direction. There is no easy access to the heights of the Teldren Mountains, whence 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 Teldyn Pass, along the Stieka Mara, and past the hamlet of Criseã into the Galas Basin, where the ruined village of Falstead lies, and the ancient barrow of Sera Galaptes. It feels uncanny for Eldarien to be returning a second time to his childhood home—or even so soon to be retracing the steps that he and his companions took not long before on their journey to the Velasi Forest and to Onylandun. And yet now the path shall be so much different, 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 the 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 step 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 on horseback, unhindered by anything but the limitations of existence, while the army of Onylandun, among whom shall be their friends, will be encumbered both by numbers and by the slowness of human feet as opposed to the hooves of horses. This is not considering also the need to make camp each night and to break it again in the morning, making accommodation 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 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 Onylandun will find the means to march 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 Teldyn 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 nine days they ride, and the bulk of the mountains north of them gradually 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 away 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 very difficult 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 *Strieka Mara*, the vast chasm that opened so many centuries ago to shelter and protect the *Velasi 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 the other 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.

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. Of course they have spoken regularly since departing from *Onylandun*, 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 *Strieka Mara* shall be enough to ensure our safe and direct passage?” *Elmariyë* asks.

“I suspect that the horses shall be able to sense its presence and shall avoid any mishaps, even though it shall be rather difficult for our weak eyes to see,” replies *Eldarien*. “We can see the silhouettes of shapes around us, forms in the mist, 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. Regardless, we 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 I hope 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 am afraid not. And the path is not directly to the north, after all, but a bit to the east as well. 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 *Elmariyë* 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 the heart gives unto itself, its voice welling up from deep within, 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, yes,” sighs *Eldarien*, “and

yet also the space where we are asked to listen most deeply, most vulnerably, to the voice that is beyond us, the voice that gives origin and guidance to the heart, and to which the ears of the heart are both fashioned and ordained to listen. We may need to rely on this voice almost exclusively for long stretches of our journey, I am afraid.”

“Well then, good thing it is the most sure and trustworthy guide of all,” El-mariyë remarks softly.

“Indeed,” agrees Eldarien. “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 and we must continue walking nonetheless, I pray that our journey may not end in frustration and loss.”

Elmariyë does not respond immediately to her brother’s words, but holds them in silence for a few moments, and then at last replies, “I pray for that as well.”

Now both of them sink into silence as they listen to the crackling and popping of the fire, burning the wood that they had gathered from nearby trees and fallen branches. They are grateful that the snow that had cloaked the earth so heavily on their departure from Onylandun and for a good many leagues throughout the Teldyn Pass has now passed away. It seems that the region in which they now travel was spared snow entirely, and the ground, though bitter 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 Telmeric winter, and rare is the night, from the month of Tintas to the month of Quartas 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 black fog cloaking 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.

“Eldarien,” Elmariyë 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.”

“Why not?”

“Do *you* see any reason that it would not be wise?”

She reflects on this for a moment, and when some sense of an answer has come to her, she says, “First of all, it would exhaust us, and our journey shall be arduous enough as it is.”

“That is correct,” says Eldarien. “Though it takes much less energy to channel the light 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, I was unsure,” Elmariyë admits, “but I do under-



stand that as much as I may. Another reason that it would be unwise," she continues, "is that it may reveal our presence to prying eyes."

Eldarien nods without hesitation, and 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 Onylandun, 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 of it. At the very least, when he—whoever 'he' may be—learns that we have not accompanied the forces to Minstead, and that Rorlain 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?" Elmaryë asks. "It seems to me that the way of the Draion—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."

Eldarien reflects on his sister's words for a moment, running his fingers along his beard. 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."

"That may be," Elmaryë says, "but I agree that we should be cautious and remain as inconspicuous as we may."

"Yes. But whatever comes, even if we must place ourselves into danger, we will press forward to the end that calls us," Eldarien concludes. "So do not hesitate to harness the light if you ever feel that it is necessary."

† † †

On the morning of the next day the snow begins. 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 black mist 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 darkness.

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 brunt of the storm. But what they find instead is surprising: they find the Stieka Mara. It is recognized first by the sound, 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 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 Stieka Mara 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 then turn their minds more exclusively to the other danger now to be combated, 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 sense of the landscape that lies on this side of the Stieka Mara, 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.

It takes them about an hour to 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 enough 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 around 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 perhaps better, in both of them together, in the meeting of their consciousnesses in a shared mystery. It is a frightening experience, and something unexpected and painful, even if it is but an extension of the mystery of bearing, which carries the pain and darkness of human hearts in solidarity and compassion. For the darkness 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 as it were to blot out all the meaning of existence and to plunge it into nothingness. Perhaps this is the darkness proper to the Draion 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 Onylandun, 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. Bryma 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 freely offer their assistance. And without the aid of these latter, 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.

Rorlain hesitantly but confidently accepts second-in-command over the army, with Senfyr—with the death of Hinding—now raised to the status of commander. Bryma himself dons a mail hauberk and iron breastplate, with matching greaves and vambraces, and a thick-bladed sword passed down to the leaders of the clan of Onylandis, and joins the army, as do four others of the members of the council. Jatildë takes Bryma'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 Eldarien and Elmaryië, the host is massive and intimidating to behold—though to them, of course, encouraging—with armor glinting in the torchlight as far as the eye can see, a great horde 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, like 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 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 Tilliana, for whom the possibility of remaining in Onylandun 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 is, that they may aid those who stand forefront against the darkness. Whether it shall be cooking meals, helping with camp, tending to the wounded, or offering counsel and presence, there they want to be. And they also do not wish to allow Rorlain to press forward alone without their support and their companionship, for the burden he now carries is great.

When all have gathered and are prepared to depart, Senfyr 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. “We have a long road ahead of us, and our destination shall be more dangerous and more arduous than the road to get there. But we march in courage and in compassion, to save and to protect

the people of our land, both in Onylandis 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 arm be strong, and let your heart not fail, come what may—for we are Telmerins, and our spirit shall not be broken.”

After these words the great company sets out, following the plains and foothills to the west and then the northwest as its leaders guide all steps toward a narrow pass that cuts through a branch of the Teldrens and which shall spare a large number of days, perhaps even a whole week, from their journey. For the three companions who have journeyed from Ristfand, 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 alike, 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 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 heart of conflict now for years. But the nature of this conflict has now drastically changed, and what was once the 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,” Rorlain 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 to face what for all indication 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 to these words as he receives them with both mind and heart, 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 Rorlain, “a sword imbued with light, which seems to be our only advantage—and one that seems to me 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 Eldarien and Elmaryië 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 really do not know. But we have chosen, and we have chosen together.

All that is for it now is to follow this course through to its end, or until something else is suggested to us.”

“For my part, I believe that we have chosen wisely.”

“Truly?” Rorlain 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 both of courage and 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 Onylandun,” says Rorlain, “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 his face seems to smile even though only a slight change comes to the curve of his lips or his brows.

“I have not paid as much attention to it as it deserves,” admits Rorlain. “Truly, I realize that I took it too much for granted. But you are right, there is great hope in the people of Onylandun.” 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...”

† † †

And so their march continues as the mountains fall away behind them, though remaining 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 Telmerion, from the Finistra Range far in the north to the Midfeld Stretch in the south, through which they have just passed (an offshoot of the Teldren Mountains as they extend to the southwest toward the dual peninsulas of Fenris and Golarion). Little of these plains is visible to the eye, of course, 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, both intimidating and consoling, each in their own way.

There are also numerous streams of water, most hardly wider than a few feet though some up to ten feet, across which they must pass. 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 company 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 serious, though they suspect it shall do so further to the east or to the south, if not broken up in crossing the Teldren Mountains.

As they continue northward, accompanying the people of Onylandun 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 Rorlain has with a young man who volunteered to take up arms with his compatriots and the other is a conversation shared by Tilliana 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, while most sleep, recuperating their energy for the next day's journey. Rorlain walks the perimeter of the camp slowly, lost in thought, having just awoken from a dream-filled slumber and finding himself incapable of sinking 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?" Rorlain asks as he draws near, in order 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.

"At ease," Rorlain says kindly, stepping to the man's side. "What is your name?"

"I am called Ilthis, sir, Ilthis son of Mendelion. Though my father died in the assault on Onylandun."

"I am sorry to hear of your loss, Ilthis, son of Mendelion. You have my condolences and my prayers for your father," says Rorlain. "Too many have fallen already at the hands of these forces of darkness."

"Aye," Ilthis sighs, unconsciously lowering his head in grief. But only a moment later he raises it again and risks a glance at Rorlain, 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 why we march," answers Rorlain. "Did you join the fighting company for this reason?"

"Yes, Sir Farâël. For that and none other."

"Please, call me Rorlain."

"Rorlain...? Ah, very well."

"I am impressed with your courage, Ilthis, and grateful for it. You are young and yet you step willingly into a place of great danger, stirred by love of your people."

"If a young man shall not be courageous, why would we expect an older man to be?" Ilthis asks, though it is clear the question is rhetorical.

"The boy is the seed of the man," remarks Rorlain, "you are right. And you speak more wisely than many twice your age. If only men would recognize that even their adult manhood is still growing, still being called forth unto matura-

tion—and yet that this maturation in large part consists in a rediscovery of the vigor and wonder, the newness and awe, of youth—then our world would be a better and more courageous place.”

“Perhaps,” the young soldier comments, “but I look forward to being a man.”

“A man you are already, Ilthis. It is courage and integrity that make you a man, and standing up for right and good and innocence. From this all other maturation shall flow.”

“You are...you are right,” responds Ilthis. “I just don’t feel ready to be a man.”

“None of us do,” Rorlain agrees. “That is perhaps part of the mystery of life, that the very gift of our existence, of who we are in the midst of this world, is both ours and yet also ever so far beyond us. Only in knowing that can you discover true strength greater than the measure of man, though alive in man.”

Ilthis does not immediately respond, but it is evident that he is reflecting on these words in the silence. When at last he speaks, he does not respond directly to Rorlain’s words, but the latter knows that he has listened to them deeply and shall hold them in the thought and reflection of the heart. Speaking, Ilthis’ voice is strained, “Ma...she is still in Onylandun. I wanted to stay and protect her, to grieve the loss of Ta with her, but I knew I couldn’t. 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 Rorlain. “And may you behold the fruit of this sacrifice, and again look upon your mother’s face and upon the faces of the many people 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?” Ilthis asks, turning now to face Rorlain directly, the intensity of his question harnessing the fullness of his attention.

Rorlain’s response is confident and yet simple, “There is always hope, Ilthis. Never cease to believe that love is greater than hatred and light stronger than darkness.”

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The second conversation occurs a couple days after the prior, as the company walks together across the plains in the darkness of midday. Tilliana 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 that pains Tilliana, but the content. They speak of the promise and the rumor of the scarred king, and though Tilliana can tolerate their disagreement and dismissal, she is hurt deeply through their disrespect, a disrespect bordering on blasphemy. But shy and quiet as she is, she finds it difficult to voice her concerns. It takes her a couple minutes to work up the courage to say something, but just as she opens her mouth to speak, another woman near to her, the oldest of the group, speaks instead.

“I have had enough of your crude language, ladies,” the woman says. The age shows in her voice, and this makes her interlocutors smirk.

“Ladies? Why do you call us ladies?” one of the more boisterous women retorts.

“You don’t want to be ladies, do you? Well, you aren’t acting like ladies, so I suppose it was wrong of me to address you as such.”

“Do you have something more that you want to say, or do you simply want to insult us?” replies another woman.

“I have no intent 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 as well as 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 that 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.”

“Are you saying that you believe in these so-called prophecies?” asks the woman who has been at the forefront of the mockery. “And you believe that 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 her words are received in the silence that is their due (Tilliana suspects that it is the latter), says, “I have believed in the promises since I was a young child, and yet the hope—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 be the deliverance and salvation of 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 there ever was to be a king who would lead the people of Telmerion unto healing and life, it would be one who was scarred, who bore the marks of suffering and of love in his own flesh.”

The intensity and the passion in these words, along with the mysterious logic present within them, leaves 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 stirred her to intervene in the first place. But she has spoken, and, for Tilliana, that is enough.

When the company stops at the end of the day, Tilliana 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 was about to speak myself but was struggling to muster the courage to do so.”

“I know, dear, that is why I spoke,” replies the woman simply. “Such blindness and disrespect thrives when people who see more deeply choose to remain silent. Anyway, darling, by what name are you called?”

Tilliana 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 Tilliana Valesa, a widow from Ristfand. What is your name?”

“So you know the pain of which I speak, do you? That explains much. My name is Elandra Mistrë.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Elandra.”



“Likewise.”

“You speak of my pain,” Tilliana 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 just happened in their own city?”

“Lighthearted?” Elandra asks, raising her eyebrows. “No, I do not think that they are lighthearted. Quite the opposite. 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 can be a heart that is light. I remember one of my teachers when I was but a child...he taught me a lesson that had a profound impact on me. This man, now long deceased, was an expert in the old language, so marvelous and yet so much forgotten. Or at least I think 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 Tilliana, wonder in her eyes at the beauty of Elandra who as she speaks seems to light up with some secret lamp of the spirit hidden deep within.

“Very well then,” says Elandra, “though now it won’t 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 to have different meanings over time. 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 second 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 sure know enough about that nowadays, don’t we? And now you see, too, why what our friends were saying earlier in their crude comments was so inappropriate. 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 makes precisely the point: we pass from the visible to the invisible almost instantaneously and without thought. It’s just the way 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 Tilliana 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 on the twelfth day after their departure from Onylandun, 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 mountains rising both to the east and the west, allowing only a rather narrow strip of land in the crevice at the feet of the two peaks, connecting 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, sheltered in the crevices of rock and in 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 Onylandun to gauge their number were it even in the full light of day without this suffocating mist of 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 Rorlain, 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, come at the request of the messenger whom you sent,” replies Rorlain.

“Ah, praise the gods. Then I would address myself to your leaders. I am Commander Turic Sylfæn.”

“I am second-in command, Rorlain Farâël. Give me a moment to call our commander and the counselor.”

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 speak together. After introductions are shared, Bryma speaks, “We have heard word from the messenger, but would ask you to share with us in greater detail what happened in the attack upon your city and also how the situation stands now.”

“I will gladly share, though little of the news I have to share is glad,” responds Turic. “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 reached out and polluted the air until all was turned to darkness. This caused, understandably, some degree of panic and confusion in the city, but it also warned us that something was amiss and indirectly prepared us for the coming attack. Do you know the nature of this darkness?”

“It has come to you all the way from Onylandun,” Rorlain explains, “for thence it takes its rise, and we are grieved to see that it has reached this far.”

“But what is it?”

“That we cannot say precisely. 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. Any description I would give, though, couldn’t really express his appearance. It seemed somehow elusive, deceptive, both terrifying and seductive.”

“The very same,” agrees Rorlain. “We too beheld him, and after we confronted him at the heart of Onylandun, he cast forth this darkness that now enfolds all of us, and disappeared.”

“You said you confronted him?” Turic asks, incredulous. “How could you confront such a monster? None of my men could get within ten yards of him without being slain.”

“Well, that is another story entirely,” Rorlain begins, “but we have not faced him in armed combat. The confrontation was of a different sort.”

“You see,” Bryma 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?” Turic says. “We have heard of such, though the rumors said that he was in Ristfand.”

“We were indeed in Ristfand, but after the assault in those days, the beginning of this terrible time of destruction, we traveled to Onylandun,” Rorlain explains.

“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 people of the Velasi, 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 we look with hope for the future of our people.”

“The Velasi? 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 Onylandun, we crossed beyond the Stieka Mara and entered the Velasi Forest, there spending time with this old and venerable people.”

“What marvels are these of which you speak?” exclaims Turic. “But much explanation is needed. Please, explain these matters to me, that I may understand.”

And so Rorlain does, with a few comments from Bryma and Senfyr at opportune moments. He traces his journey from his first meeting with Eldarien 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, moving forward, they seek to serve. When he has concluded, Turic shakes his head slowly, not in disbelief but in amazement. It seems that the bizarre and unusual events of the previous days and weeks have made him more

amenable to revelations of the unexpected, and in this case the revelations are encouraging and good, 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 *herasi* of our people are slain, a new king arises to take their place?” Turic asks when he speaks at last.

“Were you to meet him in the flesh, you would speak differently,” Bryma 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...”

“If he returns,” Rorlain interjects. “We need to be ready for any outcome.”

“As you say...but if he returns, what then?” Turic asks.

“His wish is only to see the people of Telmerion find a new future, a future of freedom and life. That is the inheritance that he gives to us, and I am committed to seeing that realized, whether he returns from his journey or not,” Rorlain says, the enthusiasm and ardor in his voice only subtly veiled.

“You know that Wygrec Stûnclad will stand against him,” comments Turic.

“We expected as much,” Bryma says. “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, Turic looks at each of them intently for a moment, his thoughts inscrutable, and then says, “Sadly, many here would agree with you.”

“What do you mean?” Senfyr asks.

“Wygrec 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 Wygrec, after all?” Rorlain inquires. “I expected to meet him upon our arrival.”

Turic 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 say in speech, he says, “He has taken a small company of men to try and infiltrate the city and free those who are imprisoned there.”

“He...what?” exclaims Rorlain. “With how many men does he do this?”

“With three hundred,” Turic replies. “He hopes to gain advantage through stealth rather than through arms. Such tactics have long worked in the battles fought during the rebellion.”

“But these creatures of darkness—the *eötenga*—they are far different than living men,” Senfyr says. “Surely you know this, having faced them yourself.”

“I sit here before you now, do I not?” is Turic’s terse response.

“That you do,” says Bryma.

“But even if his plan is folly—or at least dangerous—I would not allow him to walk unprotected unto his death and the death of those under his command,” continues Rorlain. “How long ago did they depart for this covert operation?”

“But this morning,” answers Turic. “It has been not yet six hours since they

left, though that is precisely how long it takes to get from here to the city.”

“So you say that there are people who remain in the city, alive but taken captive?” Bryma inquires.

“Aye, that dark creature of whom you spoke made sure we knew this fact,” answers Turic, but then, more uncertainly, “unless of course it is a deception.”

“It well could be,” sighs Senfyr.

At this moment Rorlain 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 held captive in the city, and also of aiding and abetting the small company under Wygrec Stūnclad. 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.”

“Aye, that is how I see it,” Turic says. “But what good would waiting do? Are there any other options than direct assault with the numbers that we now have?”

“We sent messengers asking for aid to other settlements,” Bryma explains, “but there is little hope that any shall arrive within a time that would be helpful to us. We ourselves departed immediately upon receiving your call for aid, and so at best the messengers that we sent have just arrived at their destinations.”

“What about any other plans than direct assault?” Turic asks.

“You know the city better than we do,” Rorlain says. “Is there any other way we can hope to rescue the prisoners?”

“Not that I know of. The city 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 city itself.”

“And yet the city is now our enemy’s main stronghold,” offers Rorlain.

“Precisely...” Turic sighs in agreement.

The men fall into silence now, each occupied with his own thoughts, inquiring after some solution to this problem or some path ahead that shows greater wisdom than they now see. “Turic, can you tell me about the defenses of the city?” Rorlain asks, breaking the silence. “Is there anywhere that would give us easier access than the walls surrounding it.”

“You have been here before?”

“Aye. I joined up with the rebellion for a time. But I have since found a better path.”

“Oh really? That I did not know,” Turic says, his face expressing surprise, though it is evident that this new fact also deepens his trust in Rorlain, for he now knows that he has stood on both sides of the rebellion, and of Wygrec Stūnclad. Reigning in his surprise, Turic then answers the question, “The walls, as you know, surround the entirety of the city, north and south, with two main gates on either side, through which runs the Finistra road. There are lesser gates as well, aplenty. But the larger gates shall surely be heavily guarded, and they have both reinforced doors and portcullises. Considering as the enemy appeared within the city itself, the city walls and defenses are still in pristine condition.”

“But it is also true that the creatures that we fight do not have intelligence as we do,” Senfyr says. “They may well be stationed at the gates, but this does not mean that they shall defend the city with the same reason and discernment

as would men.”

“Let us hope that is true,” Turic remarks. “But even so, I agree with Rorlain that another way would be better. And...I think that there may indeed be one.”

“What would that be?” asks Bryma, leaning forward anxiously.

“The river,” says Turic. “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 numbers?” inquires Senfyr incredulously.

“No, we don’t. But boats shall not be necessary. For, you see, along the river on both sides of the city there 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 Rorlain. “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 Senfyr the other.”

“But can you channel the light to both companies alike, Rorlain?” Senfyr asks.

“It will not be a problem,” he answers. “In Onylandun I had to do it 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 Eldarien and Elmariyë...”

“Will it really burden them even at this distance?” Bryma asks.

“The light that I bear does not belong to me. Of course, 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; 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 touched them.”

“Well...we can only hope that they shall find a way to cope with this, or even to share this gift with you in another manner,” sighs Bryma. “For our plan has long been made and it is too late to retract it now.”

“And we have no intention of doing so,” Rorlain says. “I express, not doubt, but only compassion and concern. We shall all be stretched in the days that await us.”

“So it is decided, then?” asks Turic.

“I think so. I am only loathe to lead our people so soon into battle once again,” Rorlain comments.

“Yet if we choose to wait, we may lose not only Wygrec’s forces, but also any element of surprise that your arrival has granted us,” Turic says.

“I agree. Then let us, 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 Onylandun 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 Tilliana and Cirien to watch Rorlain go,

and so many men with him, and not to accompany them into battle. But they know 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 marching away 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 come 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 Turic, and Tilliana to the west, joining that led by Rorlain and Senfyr.

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 they see at all. Perhaps, after all, they can see only in the darkness and it is light that blinds them. This uncertainty, along with countless others, threatens to stiffen their hearts in fear and hesitation, but the thought of those trapped within the city stirs them on and enkindles courage within them. Of course for many there is also the 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, 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 leaving a wide berth so as not to be seen. Trees dot the landscape roundabout, sometimes gathering 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, Rorlain glances back over his company for a moment and sees the face of Tilliana in the midst of the soldiers. Surprise and fear wash over him, and his heart recoils from the danger into which she walks, though he understands fully her reasons. He waves to her 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 softly, clearly uncomfortable with his firm yet gentle 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, Tilliana, I really do,” remarks Rorlain wistfully. “I wish that I could command you to return to camp, but 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.”

Tilliana blushes at these words and turns her head away, taking advantage

of the darkness to hide this from Rorlain. Ever since the departure of Eldarien 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 these things, 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 she has received from Eldarien, 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 Rorlain'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.

"Tilliana, are you alright?" Rorlain asks, seeing that she has not responded 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 may, though we shall both have our tasks to attend to."

"Aye, that is true," says Rorlain, "but let us do so together, if we can."

"Rorlain," she begins, her voice soft.

"What is it?"

"I am truly moved by the gesture, and I gratefully accept your offer. 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."

Rorlain shakes his head sadly, "In that you are right. Forgive me. I am divided. There are so many things at once that I would wish to do, and yet I cannot do them all."

"Worry not for me, then," says Tilliana. "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," comments Rorlain. "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 bubbling as they surge full and strong to the west. The company 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 Turic has said; they find a narrow spillway about six feet in height and wide enough for three men to walk 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, Senfyr turns and speaks quietly to those nearest to 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 his left.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### MINSTEAD

As they emerge from the other side 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 of small boats, they find nothing but silence and stillness. The city itself, were it not for a pervading sense of restlessness and of fear that fills the air, would seem as empty and lifeless as a sepulcher. Rorlain prays that it is not as lifeless, 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 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 Rorlain. Never before have they seen the druidach 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 Aldera 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 Draion, whose creation is but mockery, and whose sustenance is but the ceaseless pouring forth of evil and malignant in order to project and to sustain shadows born of the darkness.

Turning to Senfyr, Rorlain says, "The creatures may not even be manifest at this moment. It could be that only their lord remains within the city, and that they shall be called hence only when we are discovered."

"Is that good or ill?" Senfyr asks.

"I know not."

"But do you really believe so? After all, if such is the case, why would they wish to take the city as their own fortress if they do not need a fortress to defend them?"

"To that question...I do not know the answer." Rorlain turns and looks at Tilliana, her figure dimly visible in the darkness, and, beyond her, the great number of men who are now emerging from the spillway and filling the entire space of the platform. "But if that 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?"

Rorlain shakes his head, trying to dismiss the sinking feeling of futility and of fear that grips him, and to think clearly. Laying hold of some answer, however frail it may be, he says, "We should halt where we are now, for we know not what lies before us, nor even what is the case now. I would like us to be able to continue with our plan, but also to have a swift retreat, if that proves to be called for. Send word to the men behind 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.”

“Very well,” Senfyr replies. “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 Rorlain, “I shall not forget. But let us pray it does not come to that.”

“Nor for the troops on the other side of the city,” sighs Tilliana.

“Aye to that as well. I wish now that we would not have separated.”

Without further conversation Rorlain picks a dozen trained warriors and sets off down the platform into the unknown that is concealed by the darkness. A single glance shared between him and Tilliana communicates an agreement between them: though he wishes her near him so he may protect her, she is safer now remaining where she is.

As the small group presses forward under Rorlain’s guidance, 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 the cobbled streets of the city, with the figures of stone and half-timber houses looming over them, Rorlain 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 city center, where lies the “great courtyard.” This is a wide pavilion paved with stones with a gurgling fountain in the center, where market days and fairs are often held, with traveling merchants from nearby settlements coming to barter their wares, and musicians, and performers. But how different now is the city in this slumber of death!

No citizens greet them but those whose bodies still lay in the streets without reverence or burial. Seeing this, Rorlain’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 has been made a place of dark and death. It takes them a quarter of an hour to reach the great courtyard, and as it comes into view, they know they have found the end of their scouting expedition. Rorlain turns to one of his companions and says to him, “Hurry back to the rest of the troops, and warn them. 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 Rorlain realizes his mistake and says, “I am sorry. Here...you two 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 the men.”

When the three messengers have gone, Rorlain and the remaining nine 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, soon they 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 seems that the Lord of Death is gloating in his victory and using his minions as tools to express his own version of sadistic delight. Rorlain and his men also see living war-

rriors standing about the fire, their weapons drawn, though they do not engage in combat, but stand at the ready, though apparently defeated. For around them, in a wide circle without any breaks, stand numerous druidach, and among them a few larger eötenga, closing them in and trapping them, making fighting unfeasible and escape impossible.

“It is Wygrec!” the man at Rorlain’s side exclaims softly. “He still lives, and many of his men.”

“Indeed,” responds Rorlain. “Let us hope our messengers return with the rest of our company soon. There is yet a chance that we may save them.”

“But why do they not fight?”

“That I do not know. Let us risk drawing a little nearer, that we may see.”

With this Rorlain guides the men to a location 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. Peeking around it, Rorlain gains a better view of the mass of men and beast that fills the center of the courtyard. He sees Wygrec Stünclad’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 Rorlain 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 Rorlain and his men cannot hear his voice.

*Let us be grateful that he loves to boast and to parade his own victory, Rorlain thinks silently. It once served us in the liberation of Eldarien. May it now serve us also in the liberation of these men.* This wish, even as he voices it to himself, 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, trying to gauge the number of men still under Wygrec’s command, Rorlain 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 Wygrec and his men once again. Seeing this, Rorlain 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!”

Rorlain leaps from behind the cart, knocking an arrow in his bow and letting it loose into the mass of eötenga. In the same moment he allows the light to stream forth, not only into the arrow that he has loosed, but into all the weapons wielded by the men at Wygrec’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. Rorlain turns this to his advantage by rushing forward and calling out, “For Telmerion! Let the light be your bane, creatures of darkness!” He releases another arrow into the heart of a druidach 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. He collides with the still confused creatures at full sprint, and the men who have accompanied him are but a few steps behind.

Seeing this, Wygrec's men 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 the rest of the forces that have sneaked into the city with Rorlain arrive, 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?" Wygrec asks, turning to face Rorlain when the battle has subsided.

"We have marched from Onylandun after receiving the messenger sent to us to ask for aid," answers Rorlain.

"Well, I am Wygrec Stünclad, 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. Turic 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 Wygrec.

"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?"

Rorlain 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 his mouth again and simply nods silently. Thankfully, it does not appear that Wygrec 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 that we have been hearing rumors about these last months?"

"Aye, that it is," says Rorlain.

"Then you must be the one about whom all the people speak?"

"Well, no, that is actually my dear friend."

"He is here as well, somewhere, I assume?"

"No, 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 Wygrec. 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 now. 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," Rorlain says.

Wygrec glances back over his shoulder at Rorlain and cocks an eyebrow curiously, remarking, "You think your presence is that important, do you?"

At this moment the company led by Turic arrives, and their presence brings this uncomfortable conversation to an end.

"Ah, Turic, you have come as well!" exclaims Wygrec, extending his arms wide in welcome. "We are about to see what we can do about infiltrating the castle and freeing those held within."

"Where are the rest of your men, Wygrec?" Turic 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 Turic. “Shall we rely upon force alone?”

“Look upon our newfound numbers,” responds Wygrec. “This is more than I had expected to receive in response to our summons, even if still far less than the numbers of our enemy. I say 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,” Rorlain interjects. “I would hate to see lives lost through negligence or deliberate ignorance. Better to enter with eyes clear and open than to run in blindly and to witness later its ill effects.”

“As you wish,” says Wygrec. “I know not if any of these dark creatures remain in Minstead at all, now that we have slain those in the courtyard. Of course, 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 darkness, and before we even realized it we were surrounded.”

“Precisely. And I fear that shall happen again if we simply charge into the castle relying upon numbers alone,” says Rorlain.

“I agree with sir Farâel,” Turic comments. “As we did in entering the city, just now, let us split our troops into companies and seek entrance into the castle strategically, from different vantage points. And a large number, too, shall remain without, to prevent such traps as you have mentioned. 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 even we possess here, though great indeed we may seem. I suggest 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 prove inseparable.”

“Very well, I accept your proposal,” says Wygrec. “I shall lead the main group, but what about 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 to thus wear down their strength.”

“So be it.”

“One last thing,” offers Turic.

“Yes?”

“If you are leading the main company, it is still imperative that Rorlain accompany you. For he alone shall be able to slay the enemy commander.”

“You believe that?” Wygrec 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 Mistrin Plain, which extends

across a wide distance between the mountains that rise around it in all directions. Nestled as this plain is in the heart of the Finistra Range that extends from the heart of the Teldrens to the east and all the way to the ocean far in the northwest, where lies the city of Brug'hil, it offers a splendid location for a city to be built. Not only are the natural resources, given the universal harshness of the land of Telmerion, abundant, but so too the surrounding mountains offer a touching view, standing like sentinels clad in the light and sparkling most of 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 myellion. Such discoveries hint to the even greater riches to be found in the hidden heights of the Teldrens, where few now venture after its fall during the collapse of the kingdom of Sera Galaptēs. Minstead is rivaled only by such cities as Brug'hil and the ancient capital of the Galaptēā, the first still thriving, the very capital of Telmerion, though fallen into the clutches of the Imperial occupation and made the base of their operations in Telmerion, 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.

Of course, now 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 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. The vast company moves as quietly through the silent streets of the city as they may, though by the fact of 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 Draion—Rorlain, Tilliana, Bryma, and Senfyr—struggle to believe but that they have already been discovered, and they are 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 will to destroy every living human heart?

As the company climbs the slope of the hill and comes near to the castle, Rorlain turns and addresses them at length, and his words are shared widely, that all may hear. Wygrec, standing behind him, does not fail to indicate his displeasure at this arrogation of authority, but Rorlain ignores him. He says to his people, "I fear that we walk into an ambush. For 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 warn 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 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 not 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 Sera Galaptes and of the people of the Velasi, 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 may with confidence and with faith.”

Shout they would in response to these words, stirring up their ardor before the terrors that close in all about them, but instead the members of the company, one and all, places 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 keep and begin to move forward without delay. Coming to the very feet 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 doors, they pass within easily, for the doors stand splintered and broken, torn partially from their hinges and hanging loosely, leaving a wide berth for entrance. And inside the castle's corridors an eerie silence reigns. Whatever little light had pierced through the enshrouding mist of 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. Stepping forward, they find themselves first in a wide atrium with a floor of polished stone, though 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 which direction to proceed. But 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 druidach there are, but also greater eötenga as well, whose forms tower over the men, instilling terror into their hearts.

“We fight our way through!” Wygrec calls out. “Stand firm and show these beasts the true nature of their foe!”

And so the flickering red hue of the torchlight is soon interspersed with bursts of brilliant and pure blue-white, as the light channeled through Rorlain's poverty and openness of heart flashes forth upon the weapons of all. Even Tilliana, in their midst, draws a short sword and lashes out against a druidach 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, but then she sheathes her blade and occupies herself directly with the rea-

son that she has come: tending to the wounded by drawing them away from the periphery of the company, where the assault is fiercest, and seeking to save their lives by sparing them immediate danger and 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.

But regardless of how long they fight, and how many of these creatures they slay, they continue assailing them with numbers as though endless. For when one eöten is struck down, another appears in its place. Evaluating this situation, Wygrec calls to Rorlain, “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 Rorlain over the fray.

“I shall show you. Follow me.”



## CHAPTER TWELVE

### SETTING CAPTIVES FREE

Turic'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 and 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 down rapidly into the darkness below the castle.

With a glance back over his shoulder to his men, Turic steps down the first stair. But before he can take another step a cry sounds from behind him. Turning back he beholds the apparition of numerous eötenga from the encompassing darkness roundabout his company, and they are fast drawing near to them to engage them in combat.

"Fight!" he cries. "Slay these beasts now and bring peace unto our city!" And at the very same moment as the last word is spoken the blue light shines forth upon the weapons of the combined warriors of Minstead and Onylan-dun, and the battle begins in earnest. As Turic 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 on 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?" Turic asks, not intending the question to sound disrespectful, though the haste in his voice makes it so.

"I am Cirien Lorjies, grandmaster of the order of Niraniel, from Ristfand," the man replies kindly, "and a friend and companion of Rorlain."

"Very well then. If this 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 thence."

"Thank you, commander."

And with that they part, Turic to the edge of his company where they engage 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, Hierin, taking 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 little 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 druidach who at that very moment leers before them, a guttural voice vibrating from its throat in meaningless sounds as if in pain or grief. The blade strikes true and the light flashes forth. Before the old man is overwhelmed by the sheer number who surge forward in the wake of the fallen druidach, Hierin steps forward 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 step forward.

“We do not want to get caught in the corridor,” he says. “How much farther to the bottom?”

“Not another thirty yards, I think,” Hierin replies over his shoulder.

“Can we breach such a distance?” asks Cirien.

“Your thought and intent is the same as mine, little commander.” Hierin is beginning to like 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 and empty air taking their place. 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 Hierin 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 like teeth from the open mouth of a predator beast. Behind them stand others, weapons of various sorts at the ready; and, yet again behind these, stand soldiers whose melee weapons are for a moment sheathed, and bows instead are drawn from their backs and used 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 ahead and then crashing down upon the beach and 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 we may look?” Cirien asks.

“Aye, there is a yet deeper prison, or rather something that may function as such, wherein great numbers may be held,” replies Hierin. “We go there now.”

And so they do. Taking yet another stairway, this time one that spirals downward in such cramped quarters that they must proceed single-file, they progress yet further into the bowels beneath the castle keep.

“What is down here?” 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 what 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 place to imprison those one wishes to conceal.”

In but a minute or two they step forth from the narrow stair and a wide chamber opens before them, its low ceiling illuminated by the flickering torch-light though its walls are too far to receive even a hint of their luminosity. The chamber is bare, with no furniture nor decorations, an empty space with featureless floors, walls, and ceiling. But it is also for the moment devoid of eötenga, a surprising but fortunate fact.

But as the company moves forward through the darkness deeper into the room, figures are revealed before them, their faces and their form almost grotesque in the light of the torches born 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 their head. Upon inspection 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 imprisoned here. Know you of their location? And what are you doing in such a place?"

"Aye, we know of 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."

"Clearly you wish not to fight," Hierin says. "We outnumber you two to one. Let us take back our own people, for, like you and I alike, they are men."

"We are not outnumbered," retorts the leader. "A simple gesture and the creatures could be at our side. But they are restless beings, and they make rational discourse quite difficult. Don't make it come to that. Go now from 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 reasons do you have to speak with such arrogance and self-assurance?" asks Cirien.

"What reasons? I fight for the greatest power that there is, do I not?" asks the man, though Cirien and Hierin 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 Irilof, surely you don't truly wish to side with these fell creatures of the dark?"

"Irilof?" Cirien inquires, the realization dawning upon him all at once like water trickling swiftly down crevices of stone into an underground pool, filling it up with understanding. "You are Irilof Vandirel, the deputy lawbringer of the Empire of Valyria."

"Aye, that I am, or rather that I was," answers Irilof, 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 a Telmerin, are you not?" Hierin asks.

"That I am," replies Irilof, "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 Telmerion 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 Irilof 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,” Ciriën says without hesitation. “Many more warriors fight above us, and there is hope of victory. Renounce your pledge to these terrible creatures and accept a hope for freedom, if only you atone for the crimes you have committed against your own people.”

“Hope?” Irilof 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, I pity you greatly indeed,” Hierin says, “though I would judge you more harshly than does our pious friend here.”

Irilof opens his mouth to speak, but another man behind him steps forward and speaks, “I would 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, Irilof Vandirel,” Ciriën 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 don’t...” Irilof begins, but his voice falters. “I don’t know what to expect any more but death.”

“Yes, and that is probably what you deserve,” says Ciriën. “But 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 Irilof’s eyes, long buried and hidden almost to extinction. 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. To Irilof’s great surprise, Ciriën steps forward and places two kindly hands upon his shoulders. Raising his eyes to look into the old man’s eyes, 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,” asks Irilof. “Why is this?”

“I am not uncertain of his kingship,” explains Ciriën, “only of his return from the place to which he goes. For he walks unto danger and death in the desire to unseal the light for his people—and for you, too, Irilof.” When the latter does not immediately reply, Ciriën 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 unknowingly—worn around your neck. For he alone can wear it rightly, being the rightful heir of the one who wore it so many centuries ago.”

Now it is upon Irilof's brow that realization dawns, and he simply bows his head, a mysterious and unexpected transformation coming over him—as if the arrogance and apathy, the violence and bravado, 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 Sera Galaptes over his head, placing it then in the open palm of Cirien. And with the loosing 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,” Hierin 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 yourself, out to freedom. As difficult as it is for me to say, you shall have our protection until you see yourself safe from these beasts once again.”

Looking at his liberators, Irilof then summons forth from deep within himself, and manages to voice, 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 cries out, “We had all but lost hope of ever leaving this place.”

“The path out is not clear yet, my friends, and yet it consoles my heart to see that all of you still live,” Hierin 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 she also 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 man to her right. “Lead us out of here immediately. I don't want to be in this cage any longer.”

Hearing this Cirien turns inquiringly to Hierin, 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 are. But it is also not necessarily any safer here.”

“Let us lead them out as they have requested,” replies Hierin 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 fight.”

“Malrûn...is that you?” Hierin 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 his brow to his mouth, twisting between his eyes and across a broken nose. It is recent, though not so recent that it has not closed and begun to heal.

“Surely I do not look that different, that you cannot recognize me?” Malrûn asks.

“Aye, you are right. You do not,” replies Hierin. “I think I spoke more out of relief than confusion. I just 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 caught into captivity because of it. But that, too, is being remedied.”

“And I am glad of both, your saving then and your liberation now,” Hierin concludes. “And weapons you shall have, 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 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 and by the fortunate turn of events, fights back with equal ardor, refusing with all their might to be felled when the taste of hope against lies frail but real upon their tongues.

Yet few minutes pass and little progress is made by either side before something else happens which changes the nature of the conflict profoundly. It starts as a low rumble, almost like some massive beast growling as it awakens from slumber deep beneath the castle, and then progresses soon 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 Hierin. “Flee up the steps and out into open air before the entire castle comes down upon us!”

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Rorlain and Wygrec 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 Draia choose to take up residence than in the throne room where the ruler of the people has his seat? There is no time for Rorlain to pay any heed

to the uncomfortable fact that he joins with Wygrec Stūnclad, 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 Wygrec had a thousand thrones, he is not the true and rightful king of Telmerion. Eldarien is, and shall always remain, the king in Rorlain's heart.

At last they attain the entrance to the next chamber, and with all their strength they push open the heavy doors. They 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, dissolving it. And yet the toll taken upon Rorlain by the channeling of light in such great measure is significant, and he feels his strength waning even as they break through into the chamber beyond. Whatever is happening at this moment to Eldarien and Elmaryë, 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, Rorlain 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 from them surging forth the light that they bear, the light entrusted to them, 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, leaving in its place a feeling both of fullness and of emptiness: a fullness as a newfound energy awakens within Rorlain'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 consciousness. 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 and allows access into the chamber beyond. And then it is done, having achieved its effect even though the conscious resonance in Rorlain's mind is but like 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 trees, or like 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 Wygrec 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, Wygrec!" Rorlain calls, allowing the warrior the step ahead of him in the frenzy of battle that seems to be taking hold of him. "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, Wygrec 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, Wygrec, no," retorts Rorlain, though he knows his words fall on deaf ears.

Wygrec at last comes, with incredible strength hewing down the last remaining eötenga who stand before him, to the doorway leading to the throne room. And this places Rorlain 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, Wygrec!" he calls, but he is too late. The man pushes firmly on the double doors and they swing freely open. As Wygrec steps through, now seemingly oblivious of his surroundings and with his eyes fixed firmly ahead, Rorlain catches a glimpse of massive black wings extended across the length of the chamber beyond. Crying out in frustration, Rorlain 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 Wygrec into the throne room. As he steps in, the doors swing closed behind him spontaneously, though one remains ajar for but a few inches, caught by the person who, unknown to Rorlain, accompanies him from behind.

Even as Rorlain 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. Wygrec 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, Rorlain calls out, “No, Wygrec, let us face him together!”

But it is too late. As Wygrec draws near to the Lord of Death the latter extends one of his tremendous arms and swings it as if swatting away a fly. Wygrec 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 Wygrec Stúinclud, Rorlain 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 Rorlain, standing alone now in the chamber, axe 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 Draia laughs.

“When shall you frail mortals learn that no valor or strength can stand against the power of the darkness?” he says, and the terror of his presence invades Rorlain’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,” Rorlain replies in a voice tenuous with anguish and with fear, and also trembling with anger. “And you should perhaps be grateful 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 burning 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, knowing that I alone am deserving. You shall serve me in death!”

In a flash of movement the Lord of Death lunges forward even as Rorlain, finding his legs free again, steps ahead, swinging his axe to meet in desperate combat a creature far beyond his capacity to slay. And were it not for what happens next, Rorlain would have received the full brunt of the Draia’s attack and been 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 the disgust of tasting his own vincibility, he attacks Rorlain again, this time swiping from below with vicious claws. The axe is loosed from Rorlain’s hands in his effort to block the attack and then, before he is able to react, the Draia’s other hand finds its mark: black claws pierce deep into Rorlain’s flesh even as the force of the blow sends him flying helpless through the air until he,

too, collapses as an unconscious slump on the ground where wall and floor meet.

At this moment another voice sounds through the chamber, the voice of Tilliana, crying out in pain and lament as Rorlain 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 earthquake. 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

Elmariyë wakes to Eldarien's voice and to the touch of his hand upon her shoulder. 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 red embers. The cold is bitter and unpleasant, though the wind has stopped and the land about them is cloaked in quiet.

"What is it, Eldarien?" she asks quietly.

"I fear that there are creatures nearby...predators," he explains.

They both listen in the nocturnal silence for a long moment 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 Elmariyë opens her mouth to speak again, Eldarien raises his hand—a vague movement hinted at her side—and says, "There! Listen!" And as soon as his voice has fallen silent again 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 while, with her right, she finds her dagger and draws it, holding it at the ready.

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. Elmariyë hears the sound of metal against leather and knows that Eldarien 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 raving growl; but in response Eldarien 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, Eldarien thrusts his sword up through its torso and it cries out before slumping to the earth in death. Elmariyë grimaces at the sickening sound of the blade being withdrawn from its body.

After this Eldarien calls forth the light even brighter, and 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 know not why they do not flee," says Eldarien, his voice tense. "The light should scare them away, if not the slaying of one of their kind. I fear these 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 Eldarien slashes adeptly again the wolves that come against them. Elmaryë, 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, closing 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.

But 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, or wolves possessed of the ordinary 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 Eldarien. The other horse, Elmaryë'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 another wolf, but then turns and sprints away into the darkness. Yet Elmaryë has no time to heed this, as she must exert all her attention to the beast that now assails her, and which in like manner to the previous wolf, she is only barely able to slay. But even as she is able to do this, fear ripples through her at the awareness of the second wolf that was assailing her, toward which she has turned her back. She swivels around on her heels only to see Eldarien's figure in one fell leap descend upon the wolf and the lightbringer flash brilliantly as its blade comes down in a killing blow. And then all is quiet.

"Are you harmed?" he asks, turning to his sister.

"No..." she sighs in response, their eyes meeting for a moment and saying more in an instant than many words could express.

Raising his sword in the air Eldarien sends forth a wide ray of light to illuminate their surroundings as far as the eye can see and then, seeing nothing, he allows it to dim to no more than a dull radiance cast about them for a few yards. Exhausted, he slumps to his knees, breathing heavily. Elmaryë, for her part, still crouched in an awkward position in mid-turn, allows herself to sink back into a sitting position. For a moment they take stock of the situation, catching their breath and looking about them in silence. Then Eldarien says, "Those were no ordinary wolves. Of that there is no doubt. But this is not the first time I have come to know of the way that the darkness that arises in our land can poison and twist the instincts even of the wild animals. A bear acted similarly when it attacked the homestead of Rorlain and his father. It is frightening...and surprising. Never would wolves attack their prey relentlessly until their entire pack is slain, unless they are driven by some other force—not hunger but the impulse to destroy."

"And the horses?" breathes Elmaryë.

"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 helps Elmaryë 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?” Elmariyë 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.” Eldarien 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.”

“Of course that is fine with me. I think it is a prudent decision. Though I grieve for the loss of the horses, both because they were noble beasts and because they were a gift entrusted to us.”

“Indeed...and also because the journey shall be longer and more difficult on foot.”

“Yes...and that as well.”

Elmariyë rekindles the fire to provide some light and warmth while Eldarien 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 Elmariyë 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 light hardly more than a night with a partial 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.

† † †

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 or even considering the difficulty of their way. And as they walk, the hearts of both spontaneously reach out to the west, across the Stieka Mara and through the woods, to the velstadeä, to the abode of the Velasi, their people as much as the rest of the people of Telmerion. In each of them resides a longing to return hence 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 calls them, and so they march, through day and night with what rest they need, until the Stieka Mara 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 set up camp 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 and look around, though the darkness conceals all from sight. Drawing his sword from its scabbard, Eldarien allows some light to pass into it and through it, shining upon their surroundings. And as he does so, 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 into full light, the 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 in 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 and yet walking forward without footprint or sound across the snow toward Eldarien and Elmariyë, 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...” Eldarien breathes, but he does not finish the thought.

“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 awoken in great number and now lay waste the world of men.”

“You lie,” Elmariyë replies. “Like all your kind, you lie.”

“Oh, you think 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 Eldarien.

“But how readily men believe them,” 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 right 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 Eldarien, 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, though it is obvious that this response disgusts him, Eldarien asks, “Why have you truly come? I do not think 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 are a perceptive one, aren’t you?” the figure says. “You are right in this: the Lord of Darkness sent me to you, just as he called me from my castle into the light of day once again. Of course, this light has now descended into ceaseless night.”

“Why did he send you?” Elmariyë asks.

“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.” By now the figure has stopped directly in front of Eldarien and Elmariyë, 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 en-

joy it.”

“No more talking,” retorts Eldarien. “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, Eldarien and Elmaryë 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 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 mountain and the tree-laden wilderness. But then higher they ascend, until they are looking down upon the land of Telmerion 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 Velasi Forest, and far to their right, the Galas Basin, in which lies the ruined village of Falstead and the barrow of Sera Galaptēs. Far above these, nestled in the heights of the mountains is the great and ancient castle of Sera Galaptēs, and the destination of their journey. As they continue to look out across the landscape, their vision extends even to beholding what lies on the other side of the mountains, where the Finistra Range extends forth from the higher Teldren peaks like a ripple in the earth, until ending in the great city built upon the craggy heights overlooking the crashing ocean, the city of Brug’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. “I want you to behold the destruction that I sow with my own eyes, as I myself behold it. 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.”

Eldarien and Elmaryë both, in their own way, seek to respond to the Draia’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 lies 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 very 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 Telmerion 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 Stieka Mara and extends forth to the west, cutting through the very heart of the Velasi 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, whence the chasm closes again.

Before their horrified gaze the entirety of the Velasi Forest sinks into the pit that now opens like a weeping scar upon the face of Telmerion, and 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 of the city 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 Eldarien and Elmaryië 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 confusion, though neither of them understands what it means. A moment later both the triumph and the confusion, 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, yes, but deeply cherished—upon the figure of the Lord of Mæres. Filled with grief and fury, Eldarien tries to rise to his feet, tears bursting uncontrollably from his eyes. But he is too weak and sinks immediately back to the earth. Elmaryië, at his side, weeping as well, reaches out and clings frailly to his arm. “They are gone, Eldarien, 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 incredible 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 Eldarien 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 comes out: "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 Elmaryë 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," Eldarien 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. No, rather, I call you by your true name, and in speaking it I exorcise you from our land. So I say: Midrochus, begone, and come not hence for all the ages of the world!"

In response to these words, Midrochus 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 ever again directly afflicting the people of Telmerrion. For though Eldarien, 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 Midrochus has gone, Eldarien and Elmaryë, still clinging to one another, walk on through the darkness, illumined only by the light that shines still through Eldarien 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 as if cut by a massive blade, undulating down and 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 Draion. 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 Anaia, Hiliiana, says unto them: "Where before the earth had been split by the hand of Eldaru 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 Hiliiana'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 binding your spirit. Release it now, therefore, in trust, and in this trust walk forward. For whence 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 de-

stroy 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 with their darkness, they would do so without reserve or hesitation. But 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—oh, 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 his eternally, 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 Hiliana, the grief may well have crushed Eldarien and Elmariyë into incapacity, but as it is they proceed on their journey after only a short rest. But this does not mean that their hearts are not grievously sorrowful and filled with lament for the terrors that they witnessed at the hands of the one who called himself the Lord of Mæres, Midrochus, whose presence and power is now cast far away. And so they leave the great chasm behind and set their faces to the northeast, following the base of the Teldren Mountains even as their hearts linger with their beloved Velasi, with the most wise and loving people whom they have ever known, whose village now lies swallowed up in the depths of the earth.

When they stop again to make camp, they give free expression to their grief. They feel flowing in upon them an immensity of sorrow and loss sprung indeed 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 become aware more vividly of a sense that has been growing in intensity, in breadth and in depth, ever since they absorbed the darkness of the dragon in Onylandun, 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. For 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 evil and the mysteriousness of death, Eldarien and Elmariyë feel small and weak, like tiny drops in an ocean of loss, in a seemingly boundless expanse of corruption.

Suddenly Eldarien 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 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 is seen only in its fruit or in the radiance that it casts upon all that surrounds it and all that it touches." He pauses and runs a hand absentmindedly through his thick hair. "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 one 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?"

Elmariyë raises her eyes kindly and looks with profound love 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. No, it is rather the enduring truth of being that should 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 it to be. Not in looking to our own strength do we find courage and hope, but in looking 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 no longer see it, Elmariyë," admits Eldarien, voicing to her in words the heaviness of his heart that he has already shared with her in the unspoken communion of the spirit.

"Neither can I," says Elmariyë 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 the 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 Eldarien.

"And yet it is asked of us nonetheless," Elmariyë says. "As you said, and as we both feel so keenly now: our world is so fractured and so dark, estranged from our Father's original intentions and yet still bearing 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, both 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; but 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. 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 and of fervor in response to what Elmariyë 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 it 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.

Eldarien awakes just as the sun begins to shine over the horizon in the east, though this is evident to those upon the continent of Telmerion only through the slight lightening of the darkness where the glowing disc of Elda appears, fighting to pierce through a black veil. Before sitting up he opens his eyes, and he sees the figure of Elmariyë beside him. She is kneeling with her upper body bent over prostrate so that her forehead touches the ground. Seeing this he is not surprised, for he has seen her in this posture many times throughout their journey, even daily. 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 Eldaru, 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 Telmerion! But even before this, his heart wounded by so much pain and loss in his youth, 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 flowed ever more intensely with every passing day throughout the entire of his life and the wholeness of his being.

All of this comes to him now anew as if in a single glance, and Elmariyë sits 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, each unique and yet the two indivisibly made one.

But then another element soon enters into this reality as well: they feel the anguish of Rorlain, calling upon the light entrusted to them while he fights desperately in a place of utter darkness, and the grief and anguish of Tilliana and Cirien with him. The words that Hiliana spoke to them but the day before also 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 Rorlain 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 so

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 any words, they embrace one another and hold each other, lamenting together at 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 know what Hilitana had meant in speaking of the deeper darkness. Thence 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 keep them from being returned 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 pack up their camp. Then they set their faces to the mountains and continue on their journey.

† † †

Eldarien and Elmaryë pass along the base of the Teldren Mountains and come shortly, within less than a day, 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 effect of the earthrend upon the people of Telmerion. 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 so they turn their faces away and skirt 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 soon greets them, and the trees of the thick forest that spans from mountain to mountain—and in which lies nestled the village of Falstead—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.

“And I find that I can summon the light no longer,” sighs Eldarien. “We have entrusted it now entirely into the hands of Rorlain, and we must walk ahead without relying upon its luminosity or its strength.”

“But it is like a maze in here,” Elmaryë replies. “We must navigate our way through the trees almost by feel alone. This shall greatly slow our progress.”

“It is but a day or two across the basin, and then we shall climb beyond the trees, though even then the path shall be difficult. Many ages has it been since

the path into the mountains and to the ancient citadel of Sera Galaptes has been trod by human feet. We know not what we shall find, nor even if the trail is still amenable to passage.”

“I—,” Elmariyë 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 Velasi 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 Eldarien and Elmariyë their surroundings for a good ten feet in every direction.

“We may not be able to summon the light,” Elmariyë remarks, “but it is still here to guide us.”

Nodding to her but feeling in his heart the ever growing haste, Eldarien gestures for them to continue on their way without delay. And so they do.

For a day and a half they walk, speaking little and sleeping only three hours, until they come to the roots of the mountains upon whose rocky slopes, high above, the citadel resides. The trees begin to 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 progress becomes impossible until they find the entrance to the pass, as the overgrown slope rises before them, interspersed with rocky outcroppings, such that they can neither navigate nor climb. Yet finding the pass proves to be 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 flow shallow streams from high in the mountains. And they do not find it.

Their hearts cry out in unspoken prayer, fear and discouragement gripping their hearts. At last Elmariyë stops and, sinking to the ground which is damp with hoarfrost, says, “I do not know why we cannot find it. But we cannot continue like this, not for lack of path alone, but because the darkness intensifies with every moment and soon shall break us. Regardless of the haste and the burden of responsibility that we feel, if we do not proceed in peace, we shall not be able to proceed at all...”

Eldarien 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, reaching out for some path forward when looking externally 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 Elmariyë’s hand flickers, wavers, and goes out. Now they sit in almost complete darkness, with only the dim light struggling through the black mist illumining the air around them.

But at long last Eldarien stirs himself and rises wearily to his feet. He walks

to a nearby tree and breaks off one of its lower branches, and, using supplies from his backpack, he prepares it as a torch. The flames sputter to life and emit a faint glow on their surroundings, though even this light seems to be unnaturally dim, even more so than all light has been since the coming of the great darkness.

Walking back to where Elmaryë sits upon the ground, Eldarien extends his hand to her and 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, Eldarien," she whispers, her voice hoarse. "I am deathly tired."

"Yes. As am I. But to sink into inactivity will only make it worse." Then he says again, "Come, let us go."

Now she allows him to take her by the hand and to draw her up. Side by side, in the frail and flickering light of the torch as it combats the encroaching darkness, they continue their search. It another half hour before they encounter that for which they search. 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. The trees and foliage have also grown to hide it, making it difficult to find even for one who would know its location, even the more so for those searching for it for the first time. But when they have found it, the path is unmistakable, for it climbs upward steeply with 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 they climb, and all the while the torch in Eldarien's hand grows dimmer and dimmer, until it no longer emits any light even though the flame still flickers upon it. He casts it down in frustration upon the stone and stamps out the fire, then raises his eyes to look ahead.

"We have no choice now but to walk forward without any light to guide our way," he says. "Be careful not to fall, for the going shall be rough."

Elmaryë nods at his words without replying, occupied as she is with the conflict between another darkness and another light.

In another half-hour they begin to see before them the high parts of the mountain painted a darker black against 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 silhouette of towers and turrets jutting up in the midst of the blackness, harbingers of their approaching 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 as much as 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?" Elmaryë asks. "Surely whoever sent them knows that we cannot withstand such an assault."

"I do not think that he is trying to prevent us," Eldarien says, "but rather



simply to fill us with fear and to weaken our resolve.”

“But what about the Lord of Mæres—Midrochus—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 believe that the Lord of Darkness awaits us...draws us... What Midrochus did was his act of rebellion against his ‘master,’ who wishes for himself alone the privilege of destroying us and bringing an end to our quest. I think that Midrochus was rather simply meant to bring us to him.”

“So all the destruction that he caused, that was simply a whim born of his own pride and malice?” she exclaims.

“I fear so...” Eldarien breathes. “Such a degree of apathy, of disrespect, is incredible. And as a chasm has been torn open in the heart of our land, so I feel as if 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.”

Elmariyë sighs sadly, and the exhaustion in her voice is tangible, “Let us not look overlong into those depths, Eldarien, even if our eyes can see nothing else. I know of what you speak, but, whatever awaits us, we are coming to the end of our quest. Let us simply keep moving. It is not much farther now.”

He chuckles softly, though it comes out strained and choked, and he says to her, “I encouraged you and now it is you who encourage me. Who shall encourage us when neither of us can find courage any longer?”

Elmariyë looks at her brother very seriously now, as if his words have contained far more than he explicitly 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 ourselves, upon which we must rely for deliverance and salvation.” Saying this, Eldarien reaches out and takes Elmaryë’s hand within his own, looking at her tenderly.

“The light slips from my grasp and from my searching eyes,” Elmaryë replies sorrowfully, squeezing his hand ever so gently. “My heart is not big enough to hold the two together, to see and 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 Eldarien. “Even if you cannot see the light, cannot span the distance that must be spanned, only allow the Love within you to do it. That, that shall be enough, and it shall hold you too, even beyond feeling.”

“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, overgrown with moss and lichen, and broken in many places and crumbling with the passage of time. Though it has not snowed here in many days, perhaps even longer, drifts of snow still appear in shaded places of stone or in the shadows of trees to their left and to their right, visible as a lighter gray amid the all-enfolding darkness. They ascend, their flesh straining with every step to continue moving 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 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, like a gaping maw or a portal into the darkness—for 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 on the inside as well, with only an eerie light shining in from windows high in the walls, barely allowing the form of the walls and of the vaulted ceiling to be sensed.

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 poison that inundates the air and seeps from the walls and the floor, that emerges from the very air itself. And this silence is all that they encounter. There are no druidach, 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 near to a large spiral staircase winding down at the center of a spacious, domed chamber, El-mariyë stops.

“Brother, are you here?” comes her voice to Eldarien’s right, 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, but her eyes seem to gaze beyond him, as if no longer able to see. “I feel so alone. Please do not leave me. Please, I can’t 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’t I see you, hear you, feel you?”

“It is I,” affirms Eldarien gently, stepping close to her as if the proximity of his body to hers 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 more now, Eldarien wraps an arm around her shoulder and guides her forward across the chamber to the spiral stair. She follows docilely 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 the crown surrounds a head. The first thing that becomes evident as they step into this room—clearly the highest room of the citadel, the pinnacle of the topmost tower—is the eerie lights that play upon the walls. No...they are neither lights, nor are they walls.

Eldarien looks around and realizes that he is looking 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, Eldarien realizes, that is exactly what they are. As if giving some visible manifestation to what he and El-mariyë 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 terrors 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 hopeless-

ness, moaning in pain. And among the many scenes that play out before them, they see their own selves, too, their own reflections looking back at them, but distorted, out of proportion, showing only the evil and ugliness that they have done, and painting their features black and abhorrent.

Elmariyë 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, Eldarien 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, and stream forth, like smoke blown on a strong wind, and assail Eldarien and Elmariyë, 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 now again as it had been in the absorbing of the dragon’s darkness. But what they absorb now, what they bear, is so much more. And even if 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 malintent of the artificer of this terrible war, and to channel anew to the place to which it is meant to flow, free and unhindered.

And then, in a moment of deepest insight, Eldarien 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 Elmariyë 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. And it is there that their hearts both turn to face one another and, together, turn beyond, 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 Telmerion.

The sacrifice must be twofold, though only one: both death and life, two sides of the same mystery, though giving way to endless life. 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 established, 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 where all shadows shall pass away. Elmariyë’s heart pleads, therefore, in the silent cry of its inmost aspiration, and Eldarien 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 har-*

*mony where before there was division, and in the ways of faith where before there was ignorance, evil, and forgetfulness.*

After this, her voice passes beyond recognition, in a cry of the heart that cannot sound in the confines of this life, and Eldarien 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, burning at its heart, 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 crystalline light floods in upon Eldarien'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—but a group of houses spread about—that resides in the wide plain of Telonis. 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, winds a path upon which walks a 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, earth and sky encircling, protecting, and fostering 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. And were it the figure's intention to knock upon the door and ask for the owners of the homestead, 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 illuminating 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 Eldarien Illomiel. 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, 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 been liberated 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. Ciriën, 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.

Tilliana, 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 Draia and yet had left the edges of the chamber untouched except by the smaller falling debris. She found herself, therefore, crouched over the body of Rorlain, unmoving and apparently lifeless. In the darkness she has laid her hands upon his face and his chest, and felt the slighted 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 Rorlain rested 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 earth. But soon she learned that they had narrowly escaped a much worse fate: a great and massive chasm had opened in the earth, marring the face of Tëlmerion for many miles, just to the south of the city. 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 was besieging the city, she could not but think with longing and with fear of her dear friends, Eldariën and Elmariyë, 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 met the former. 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 mist 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.



For many days they knew not whether their companions had survived the ordeal that they faced in the citadel of Sera Galaptes, in their confrontation with the heart of darkness. All in Minstead attended now to the care of the wounded and 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 Rorlain, Tilliana, 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. All that they could do was abide in trust and in waiting.

But on the eighteenth day after the ending of the great darkness, Eldarien 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. Upon his coming many fell down before him, prostrating 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 Eldarien 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 Elmariyë, 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 Telmerion 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.

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Eldarien rides on horseback across the land, his sights set on returning to the citadel of Sera Galaptes. 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 Onylandun. 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 sustained. And in each he does something that he did not know he could do. No longer is the light needed to banish the creatures of darkness from the face of Telmerion, 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 remain. Moved by this, he had descended from the wall and walked out of the city, to the graveyard and remembrance of the fallen that lies to the north. Standing in its midst he had looked around, lamenting not only at the number of tombs, but also at 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 Eldarien 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 Eldarien did not know was that he could bring healing to this wound. Kneeling down against the earth, he had placed his hands against it in a gesture of tenderness and sorrow, as if bidding farewell to the Telmerion 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, flat plain. Soon the entire field, and beyond, all the way to the edge of the great chasm, was bathed in light, and glowing gentle. 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 Eldarien's left exclaimed, "And it is hardly the beginning of spring!" while others simply laughed in sheer wonder and delight. Tilliana, who stood a few paces behind her king, made the remark, "Telmerion 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 Eldarien 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 thence 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 masterful craftsmanship, but an eye that had gazed long and deeply into the light. Henceforth for many ages people would look up toward the Teldren Mountains and, if the day were especially clear or the sun particularly bright, they would exclaim: "Look! It is the great white citadel, the home of the king!"

For so it is to be. Eldarien returns to the citadel, and many shall follow him hence in the coming days. With the destruction of many towns and villages throughout the center of Telmerion, and even with the aftereffects of the terrible conflict in which the Empire engaged in its last push for power in the lands of Rhovas and Mineäs, a new settlement is to be built. In conjunction with the rebuilding that is taking place throughout the rest of the land, the ancient seat of the high kings of Telmerion, the people of the Galapteä, righteous in fidelity and friends both of the One and of the Velasi, the gifted custodians of his memory, is being reborn. And even if such people have long passed away in the ages past and in the calamities of recent days, they still continue to live in Eldarien, 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 Elmaryë 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 the crystal 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 descended hence. But in looking through these windows, Eldarien does not see as one ordinarily sees, or rather his ordinary sight is enhanced and extended, and he can look out for many miles across the face of Telmerion, a king keeping guardianship of his people with some small share of the vision of the One who is their true Guardian. Eldarien only prays that he may ever share in the love and compassion, with wisdom and the gentleness, of the heart of this true King, and that his kingship may but manifest and extend 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 renewed. 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 Eldarien. "I was not particularly 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," 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 Rorlain, 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 know that it would lead unto the revival of the high kingship of Telmerion 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 Eldarien 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 awe of heart, with gratitude and with confidence, for an inexpressible and eternal Love goes before us, and walks with us at every step of the way."

"I speak a wholehearted 'yes' to that!" Rorlain says with a heartfelt and joyful laugh, and in this moment Eldarien is moved to witness the newness of being that his friend has discovered, a lightness found not in any earthly home along, but in the home of the heart that fills every home while surpassing them all, the true and enduring repose.

"You know, Rorlain," Eldarien begins, a twinkle of gratitude and wonder in his eyes, "let us go together to visit your father soon. I would like to see him again, and to do so with you."

"That would be wonderful," agrees Rorlain, "but then I come back with you. You shall never be rid of me as long as you live."

"Nor would I wish for it to be otherwise." Eldarien 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 you 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, effected him, sometimes beneficially, sometimes harmfully. 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. To turn against this Love is not freedom, not liberation, but the destruction of myself. It is like a branch cutting itself off from the tree in the false pursuit of a liberty which brings only loss and the anguish of aloneness."

He pauses and runs his hands through his hair in thought, and then 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 contours 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, which, because he is our origin, is also our true destination and full Consummation."

"In the embrace of infinite and eternal Love," Rorlain 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, the blessedness of his communion."

Laughing softly, Tilliana says, "How I delight to hear your words, my friends! But come, we shall have time to speak much more later."

"Indeed, shall you show us this chamber of which you spoke?" Cirien says. "I would like to see the place in which our dear Elmariyë 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," Eldarien 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 in darkness unto death, to work such wonders of restoration and life.

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The day before his official coronation, which occurs one year to the day on the anniversary of his and Rorlain's arrival in Ristfand, 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 sided with the darkness. Irilof 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," Eldarien says to them. "The Empire of Valyria has fallen and a republic is springing 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 Telmerion 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 Telmerion 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 ages of the world, 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 Telmerion 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 Eldarien Illomiel receives unto himself in marriage Tilliana Valesa, who 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 Eldaru, the One, places upon their heads glittering crowns of gold and silver. And around Eldarien’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, Sera Galaptēs, his ancestor.

When this has concluded, Eldarien and Tilliana rise to their feet, hands joined, and 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 moments, 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 Eldarien 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 almost lost, 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 due. 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 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, Elmariyë Siliari, 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-Velfana. 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 the receiving, only in the gratitude that springs up in the heart, can we find joy in the present and hope for the future.

“Let every dawning day be a new hope of life abundant; 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 sorrows. 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 endless Day.”

## EPILOGUE

The sun sends light through the thick canopy of trees, causing dappled light to dance upon the forest floor, warm and majestic, humble and serene. Haeldaris 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 Haeldaris' 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 Telmerion.

Drinking in the warmth and brilliance of the light, Haeldaris 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 spins 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 Haeldaris 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 Haeldaris," 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 Eldarien Illomiel, the inheritor of the conjoined blood of the Galapteä and of the Velasi. I knew them both, Eldarien and Elmariyë, 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, seikani, live, child of the light, infinitely and eternally loved."

“W-who are you?” Haeldaris manages to say, as their eyes interlock in a prolonged gaze of mutual beholding.

“My name is Relmarindë,” 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.”



Ἰ ΣΤΑΓ ΠΡΑΪΣΕ \*Θ ΓΘΔ, \*ΗΕ ΘΛΕ,  
 \*ΗΕ ΑΛΛ-ΓΙΥΕΡ ΑΛΔ ΑΛΛ-ΥΑ\*ΗΕΡ,  
 ΥΘΡ ΗΙΣ ΛΘΥΕ ΑΛΔ ΜΕΡΘΩ ΥΛ\*Θ ΜΕ.  
 ΜΑΘ Ἰ ΣΤΑΓ \*Θ ΗΙΜ ΥΘΡ ΓΛΕΡΑ\*ΤΘΛΣ ΥΛΕΛΔἸΛΓ,  
 ΥΘΡ ΗΕ ἸΣ \*ΗΕ ΘΡἸΓἸΛ ΑΛΔ ΔΘΛΣΥΜΜΑ\*ΤΘΛ.  
 ΥΘΡ ΗΕ ἸΣ ΛΘΥΕ, ΗΕ ἸΣ ΔΘΜΥΛἸΘΛ,  
 ἸΛ \*ΗΕ ΕΥΕΡΛΑΣ\*ἸΛΓ ΕΜΒΡΑΔΕ  
 ΘΥ ΥΑ\*ΗΕΡ, ΣΘΛ, ΑΛΔ ΗΘἸΓ ΣΡἸΡἸ\*,  
 ΥΡΘΜ ΥΗΘΜ \*ΗΙΣ Σ\*ΘΡἸΓ ΗΑΣ ΒΕΛΛ ΔΘΛΔΕἸΥΕΔ  
 ΑΛΔ, ἸΛ ΗΥΜΒΛΕ Σ\*ΕΥΑΡΔΣΗἸΡ, ΥΡΑἸἸἸΓ ΒΡΘΥΓΗ\* \*Θ ΒἸΡ\*Η.  
 ΜΑΘ Ἰ\* ΑΛΛΘΥ ΗΙΣ ἸἸΓΗ\* \*Θ ΣΗἸΛΕ ΜΘΡΕ ΒΡἸΓΗ\*ἸἸΓ  
 ἸΛ \*ΗΕ ΔΑΡΚΑΛΕΣΣ ΘΥ ΘΥΡ ΥΘΡἸΔ, \*ΘΥΔΗἸἸΛΓ Θ\*ΗΕΡ  
 ΗΕ ΑΡ\*Σ,  
 \*ΗΑ\* \*ΗΙΣ ἸἸΓΗ\* ΜΑΘ ΔΡΑΥ ΥΣ ΑΛΛ \*ΘΓΕ\*ΗΕΡ,  
 ΥΛἸ\*ΕΔ ἸΛ ΗΙΜ, ἸΛ\*Θ \*ΗΕ ΕΥΕΡΛΑΣ\*ἸΛΓ ἸἸΥΕ \*ΗΑ\* ἸΣ  
 ΘΥΡΣ,  
 ΥΘΡ ΥΡΘΜ ΗΙΜ ΥΕ ΗΑΥΕ ΒΕΛΛ ΒΘΡΛ  
 ΑΛΔ \*Θ ΗΙΜ, ΒἸ ΣΗΕΕΡ ΓΡΑΔΕ, ΥΕ ΑΡΕ \*Θ ΡΕ\*ΥΡΛ.

A SMALL GRAMMAR  
AND VOCABULARY  
OF ANCIENT TELMERIC

## RUNIC ALPHABET

RUNE	ENGLISH	PRONUNC.
ᚦ	A	Arecha
ᚢ	B	Bena
ᚦ	C	Cara
ᚩ	D	Dea
ᚱ	E	Ea
ᚥ	F	Fia
ᚷ	G	Geka
ᚨ	H	Hara
ᚲ	I	Ia
ᚫ	K	Kara
ᚨ	L	Lea
ᚖ	M	Mea
ᚱ	N	Nea
ᚰ	O	Oa
ᚱ	P	Pia
ᚱ	Q	Quena
ᚱ	R	Ra
ᚱ	S	Sera
ᚱ	T	Ta
ᚱ	U	Ua
ᚱ	V	Vena
ᚱ	Y	Ya

The ancient Telmeric 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. Elmaryë (el-mah-ree-eh). If there is an exception and the “a” is pronounced long, it is thus marked as “â” 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 “Ristfand,” pronounced softly as “Ristfænd.”

**B** – same as the English pronunciation.

**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, as in Elmaryë (El-mah-ree-éh).

**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 Telmeric, 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.”

**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 Telmeric word “one” is pronounced “ah-neh,” with a short “o.” In addition, when coming at the end of a word, the “o” is always short, as in “poro,” “poor-ah;” this is similar to the omicron in Greek, as opposed to the omega. (Note that the “ah” here does not indicate an “a” sound, but rather the shortness of the “o,” which in this circumstance sounds more like a short “a” than a long “o,” again, similar to the Greek omicron.)

**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 (mal-roon).

**V** – ordinary.

**W** – this letter does not exist in ancient Telmeric, and was contained within the letter “v,” arising only in later development.

**X** – also does not exist in ancient Telmeric.

**Y** – similar to English pronunciation. Pronounced as a short “i” when between two consonants: e.g. Wygrec, Fyrir, wylana. All “j’s” in names and places are pronounced as a “y” sound, since “j” does not exist in ancient Telmeric: e.g. Alija (Ah-lee-yah).

### **Diphthong Pronunciations:**

**ai** – long “a” sound, as in English “rain,” (e.g. Rorlain).

**aio** – “ay-ohn,” as in Anaion and Draion.

**aī** – pronounced as two distinct syllables, a short “a” and a short “e,” with a “h” sound joining them; an exceptional case in Telmeric. Thus the word “aīn” is 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, *heras*.

**aē** – unlike the above, this is pronounced with a very clear enunciation of each vowel, “ah-eh,” as in *noaē*, “no-ah-eh.”

**æë (âë)** – a rare combination, pronounced as a long “a” followed by a short “e,” as in the surname Faræël, 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,” “ee-ay,” as in *stieka*, “chasm.”

**jia** – although this is not proper ancient Telmeric, 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, Rejia.

**oë** – oh, eh.

**œ** – long “o” sound, as in “ocean,” as in the word *œdra*.

## GRAMMAR

In terms of grammar, for the sake of simplicity, the rules are more or less equivalent with modern English. This makes learning ancient Telmeric relatively easy, since it is mostly a matter of learning vocabulary, pronunciation, and a few rules, 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
- You: tu, ti, tua
- You (pl): su, si, sua
- They: ena, enia, enen
- Us: noë, noän, noën
- It: ia, iana, iyen

2. The order of words is much freer in ancient Telmeric 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:

- 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*)
- a, n + si (*fæn*, *fænsi*, *vela*, *velasi*)
- e, ia (remove a) + on (*brudghë*, *brudghon*, *Anaia*, *Anaion*)
- most consonants + i (*cæhil*, *cæhili*)

### Verb tenses:

- Present/infinitive – ordinary ending of each verb as in dictionary
- Past – remove ending and add -at.
- Past participle – remove ending and add -enga.
- Present participle – remove ending and add -eng.
- Future – remove ending and add -ata.
- Imperative – usually just as -s to end.

TELMEIC-ENGLISH DICTIONARY  
(WITH OTHER ETYMOLOGICAL NOTES)

**A**

a – to  
 ærē – dream  
 æsa, æsi – wind  
 alaia – eternity  
 alaie – eternal  
 allo – light (adj. concerning weight)  
 allacora – lighthearted, light-heart  
 aīn – for  
 Anaia, Anaion – celestial spirit, divinity (no m./f. difference)  
 andra – wonder  
 andraplera – wonderful  
 ainé, ainá – god, goddess  
 ane, ana – this  
 ana – onto  
 anga – delight  
 ann – a(n), a certain, any (adj)  
 ædir – before  
 adra – able, capable  
 adra'e – able to (followed by verb)  
 adria – ability (noun)  
 adra – energy, stamina  
 æftir – after  
 ægge, æggia – urge (verb/noun)  
 æggres – anger  
 æggre – to be angry  
 æggresta – aggressiveness  
 æpa – upon  
 aldes, aldesi – tree  
 aras – origin  
 arecha – beginning  
 asang – song  
 asta, astási – star  
 ata – at

**B**

bánda – death  
 belía – daughter  
 belós – son  
 brudghë – cliff, cliffside

**C**

cæhil – city, large settlement  
 cæra – to deliver  
 cakraë – cacophony, noise  
 cara – peace  
 castra – throne  
 castria – throne (adj)  
 ciri – humble



claris – visible  
 cora – heart  
 corahas – harmony  
 cris – clean, pure  
 crunæ – discordant  
 crunas – discord

**D**

dara – to give  
 den – to mind, to give presence  
 denas – awake  
 adenas – asleep  
 dere – lost  
 dia – from, by  
 dife – send  
 dire – (verb) to direct, guide, bring  
 diya – day (as in 24 hour period)  
 draico – dragon  
 Draia, Draion – spirit of darkness, fallen celestial spirit (no m./f. difference)  
 dugra – skill

**E**

eä – being (noun, ontological), also “to be” (verb)  
 eäs – being (noun, concrete)  
 ecla – bend, turn (noun)  
 eiga – edge, brink  
 el – all (noun)  
 elas – love (noun)  
 elandra – wisdom  
 elandre – wise (adj and m. and f. noun)  
 elementa – generation  
 elementar – elder  
 elen – to be  
 eicta – eight  
 eictanda – eighth  
 eidoch – steppe  
 eliána – good/beautiful, goodness/beauty  
 eliaru – to love  
 en – and  
 ena, enia, enen – they (nominative, dative/accusative, genitive)  
 endrale – forever  
 enna – still  
 entra – among  
 einnen – when  
 eöten – creature of darkness (many meanings)  
 eya – into

**F**

fæn, fænsi – man, male  
 fæna, fænási – woman, female  
 fænd, fændi – village, small settlement  
 feski, feski – fish  
 feskar, feskári – fisherman

fél – woods, forest

fian, fiana – new (adj)

feld, felda – old (adj)

freyja – longing

fundála – truth

fyris – because

## G

galema, galemi – echo

ganya – wife

glær – steed

gripa – finger

gunnas – abyss, emptiness, hollow space

## H

hæras – jarl, chief

haláne – joyful

hama – shape

handa – hand, palm

hasa, hasia – praise (noun/verb)

hasío – holy

hata – that, in order that

Heillas – Holy Ones, Blessed Ones

henna – flower

hïen – man

hist – husband

hûnd – hour, time, moment

hûpa – under, underneath

hvitá – white, resplendent

hyga – give heed, take heed, hearken

hyra – to hear

## I

ia, iana, iyen – it

iella – to surrender, to give oneself

ievántyr – adventure

igna – fire

il – in

ildrich – flatlands

illia – dawn

illiandir – Dawnbringer

illo – light (noun)

illu – teach (verb)

illustre – lamp, lantern

incla – bend, incline (verb)

incla – slope, incline (noun)

## K

kiela – lake

kalen – end, goal

kalasteia – consummation

kalla – name

ka'el – to say, speak

korda – termination

kvéda – lament, mourning (noun and verb)

## L

landa – land, earth

lementa – age

liene – free

## M

ma – mama (intimate term for mother)

mærdenás, mærdenási – horror, terror, i.e. waking nightmare

mære – nightmare, bad dream

mala, malási – musical note

mande – to offer, to proffer

mara – (adj) great

maris – (adj) very

mena (adj) small

maréa – sea, ocean

matra – mother

me, mia, melen – me (nominative, dative/accusative, genitive)

medlur – shadow, false image

meldaë – melody

meldia – melodious (adj)

meldanda – fifth

melen – gentle (adj)

meléndia – gentleness

mena, menäë – count, quantity (name of Telmeric currency)

meneris – memory

menes – to remain

midda – middle, center

miel – gentle

mon, moën – all, every

moendas – everything

morda – grove

## N

na – indeed

narië – always

nata – night

ne – no

nenua – nine

nenuada – ninth

net – not

nirande – to yield, to give way

noë, noän, noën – us

nua – none

nu – of

## O

obsca – (adj) dark

obscur – darkness

Oë – “O” vocative address

ohomë – need

ona – one

onanda – first

onys – each

onanda – unique

oro – pleasant, enjoyable

## P

paras – to confront, to stand against

passa – beyond

patras – father

pleras – fullness

poro/a – first

proia – to sound

proya – sound

## Q

qua – who

quanda – fourth

qui – what, which

## R

raö – mind (noun)

rego – realm, kingdom

ren – strength

rinda – firm

rindaro/a – firmness

rist – rich, wealthy

risté, rista, risti – nobleman/woman

roër, roëra – valiant

roëdra – office/study, reception chamber

## S

sama – same

sano – pure

sara – to paint

saráta – painted (adj)

seä – to sing

sed – two

sedra – second

seko/a, -anin – chosen

sek – to choose

seïkani, anin – beloved

seles, selea, seleánin – child (m/f), children

seni – without

septes – seven

septanda – seventh

sera – to live

seka – six

sekara – sixth

stadeä – home

stïeka – rift, chasm

sorda – strife

su, si, sua – you (plural)

sura, surana, – life

suré, surá, suría – person, people

svas – sweet

svatá – to sweeten, make sweet

## T

ta – papa (intimate term for father)

tan – the

teranda – third

t'handas – companion, friend-at-hand

tillë – cultivate, also n. for garden

tina – to plow

tinaq – plow (n.)

tinda – to fall, to be lost

tinta – ten

tindanda – tenth

tinde, tinda, tindási – fallen, lost (noun)

toralé – to take

torda – to remove

torvéla – to unveil

traté – (verb) to move

tu, ti, tua – you (nominative, dative/accusative, genitive)

## U

ungden – hurt, hurting

ûfor – under

## V

vel, velí – veil

vela, velasi – veiled one(s)

ven – come

ventrás - winter

voä – cry, plead

## Y

ya – an expressive form of “en” (and), emphasizing the inseparable conjoining of two parts

yahë – final

yé – gracefulness

yfir – above

yin – mountain

yora – valley

yovar – younger (noun and adj.)

## NUMBERS

*The first word is the name of the letter (e.g. one, two); the second word is the descriptor (first, second).*

o – eng

1 – ona; onanda

2 – sed; sedra

3 – tera; teranda

4 – quara; quanda

5 – melda; meldanda

6 – seka; sekara

7 – septes; septanda

8 – eicta; eictanda

9 – nenua; nenuada

10 – tinta; tindanda

11 – ona'te; onatanda

12 – seda'te; sedatanda

### DAYS OF THE WEEK

Eldaridya (*Sunday*)

Mornwydya (*Monday*)

Toroanya (*Tuesday*)

Haelinya (*Wednesday*)

Nerethya (*Thursday*)

Melengthya (*Friday*)

Niranya (*Saturday*)

### MONTHS

*The connection between the Telmeric months and our contemporary Gregorian calendar is only approximate, as the Telmerins 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.*

Fiándas (*January*)

Sedrás (*February*)

Teras (*March*)

Quartás (*April*)

Meldrás (*May*)

Sesémas (*June*)

Septémas (*July*)

Eicta (*August*)

Nenás (*September*)

Tintás (*October*)

Onátas (*November*)

Sedátas (*December*)

THE CONTINENT OF TELMERION



IN THE LAND OF IERENDAL

THE DOLKRELEAK  
 OF KLEMLERPEA  
 IN THE LAND  
 OF IERENDAL

