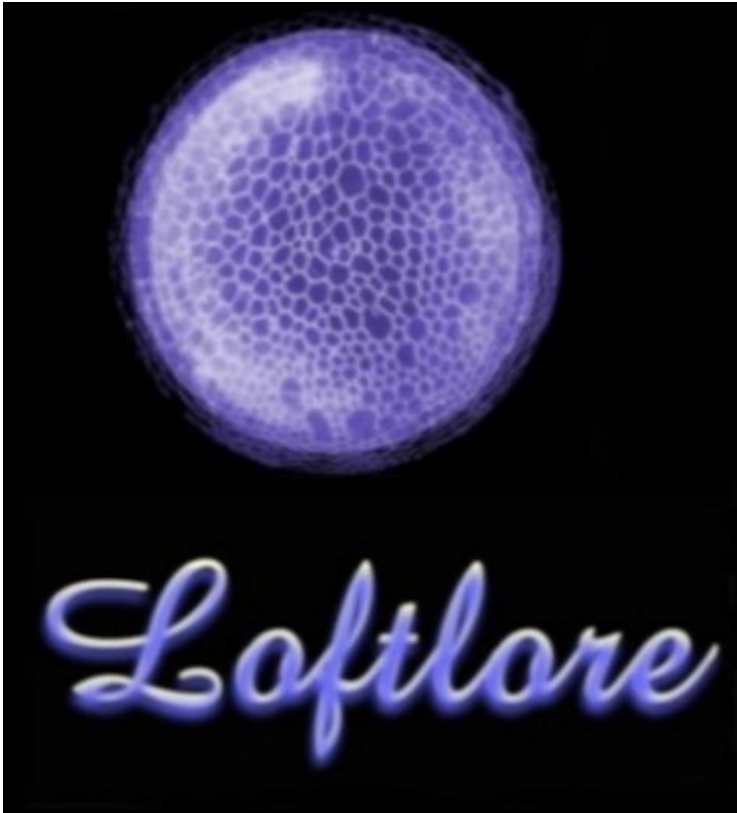




By E. S. Hudler



Illustration by Joyce DiBona



By: E. S. Hudler

Books by E.S. Hudler:

Loftlore

Loftlore Mission

Loftlore Resolve

Loftlore Epitome



Loflore

A Book By E. S. Hudler

E-book edition

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PROLOGUE

"Many of them will die."

"They must die if they wish to live forever.
Dying is how I teach it to them."

The vastness of it was beautiful. The army moved as one. "Glorious," the General whispered. He did so under his breath. "So much martial might under one will." He heard footsteps behind him. The General turned to see the man, the will that ruled them all.

"How many are there?"

"Over one hundred fifty thousand, Everand!"

Everand was not so much wearing black as he was covered with the absence of existence. Where he stood there was a hole in the world. His presence was real enough. His malevolence was very real, but his existence was unexplainable. His form suggested that he was human. He was covered, not in armor but in night. The blackness was devoid of light or color. The sound of his voice issued from his whole person. No one in his right mind would touch him.

"General Logos, take command of your troops."

The highly decorated Ragnall moved along the wall upon which they stood. He followed the top of the wall until he came to stone stairs that emptied onto the compound.

"Hello, Everand." Another figure in the same impossible black clothing approached from the right.

"Ah, Brother Lucas! Good to see you!"

The second figure stood back, though Everand's greeting seemed warm and welcoming. "I fear they are not as ready as they could be, Everand. If we held off for a year we could send a third of them armed with guns."

"Who cares? Guns. No guns. Who cares?"

"More of them will die if we go now."

Everand looked into the stark blackness of the other's person. "They are gerbils, Lucas. It is a weakness to allow yourself to get sentimental over them." A threatening quality had entered Everand's voice. "Let them die like gerbils. They are soulless, Lukas." He turned away "The best they can hope for is to die for their lord. This fight is an opportunity for them."

Many thousands of Ragnall were on their knees before Everand. To a person, they looked at him and only at him. There was worship in every face. Everand motioned for the hoard to rise to their feet. The thousands upon thousands of Ragnall rose. It was as though they were countless puppets on multiple strings. It was an eerie moment.

General Logos returned.

Everand turned his covered face to the General. "Send out the scouts, General. When the scouts return," Everand paused a long, self-satisfying moment, "loose the army on this wicked world. We are the fist of God."

CHAPTER ONE

THE LETTER

Balanor faced the cold, still morning with a motionless stance. Statuesque, he looked into a night sky with his sharp, bird-like sight. The black background sky was all but filled with uncounted thousands of crystal stars. His log cabin door was closed against the air that had turned suddenly brittle-snap cold. In the dim light of two uncaring moons, there was just enough illumination to draw soft shadows across a glistening, frozen field. Just recently planted, the budding crop was iced over, dead. The moons, a smaller one tidal-locked around a larger moon, circled like the hands of a heavenly clock, keeping relentless time. In its orbit, the lesser moon kissed the greater moon. The contrast of the impersonal beauty of the night sky, with its dancing residents, and the sight of his field was depressing. The night was so alive with motion, but the field was a single, frozen rock. Fist-sized winter cabbage shoots were static, unmoving. They were frigid, and would feed no one. Farming this early in the season, and so near the Ilder glacier, was always risky, but planting winter cabbage before the moon's first slow seasonal kiss was truly a gamble. Balanor had walked half a day to get his neighbor's recommendation on planting the winter cabbage so soon, but he had set seed down despite his neighbor's urgings not to, and now he was paying for the risk. Thoughts of profit at the higher 'first-crop' rate had turned to disaster. Sometimes it seemed as though nothing would ever go right.

Crisp steps made crackling-crunching noises as Balanor walked over the ground. He strode to the nearest plant shoot and gave it a nudge with the point of his elk-hide boot. It snapped off at its base with a sharp, clear note. With disgust, Balanor spit past the parka hood's snow-white rodent fur that shaped a fuzzy oval frame around his

face. The spittle landed and froze instantly into a crystal lattice of bubbles, one bubble upon another.

Except for the crunching sound that his walking made upon a dusting of snow, Balanor moved silently back to his cabin.

The cabin was small, even by humble standards of most other Sarahan. The single room offered sturdy but stark sanctuary from the bitter cold. Balanor crossed a plank floor to the pig iron stove and opened its heavy, cold door. It squeaked its usual protest of metal against metal. Balanor was not stingy, but with a miserly reluctance that made him uncomfortable, he placed a little kindling upon the dead bed of ashes inside the stove. He added a log. Firewood was hard to come by, as the forest was some distance away. The energy needed to cut the wood and gather it near enough to be useful had to be stolen from the demands for work that his farming placed upon him. 'Stay warm or eat more' was the standing expression amongst the Sarahan. The split bough that he placed in the stove was an extremely heavy piece of stonewood, and would provide steady, moderate heat for the entire night. Tomorrow, there would be few additional ashes, and even those could be salvaged and added to lard to make soap. In Balanor's life, nothing was wasted. There was no abundance here.

With a passing glance around the room, Balanor's quick eyes made sure that everything, his few meager but essential and thus precious possessions, were in their proper place. When you have so little, the smallest things seemed important. He paused for a moment to mourn the structure's lack of a window. It was a mark of his relative poverty that buying a small window and installing it seemed a distant and somewhat hopeless dream. Satisfied, as he always was, that this small but vital part of his world was in order, he climbed a straight-ladder. The Sarahan was a tidy race and it showed in the careful, clean and organized way they lived. The lives of the people were not always so tidy.

A fatigue born of failure overtook him. He climbed up to the loft. Its height was twice his height. A Sarahan's life was in his loft. It was so much more than the room where the race slept. They kept the markers and medallions of their life there, around them, that and their minimal beds. The loft was known as the place of dreams, of hopes, the place where stories untold were generated. It kept the past and made the future. It was the place where conception and birth took place. In the end it was where life took flight. To a Sarahan, the loft was the place where their existence was centered.

The tiny room was three times his body's width but barely its single length. The comparative height of the loft allowed every available degree of life sustaining heat to reach the space. On this arctic night he'd need the warmth, all of it.

He removed his parka and placed it over the thumb-thick blanket, the only blanket he owned. It always supplemented, as was intended, the warmth conservation of his body's precious reservoir of heat. He paused for a moment to ask the old question, why a people such as his, so poorly adapted to the cold and rigors of life on the island, would share this place with so many other species so perfectly adapted to the environment. Placing the puzzle on hold once again, he slipped his still fully-clothed body under the blanket. He shivered for a while as his body tried and nearly failed to give him the comfort of a temperature where sleep could be sustained. When he finally sailed those seas, he did so in a storm of dreams, and none were to his liking. His sleep was fitful and his dreams the size and shape of bubbles, but full of horror. Dreams faded, floating away to a dim background. Still restless in his sleep, Balanor became aware of a change. Distant dreams moved away, and he somehow knew himself to be back in his room, warm in his bed, yet all was not right. There was a presence, and it was near. He was deep into dream sight. His mind searched for something, a presence more fit than seen. He searched for its essence, evil and frightening or

friendly and comforting. It was something else. It was nothingness.

Balanor now understood, fully and suddenly. The darkness had revealed itself to him. Intuitively, he knew, with a knowing as hard and cold as a stone on a frozen night, that the darkness was a future, his future; a wasted one. It was a future remarkable only for its poverty, a barren future void of worth. The darkness was surrender objectified. It was a path to walk, ever narrowing to an end where it plunged into some unseen hole. Here was a pit where things are placed that are never meant to be found, a place to be forgotten forever. The void, the soft formless darkness, moved closer, and began to write a life with a beginning, middle and an end, but absent of all meaning and accomplishment.

He woke with a scream of defiance, leaping from his bed. He barely bothered with the stairs to the cabin's floor. In a burst of two steps he charged to his staff, marshalling himself to his door. Behind it, he knew, was choice, do with his life some thing, or to rest in inky blackness of mattering not. Again Balanor screamed defiance, raised his staff and tripped the wooden lock of the door. Sweat dripped from his cold flesh as he bashed the solid wooden door. With a ring that was a thud, it creaked open. Balanor stood his ground, wet with perspiration and breathing as though he had just finished a fight.

There was nothing outside, a nothing that was real. The formless ink was not there. "Where are you?" he screamed. "Fight! Fight me!" he shouted, but surrender never fights, it just calls.

Many minutes passed before Balanor could compose himself. His chest rose and fell. His knuckles turned white with the death grip he had on his staff. Slowly, ever so slowly, his rage passed and his reason returned. "I am mad," he whispered to himself. From deeper within came another answer. Perhaps he had experienced something so profound, so critical to his life, that it appeared to be madness. The tension leaked from his

shoulders, and he slumped into a chair. It was a long time before he closed the door. He had beaten a demon, one he knew that fought with all souls.

Morning was a close contest of will versus flesh. The fight was unfair, as Balanor's will always prevailed, but sleep made him suffer. He had not slept after the night's encounter. He could, and did, work to exhaustion. Balanor deprived himself of rest, until the protests of his physical needs nearly made him ill. His body sentenced him to a period of punishment for his poor use of his own resources. The lesson remained unlearned, however, and loud, persistent aches and pains were ignored. He moved from the comparative warmth of the bed, and the spiritual warmth of his loft, to the shocking cold of below.

With an intuitive glance he looked toward the door. Balanor's sense of premonition was so acute that it became the source of many whispers behind his back and much name calling to his face in school. As he reached for his fur-lined boots, the door opened. For a fraction of a moment he hesitated, unnerved by the night before, but soon his blurred and sleepy mind leapt into a warm focus. The stature of the figure before him, its sure stance and bearing, but most of all its height, was a dead give away. The person was utterly indistinguishable under a parka far too big for its apparent frame. The face was entirely hidden behind frost-covered but downy fur. Air, exhaled from the face of the parka's hood, rose in streams and puffs of frosty, steamy condensation. The newness of the morning, the parka, the physical appearance of the body, told the story. His wife had come home. She was early.

"Wait just a moment," he shouted, hand held up and out, palm forward. "Wipe your feet!" One sharp stamp of each foot was all the foot wipe he got. It wasn't obedience. It was more akin to defiance. Balanor knew what the stomps had meant, for his wife and he had played this game many times. They both delighted in it but pretended not to.

"WHAT!" came a fur-muffled shout. Buttons on the parka, made of golden amber, were released. The hood was unsecured from around the face by the release of leather strings. The entire garment fell to the floor in a heap. The figure within proved to be but seed size compared to the outer husk of the canvas. The thick thing trapped warmth, and was Dercy's only coat.

Balanor cursed to himself. It was not his nature to do so aloud, nor was it a good idea to be profane in front of Dercy. "Why the rude awakening? What are you doing back from your parents' so early?" She looked at his face and looked away. He became suspicious immediately. Dercy's eyes never retreated. Quickly, silently, something passed between them, but it was postponed by the growth of a smile upon her face. The smile grew to a grin, then flowered into something lovely. She made no attempt to stifle a bright, new laughter. She was laughing at him!

"What's so funny?"

"You are! You look absurd." More laughter, released without control or harmful intent. It simply escaped her glacier-white toothy grin. The sound she made seemed to be a drink of joy to him, though he knew full well that it was he who was the focus of the levity. "Your clothes look like you slept in them and you look as though you had just gotten out of bed."

"That would be because I slept in my clothes and just got out of bed."

"Droll. Very droll."

"Damn," slipped from Balanor's lips as he nearly tripped over the parka. A laugh from her followed his curse. He felt himself safe. She continued to giggle, and moved past him into the center of the relative warmth of the cabin.

"It had to be you. I knew it was you," muttered Balanor, his voice heavy with sarcastic regret. "Did you

steal that parka? You'd better take it back and give it to its lawful owner."

"Gods! Close the door!" She picked up the mound of material and fur that made up the parka and hung it as a heavy lump on an iron nail. It draped over a small window, yet another way to economize the cabin's precious heat.

"Take this back? Not a chance. Its last owner set it down so they must not have wanted it. Besides, mom gave it to me. What's for breakfast, my husband?"

"Stolen property," he mumbled just loud enough to be heard. Her hearing was so acute it was spooky. All her life her gift of hearing had gotten her into trouble. She heard what was not meant for her to hear, or she heard what was needed to be heard. Either way, trouble followed Dercy.

"Nothing is for breakfast. How do you want your nothing?"

"I always take my 'nothing' fresh and raw." She returned to the parka and removed a fist-sized package of waxy-white paper. She slapped it down on the kitchen's cutting board with a satisfying slam. She reached across and pulled a serrated knife from a knife block. It was the sharpest knife the new family owned and a semi-precious commodity. With some satisfaction she began cutting slabs of the meat from the brisket, deftly and expertly slicing between and around the ribs.

Balanor could see that there was more on her mind than breakfast. His relationship with Dercy had always been exceptionally intuitive. Their life was a dance of impromptu steps that each seemed to know by heart. He decided a change of subject was called for.

"What makes you think I'm inclined to eat breakfast? I can take care of myself. Want some help?"

Dercy measured the attempt at compromise and found it sufficient. "How's about you get eggs and begin a scramble. I'll fry."

"Fine. I've tasted your eggs. Stand back!" He gave her a butt shove, moving her but slightly. "Don't burn yourself! That's too much oil, Dercy."

Her retort was a snort, after which she added more oil.

Balanor briefly choked on a laugh. Facing away, she grinned. It was too soon to award him a smile-prize.

"It will be nice not to have to plow that frozen field anymore," she said. It was almost a non-comment but it brought Balanor up sharp. There had been a twist in the comment, and he picked it up immediately. She knew that the field would need to be plowed yet again before another planting, even a modest one.

One of her snow shoes fell from an iron nail from where it had hung. Balanor looked at it and commented. "I wonder when the other shoe will fall?" He moved quickly to re-hang the thing by its broad, leather webbing.

Dercy couldn't help herself, she changed the weight on her feet from one side to the other, an imperceptible gesture that Balanor would certainly perceive as a squirm. The body language of each person was transparent to the other.

"You're so subtle, my husband, but its lost on me. I'm just too simple a person. That's me. Simple." Now it was Balanor's turn to make an abrupt noise, a rude retort.

"Lover, Confess. What's this all about?"

His spoken endearment broke the ice, and her plans to broach the subject melted away. "Here, take this," she said, and produced an envelope from deep within the

bottom pocket of her left trouser leg. "It's from the Elders Council."

Balanor knew all too well what the envelope contained. Mail rarely came to Coldfield, their ancestral home. Farmers, especially young ones without families or children, might get mail once, maybe twice a year.

The Council had been scheduled to hold its secret lottery five days ago. Held once each year at the Spring equinox, its sole purpose was to select the one male who would tempt the sea by sailing it alone.

Balanor's people were an orphaned race. Every single being on this island was the child of a parent of a grandparent of a great-grandparent of a shipload of their people marooned on this barren place some one hundred turns ago. "The Crossing" was the people's way of sending one spare male into the deep, cold vastness of the sea to try to reach their now mythical homeland, "Cone." It was legend to be a place of warmth and abundance that was spoken of to children before they went to bed. It was the mainland, a place of hope. However, the cost of this hope was high, one life lost every year for as long as their racial memory served.

The Council supplied the luckless selector a dinghy (outside of official circles it was known as the gift of a floating coffin), some basic supplies, and much sage and ceremonial advice on which direction to travel to reach land.

No one had ever returned from The Crossing.

Dercy fidgeted. "Well, are you going to open it? It may be good news. It may not be what you..." Her voice trailed off as the words compressed against her obvious fears. Her eyes met his and made a plea. It only took a moment for Balanor to cross the distance to her and wrap himself around her. The embrace left them breathless, and the air they expelled was taken in by the other, gladly, deeply and wholly and the warmth of it felt like life itself.

Their faces joined in an open-mouth kiss. His lips sought her left cheek, moist from tears. He kissed them away. Neither really shed tears. The salty moisture was squeezed from their heated, flushed faces by powerful fears. Her breath seemed very hot, as did his, and neither knew nor little cared where one's air ended and the other's began. He kissed her. She returned the kisses, saying a thousand unspoken words. Silently, seeking impossible reassurance and some kind of future in each other's comfort, they gave of themselves to the other. That they didn't know what the future held made holding each other all the more important. Her large, seeking eyes locked on his, and wordless expressions of passion joined seamlessly with expressions of compassion. Who led whom to the loft was unimportant, for the physical expressions they were about to share were felt by the two as if they were one. Soon one is what they were, and what happened then seemed so perfectly natural to both of them, that they would not have thought to question it if they had lived to be as old the ocean was vast.

* * * * *

The letter lay on the floor where it had been dropped from hands opened to hold something more important. The food was cold, but they ate it anyway, slowly and without joy. The concern for her husband wore new wretched lines into Dercy's young face, a face that had never experienced concern like this before. She picked it up and felt it a hated thing, but placed it gently in a rough, open-weave egg basket that hung from one of the rough hewn logs that supported the loft. Balanor returned his attention to eating, and spread sweetberry jam over three day old bread, toasted atop the wrought iron stove that served as heater and oven for the cabin.

"Efferæet gave it to me." These words caught Balanor by surprise. "It's his seal."

While Efferet was a member of the Elders Council, almost everyone knew him as a single-minded, unbalanced old man. Balanor did not count himself part of that majority. To Balanor he was a respected teacher, a shaper of Balanor's deepest and most heart-felt philosophies. To say that he was a mentor was to demean the relationship. Balanor could not believe his old teacher had anything to do with issuing what amounted to a death warrant for his closest student. "May I see that now?" he asked of his wife.

Faster than the eye could follow, Dercy grabbed the envelope. Before Balanor could stifle a stunned squeak, she had the thick, yellowed paper of the envelope crumpled into a wad. Incredulous, he watched as she held the wad of doom near the open door of the oven! "I swear on my life, Balanor,

I'll throw this filthy thing into the fire unless you agree, right now, to let me come with you!"

"What? You're mad! Dercy, I am going to die! You want to come with me? Stop acting foolish and hand it to me!" Balanor knew his mate was serious. He didn't advance to get the summons. She didn't move, and holding that document so near the heat of the fire could not have been comfortable. "Dercy, you are my wife, not my keeper. I will not let you do this."

"I am so your keeper, my husband."

"Dercy, this is not funny. You know what kind of trouble you can get into by destroying that summons. Give it to me." The coals of the fire danced orange and red, giving a ghastly look to Dercy's pale hand

"This letter is ashes unless you swear, swear on all you hold true, that if this letter is what we know it is, you will let me help!"

He looked for a way out of the trap. Without the document, which had been put in her charge, he would be

banished, which was effectively a death sentence. Because Dercy was what she was, she would choose to die at his side. "How can you ask me to risk your life, Dercy? I love you so much more than that."

"No, husband. You will not leave me here alone. I will share your fate. We are one and will remain so forever. You decide, though you'd better hurry. My hand is getting hot and I may drop this."

In that moment he weighed all things. Love, need, their bond, his need, her life, all things. All his adult life he had wanted a mate that could move him to his very soul as Dercy did on a daily basis. When they met, they had both known their fate, and that was to be together forever, as was the custom and instinct of their people.

Knowing well her will, he acquiesced. "Yes., you may come with me," was all he said, but to himself he thought, 'Now we are both lost'. He took the crumpled envelope from her fist to his lips and kissed it, then, with a sound like far off wind, he blew a gentle breath from his lungs over her shaking hand.

He flattened the envelope, broke Efferæ't's red wax seal, opened it and pulled a document from within. Caring very little for what it said, he read silently.

Though certain of what the letter said, Dercy watched her husband closely for facial changes. When it came, she saw it. His eyebrows dropped a fraction. She blew on her own hand now, singed, hot knuckles trying to distract her from a deeper pain. "It's The Crossing, isn't it?"

Balanor sat down to his cold breakfast and took a small bite, his appetite gone but stubborn routine never admitting defeat. He swallowed rather more thickly than required for the meager bite he had taken and nodded in the affirmative.

Dercy grabbed the parchment and read, "By decision of the Elders, you are requested to come to Landfall for participation in The Crossing." The thought crossed her mind that she should cry, but she would not. He would not see her suffer. Instead she showed another side.

"Participation"! In 'The Crossing!' I like that! Ah, look! Kind old Efferæet left you a personal note. 'Dear Balanor, I hope to see you soon. I must tell you that I recommended you for this voyage. The Crossing must succeed this year. I have seen it. Our people are running out of time. You are the only light in our night. I trust you with this task. Come to me. Your friend and teacher, Efferæet Some friend! He just recommended you for a burial at sea!'"

"Efferæet wouldn't send me to my death, Dercy. I trust him almost as much as I trust you." He hoped his words would make his rage be still. "I said you could help, but honestly, I don't see how you can." He held up an open hand, palm forward, in anticipation of the storm of protest he knew was about to rain down upon him. "You know how it works. One man gets in a boat, pushes himself into the water and trusts to luck that he'll reach the mainland. You can't help." He looked into her eyes and two souls made love. "But you can come." He paused. "I have just killed that which I love the most."

"Balanor, my love, you once told me that it's wrong to make life's decisions for another. I did this, not you. Who are you to take credit for my act?" She stood herself tall. "Have you noticed I am not dead yet? I hope to live forever."

He smiled at her bravado. "It would be just like you to live forever. To me you are immortal already. As for going with me, you did ask and I did promise." He recalled his words with regret, but his heart pounded, full.

"You're not going to claim duress later?"

"You don't own a dress my love."

She shook her head. "What was that? That was so bad. Are you smiling? Answer please."

"When do we leave?"

That was good enough for her. "We should tell our parents."

"They will learn soon enough. Bad news always finds an ear. We leave tomorrow morning at dawn's first light."

"Not sleep in? Well, fine! An adventure seems to have found us. Who do you suppose gave it directions to where we live? Never mind. I spend tonight cleaning the cabin."

Balanor didn't even bother teasing her about making the earthen floor cabin spotless before leaving it for what promised to be forever. He simply joined her in the task.

"Bring your bow and leave your staff."

"What?" asked Dercy.

"Bring your bow and leave your staff. If you take your staff, you'll lose it."

"Balanor, that's absurd. I've never lost a weapon in my life. Besides, If I leave it here, it's pretty much lost anyway."

Balanor's face reflected a question unasked. A look of distance and time came over him. "Dercy, leave it here or stay here with it. It doesn't come."

"Is this a feeling?" she asked. Her tone was a question.

"It is. You mustn't bring it."

"Then it stays." She spoke with finality. Almost everyone had hunches, and many have intuition, but she had come to know that in her husband these moments were akin to prophecy. With her, facts didn't carry as much weight as did her husband's 'feelings'.

When the work was done, she spoke softly, "Now we will have the night. I am at peace. Let's add another memory to the loft." And they did.

CHAPTER TWO

THE WARGWOLF

Balanor was waiting when Dercy arrived. The corner of the field was only a few strides from a trail that led into a lightly wooded forest. With Dercy approaching, he shouldered his pack and secured it about his waist. Getting his balance just right, he stooped to pick up his staff. Strapped to his belt was his hunting knife. No toy this, the blade was three hands long, set in a hilt of highly polished stonewood. The knife and the staff were the only weapons he carried.

Dercy looked over Balanor's pack, checking for placement of critical items and weight distribution. "Your pack's okay. Check mine for balance." She turned her back to him.

"Do you think we can make deep forest by noon?"

"We'd better. I want to be across Ilder in five days. The dire wolves won't cross the glacier, and as they've been spotted in the forest, we need to be out of the woods as soon as possible. Let's move it."

"Yes, lord. Let's go."

Five weary hours later the sun was as overhead as it could be, which in these northern latitudes was not much. The temperature had risen enough to make the parkas unnecessary. The forest started to thicken. Balanor stopped mid-step. "Before we go any further, I think it's best you string your bow. We're going to be coming into stands of stonewood pretty soon. Keep an eye out for tracks, okay?"

"Why? Did you hear something?" Dercy stared at Balanor. He ignored the question. "Balanor, pay attention!"

"I think there's trouble in there," he said, pointing in the direction they were traveling. "Trust me on this."

With an ease that spoke of long hours of practice, Dercy strung her bow and reached back with her left hand to select a shaft. It was notched in an instant. "Ready," she said with military brevity. They continued to travel toward the setting of the reddish-yellow sun. Balanor stopped suddenly and, without a word, held up a halting hand. From a great distance came a sound guaranteed to raise bumps and hairs on the warmest skin. In the distance, a long, lonely howl suffered its way through the forest. It was the call of a dire wolf searching for company.

"Let's make camp here," Balanor suggested. Dercy smiled as he set to making the campsite as comfortable as he could. He neatly stacked the kindling into a pyramid, small wood first, then larger pieces. "Nice camp fire. You'll make someone a fine wife."

"Very funny. Why don't you gather some more wood. Try looking in the direction where we heard that howling." They both smiled.

Balanor had to tend the fire closely, as many of the twigs were stonewood, hard to catch afire but long to burn. "Let me cook. I've tasted your cooking." Dercy frowned her best frown.

After the considerable work of making and cleaning up after the meal, their aches and pains settled in. The fire popped, snapped and glowed brightly as Balanor placed two largish pieces of stonewood in the middle of the coals. "That should hold us for the night." He laid back on his blanket and sighed. Dercy saw this as an opening for a question.

"What are our chances? Where are we going? Assuming, of course, we are going any where.."

Balanor sat back up and poked at the fire for a while before answering. "Don't ask me why, and I don't know how, but I think we'll make it. Dercy, there is something else. Something dark coming, later on."

"That's just a feeling, I suppose," questioned Dercy.

Balanor sat up and looked, head down, into the fire, not answering. His silence was answer aplenty. She began pacing in half circles, raising her hands in gestures exaggerated by large shadows cast by the dancing light of the camp fire. "That's great. That's just great. 'Something dark later on', ea? Well, that just makes my day special." Her gesticulations carried her near her blanket and gear. She grabbed her bow, notched an arrow and let it fly in a single smooth, fluid motion, in the general direction of the night sky. She sent a piercing scream after the projectile and shook her fist at the dark void, the unknown target.

"Feel better?" he asked.

"I've gotta go pee!" sparked Dercy as she stomped into the forest night.

* * * * *

The next day's travel moved them ever deeper into the stonewood groves, huge trees that oft as not measured thicker in the trunk than a man's height. Dercy moved quietly with the easy grace of a huntress while Balanor carefully scanned the forest floor. Near noon he found some tracks. "Dercy, look at these. See the spacing and the shape of the boot heel? A hunter has been through here."

"Yes, and he isn't that far ahead of us."

"Keep both eyes open. It's never a good idea to surprise a hunter."

A short time later they came across the hunter's camp from the previous evening. They also came across the first tracks of a wargwolf.

"I'd hoped this wouldn't happen, but I thought it might. The cold is driving the wargs out of the higher forest. This one has the scent of the hunter. Dercy, these things are smart, and when there's more than one, they work together. If we get caught by a pack of these monsters, we're dead. Double damn! Now we'll have to follow that hunter."

Dercy notched an arrow while smiling at her husband's modest curse. "It's almost worth a fight with a wargwolf to see you so upset. Very funny!"

"Push that grin off your face, tag-a-long, or you'll likely end up as a warm, full feeling in some wargwolf's stomach." Dercy grinned, as did Balanor. He could always make her smile. "We're going to have to leave the trail." He peered at the barely discernible deer markings leading south. "If we cut through that way," he said, pointing southwest, "we might make up what time we're going to lose in the brush. Blaze a few trees just in case we have to come back this same way."

"Right," said Dercy, as she slipped out a wicked-looking knife.

After traveling for a while, Balanor pulled up short so suddenly that Dercy almost walked into his back. He turned around to reveal an expression of puzzlement and revelation.

"Did you pack your ice boots on the bottom?"

Dercy nodded the affirmative.

"Well, get them out." He pulled off his pack and removed a pair of rugged, warm boots that had two rows of steel spikes on each sole. "I knew there was a reason I put these things on top," he mumbled to himself.

"I thought these were for the Ilder Glacier? We have to cross the glacier before we get to Landfall."

"That's right, but put the boots on now."

"You want... Put the boots on now? Here? Now? Right now?"

"Yes, yes, and yes."

Balanor's face was locked into a smile. Without a hint of understanding, Dercy shook her head and laced on her boots. "Right. Ice boots. I'll put them on right here in the forest. Don't ask questions, just do it." Mumbling to herself, she did the deed.

After knotting his boots tightly, Balanor pulled his backpack back on, leaving several straps loose, and tied his waist strap in a slip knot. He turned to Dercy and said, "Watch this!" Striking a comical pose of surprise he shouted, "WARGWOLF," and pulled the slipknot while running in a high-stepping gait for the nearest tree.

Enjoying the show, Dercy stepped aside and applauded as he ran past. Balanor's arms and shoulders moved to allow the pack to drop behind him with a thud. Nearing the tree, he took a great leap into the air. To Dercy's surprise, the jump took Balanor almost fifteen hands off the ground before he even reached the tree. She squealed as she waited for the inevitable crunch of him smashing into the giant stonewood. Yet Balanor's legs were already churning the boots into the bark of the tree as his momentum carried him up to the nearest branch. He grasped the limb and pulled himself the rest of the way up. Breathing hard, but grinning fiercely, he looked down to his wife, now some sixty hands below.

"So... What do ya think?"

"Fantastic! Great!" She shouted. "I have got to hand it to you, that was prime. Think you are pretty clever, don't you? Oh, ah, how do you get down?"

Balanor's smile vanished instantly. Dercy's grin widened.

* * * * *

Nearing the end of the day, both Balanor and Dercy were tired. Muscles not used to travel protested the rigors of the trail. Sleeping in a cold bedroll the night before hadn't helped. Balanor's answer to his body's pains was to press the march even harder. Dercy knew the swift pace was a valuable strength building time, but the knowing didn't stop the hurting. Twice, Balanor stopped the forced march. Each stop was to examine a fresh set of prints or wolf scat. After the second pause he said, "The same wargwolf has made all of these prints. He's definitely hunting, but he's alone."

"Hunting what?"

"Hunting the hunter."

Thirty minutes later, just before the sun went behind the horizon, Dercy stopped Balanor with a touch to his shoulder. Turning, he saw her concentrating, listening to something. She touched her ear in answer to his unspoken question, then pointed left-forward. Balanor literally cupped both hands to his ears and pushed them forward to better capture any sounds that might come to him.

In an instant he'd heard enough. "Half a mile. Get ready! Let's go!" They both broke into a run. "Gods, I hope we're not too late."

Concern clearly visible on their faces, they ran while readying their weapons. The once distant noises suddenly became shouts, then a scream. Abruptly, upon breaking into a small clearing, Balanor and Dercy saw the hunter. He was dressed in brown forest garb stained red with a fatal amount of his own blood. He was locked into a death struggle with a huge, frightful monster. A wargwolf.

The great beast had two arrows embedded impossibly deep into its hide. The shots would kill the wolf eventually, but no vital organ had been hit, so the warg was going to take the huntsman with him to hell. The hunter, covered in his own blood, was still fighting. With his bow he bashed at the head of the warg again and again. Reaching with a momentarily free hand, he groped for his knife. Grasping it, he plunged the formidable knife into the soft underbelly of the horror attacking him. Through a guttural snarl of hatred, the warg began a final killing attack to the throat of his victim.

In the fraction of an instant that it took to see these things, Dercy leaped to one side to get off a shot, trying to hit the warg while missing the huntsman. Despite the shifting of the man and the writhing of the warg, the shot went home. Before the first arrow had pierced its rank hide a second arrow was drawn back. The screams of the huntsman blew large, red bubbles of blood from his mouth and nose. With a last and final spasm of effort, his knife jerked forward, opening a gaping wound in the warg's belly, which tore with a sickening, ripping fabric sound.

Balanor had run forward and to the left so as not to interfere with Dercy's shots. Her second arrow bit into the warg, but not deep, imbedding in its shoulder bone. Raising his staff in a great swing, Balanor brought the end of it squarely against the head of the warg. He'd put everything he had into the blow to put an end to the ripping bite that would tear out the huntsman's throat. Finally

suffering the death that should have stopped it minutes ago, the warg lay, its feet jerking spasmodically as they clawed at the air.

The sounds of the tumult boomed against the forest for a further second, then it was unexpectedly silent. The limp mass of the wargwolf lay heavy against the legs of the huntsman's body. A froth of blood continued to gush from the dying man's throat with every pump of his failing heart.

Balanor dropped his staff and dragged the wolf off the hunter. Having separated the two, he dropped the legs of the monster with obvious disgust. The dust hadn't settled to the forest floor before a cloud of ticks, mites and lice of various sizes abandoned the carcass. The warm, twitching warg was no longer a happy home for the parasites. who moved into the forest humus in searching circles looking for a new meal.

Dercy placed her hand over the huntsman's worst wound.

"Get me some rags, quickly!" Balanor was trying to bind the terrible wounds.

The eyes of the woodsman opened for a moment and looked across to Dercy from behind a bloody veil of pain and the rising darkness of a bleeding death. When he saw Dercy, a peace came over his face. With the last of his failing strength, the hunter dropped the knife, opened Dercy's free hand and placed his bow into it. The huntsman's last breath was a bottomless sigh. His eyes continued to stare at her for a long time after real sight had left them.

Balanor and Dercy could do little more than observe a stunned, silent vigil. After a time Balanor reached down and closed the eyelids of the woodsman.

"I have never seen death this close before," he spoke in a whisper. With resolve, he said, "Let's bury him, Dercy."

"You're not just going to leave him here? Oh, husband!"

"Dercy, you know what we have to do. Now let's get it done. He is not here anymore, but he deserves the gesture, the respect. We'll bury him."

Dercy decided she had been strong long enough and began to softly sob to herself. She had never seen death before, and to have this man die under her hand was just too much. With some measure of guilt, she realized she was also crying for herself, at she was unsure of her husband's life expectancy.

She looked at the hunter again, and the finality of his death frightened her. Between quiet tears she managed a nod. They both got on with the grim work.

* * * * *

After the burial, Balanor moved to the bow, giving it to Dercy. She'd momentarily set it aside. His eyes grew round as he took his first good look at the weapon. "Dercy, have you seen this? It's stonewood!"

"That's impossible!"

"Then I'm holding the impossible."

"It's heavy like stonewood, but thin, and look at the workmanship! Stonewood dulls the sharpest blade. Even if a bow could have been carved from a single piece of stonewood, it would have taken a year to do it! How do you suppose he made it?"

"Perhaps this is how he did it," Balanor said, holding up the hunter's knife. The blade was not the silver color of iron cast without impurities, but a strange blue-gray in hue. "I've never seen metal like this."

Dercy took the bow and examined it with reverence. "He didn't even know me... and he gave me this?"

"I think he knew you, Dercy. He knew that you were willing to do battle for him. He knew you were trying to help him when he died. You can know a person a lifetime's worth and not know if they would fight for your life. I think he knew you well enough."

The bow was the same length as her own, but much thinner and perfectly balanced. "Dercy, see how the bow is strung opposite of the natural curve of the wood? Genius." The weight of the stonewood gave a stability to the bow far out of proportion to its shape. The lines of it were simple and clean.

"To shape this out of a cut of stonewood must have taken forever! It'll be impossible to draw it back." Dercy held the bow in a set fire position, then drew the string back. The effort of her pull was evident in the tension of her substantial shoulder muscles. Quite suddenly, after pulling back a space of three hands, the strength required to draw and hold the cord back greatly lessened. It surprised Dercy so much she released it. It snapped back with an audible twang. Wide-eyed, she checked to see if the bow had broken. It hadn't.

"Balanor, look at this!" She pulled the bow back again. After the pull had brought the cord back a certain distance, it bent far more easily, but released with tremendous force. "Hand me an arrow, please."

Notching the shaft, she put her back into bending the bow; again the effort ceased at a point allowing her to make a perfect, unshaken aim. Nose touching the notched end of the arrow, she took time to sight down the

shaft to a nearby stonewood pine and let fly. The speed of the arrow couldn't be seen, but it could be heard. No sooner had it left her bow cord than it was firmly planted in the tree, dead center, and past the arrow's steel point.

Balanor pulled a matching arrow from her quiver and rushed to measure the depth of penetration into the stonewood. "Four fingers. Four fingers into living stonewood! I don't believe it!"

"I'll never get that arrow out! It will remain there, a tribute to the man that built this bow."

CHAPTER THREE

THE ENCOUNTER

It was the fifth day of travel when Balanor saw more wargwolf tracks. That afternoon they would begin crossing the Ilder glacier, a frozen yet moving river of ice that divided the island of Adopt. Multiple wolf tracks were easily visible. "A pack of 'em this time, Dercy, at least seven, maybe ten." Later the pair came across the scattered remains of the pack's fresh kill, a forest buck.

Dercy suggested with urgency, "Let's get the frigid frost out of here!" Fifty minutes later the forest started to thin. Balanor looked jumpy, and that made Dercy very nervous.

Through the few remaining trees she could see the edge of the ice sheet. They'd reached the Ilder Glacier, almost. Over Balanor's shoulder, she spotted a small dark shape about fifty yards ahead. She tapped him and reached to notch the new bow. The small shape noticed them and gave a sharp, high pitched bark of delight. "Oh gods above, its a warg pup," whispered Balanor.

With a spring in its step, the ball of frisky fur bounded toward them, yelping and yipping and tripping over its own oversized feet. Its joy at finding something, anything, to play with was comedic. It was coming to play, barking in frantic glee. Dercy stared at her husband. His look of dumbstruck horror was a perfect reflection of her own.

What followed was bound to happen. Appearing from the direction they had first sighted the pup, in a rage and full of spit and fury, was the pup's mother. Balanor was the first to react. Seeing that the warg would be on him before he could reach a sufficiently tall tree, Balanor pulled

the contrived slip knot at his waist and dropped the pack from his back.

"Dercy! Try to reach the trees!" By now the warg had spotted Balanor and was charging with teeth bared, making monstrous noises. Somewhat smaller than the male wargwolf they had encountered at the hunter's defense, this female seemed to be vastly more ferocious. The bitch was ready to kill to protect her pup.

Like Balanor, Dercy dropped her pack, but didn't head for the larger trees of the deep forest. Instead, her bow came up and she fired twice as she tracked and led the monster bearing down on her beloved. The first arrow was a clean miss, the second a grazing hit, passing cleanly through the hide. She screamed a curse as she saw the arrow open the warg's flesh on the right flank.

"There will be more coming! Get out of here!" No sooner had Balanor shouted the words than the warg leaped toward his face. Saving his throat from fangs as long as fingers, Balanor ducked and delivered an up-and-to-the-side blow to the soft underbelly of the beast.

The wolf lay stunned for a moment, its air supply knocked from its lungs.

Dercy got off another shot. The shaft shot between the front paws of the wolf and buried itself in the moist forest floor, halfway up its length. A quick glance at Balanor drained what color Dercy had left. Balanor had a ragged rip in his left shoulder from which blood oozed.

Unnerved by the sight of her husband's blood, she missed with yet another shot. Tears came to her eyes. She ignored the tears, and the doom rising in her, and fought on.

Balanor quickly took the two steps that separated him from the wolf. He aimed a swing at the creature's head but the blow wasn't quick enough, and

didn't connect. The wolf regained its footing and leaped at Balanor's bloody shoulder!

This time, jaws thick with froth and foam connected and hung on. The animal was berserk and determined to rip Balanor to shreds.

Balanor screamed in pain. Dercy moaned at the volume of his pain, the most horrid and heart-stopping sound she had ever heard. Her husband went down on one knee with the wargwolf still grinding and shaking its way into the shoulder. It filled the air with its growling, guttural, murderous noises.

Another of Dercy's arrows missed the wolf, still clamped onto her husband. Her next arrow, however, hit target.

With half her arrows gone, Dercy knew that if she didn't kill the beast soon with a shot to some vital organ, she would have to watch her husband be eaten alive by the pack of wargs that was sure to arrive soon. "I'll not be a widow!"

The quantity of blood pumping from Balanor's shoulder increased. With a savage madness, the wolf shook him like a bed sheet hung on a line in a strong wind.

Far from dead, Balanor rolled onto the shoulder of the wargwolf. A few steps across the clearing, Dercy winced, knowing what the move cost her husband.

Tired of the nicks and cuts her bow had made, and considering the close proximity of the wolf to Balanor, she charged the nightmare scene. She did so with a scream that rent the air with her rage. Her entire being focused on killing the warg.

Balanor missed seeing the charge, and didn't see her pick up the strange, blue-bladed huntsman's knife from where the rolling struggle had lost it. He was too busy fighting for his life to notice. In an attempt to break the grip

of the vicious bite, Balanor rolled atop the wargwolf and found himself free, but a single stride from the murdering teeth. The instinct to kill and a fatal pain shone through the maddened eyes of the beast.

Dercy's hits were beginning to have their effect. Balanor reached for his staff just as the warg leaped for his throat again.

Time stood still. In that frozen moment Balanor stood between the wolf and Dercy. Almost too late, from somewhere deep inside, Balanor rallied his best blow.

Rising from his knees, his right fist white with the strain of his grip on his fighting staff, Balanor smashed the stonewood into the massive jaw gnashing down toward him. The warg's ivory-white teeth moved to snap closed on Balanor's wind pipe.

In all her life Dercy had never heard the sound of splintering stonewood. With a lightning-like crack, the staff snapped in two. The wargwolf went limp, its head twisted at an impossible angle. Balanor knew it was dead, and he felt a deep sense of wonderment that it no longer moved, and that he lived.

Dercy reached his side while he was still on one knee. "Get up! Come on! The others are coming!" She pocketed the knife and slung the bow over her shoulder. By the force of her will above her real strength, she lifted her husband and moved him to the base of the nearest tree.

"Balanor, you've got to climb this tree or we'll both be dead right here! By our vows and our loft, you will get up and go!"

Balanor felt oddly sleepy. His ears began to ring, a distant sound like surf on pebbles. He felt light-headed, almost giddy.

Dercy shook him violently and her words started to sink in. He struggled to climb the tree. They

reached its first bough just as the pack broke through the thicket into the clearing.

Balanor didn't see how he could climb the few remaining feet to safety, but he tried anyway. His wife climbed ahead and pulled him. It was the difference between life and death.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE EFFORT

Balanor woke with a smoldering pain in his right shoulder. Suddenly he remembered how he'd gotten the injury and almost fainted. The recollection itself was painful. He blinked back dizziness. It crossed his mind that the pain was welcome. It was a sign of life. After all, it meant that he was alive. He groaned as he inventoried his condition. As if the injury wasn't enough, someone was shouting at him.

"Gods, Balanor, I thought you were dead! Don't ever, ever do that to me again!"

Balanor laughed, but stopped immediately and sucked air between gritted teeth. The pain was too great. Below them, at the base of the tree that supported them, was a nightmare scene of ten wargwolves leaping in a fury of froth and snapping, dagger-like teeth as they madly tried to climb up the side of the tree. Bark flew as the ten wargs clawed at it, biting and scratching the trunk as though it were the tree's fault their prey sat upon its limbs. All save one wolf continuously tried to reach them. A particularly large wolf had already given up the futile effort to climb an impossible sixty lengths of tree where husband and wife sat. The large warg lay outside the writhing circle of the maddened pack. It sat and growled, making a low, guttural sound between bared teeth. Great globules of saliva fell from the black mouth of the warg as it imagined itself tearing into Balanor and his wife. Occasionally the large warg would look across the small clearing at the dead warg, the mother wolf. The pup that had started it all was pushing and nuzzling at its fallen mother's teats, urgently trying to feed.

"It's one hell of a note when you kill a monster like that and can't feel good about it. I suppose the one with all the patience is her mate."

"That's my guess. Did you know wargs mate for life? That one is really angry! It doesn't look like it's gonna move until we come down."

"We won't be going down. I won't go through that again."

"Seeing that it looks as though you'll live, I would like to point out that your staff is down there, broken, while my bow is up here. Who's the better fighter?"

"I'm so happy for you. As for my staff, I hope the damned wolves break a fang chewing on it."

"Kindness, husband, kindness. You'd better get a firm grip on that limb or some poor wolf could break a fang chewing on your empty bones! Anyway, we're in great shape. We're stuck in a tree some five minutes from a glacier, ten wolves are waiting to feast upon us, not to mention that we have lost our packs."

Balanor moaned at that one.

"We're a two day walk from help and I've five arrows left and I have to go pee. What's to worry about?"

"I think its safe to go ahead and pee, from up here that is. It will make them furious."

"I tried, but having them down there has locked me up."

Balanor smiled, but did a quick accounting of their options. In the middle of a thought he gave a sidelong glance at his wife. Dercy's quick eye caught the glance. Very little slipped past her attention.

"Okay, what is it? You're having another intuition attack, right?"

"Never mind. It wouldn't work. We can't do it." He added a long, forlorn sigh for effect.

"Gods, Balanor, will you give me some credit? I'm not an infant you can persuade with negatives. How about just telling me what you've cooked up?"

His expression went stony. "It really is impossible." He entered a long pause. "We take off our parkas, take off our vests, our shirts, our thermal unders and we fly the hell out of here."

Dercy's expression turned sour. "You're crazy! I don't even have a flight halter on, and why should I be wearing a halter in the middle of winter?"

"Your modesty is commendable. If you have ten reasons why we shouldn't do it, I'd apply the one reason why we should. We've no other choice."

"We'll die from the cold while still in the air!"

"Better that than be wolf chow. Besides, I'm not going to die here, or in the air. Don't ask me how I know, I just know. Come here and help me off with these clothes. I seem to have hurt my shoulder."

Balanor removed his parka and the clothes from his upper torso and began to shiver almost immediately. Under the clothing were well-muscled shoulders. Now Balanor gave up his species' secret. He unfolded an intricate mass of thin, finely furred brown skin, stretched around delicate, finger-like bones. Fully extended, his 'wings' stretched some eighteen hands from shoulder to tip. There were no feathers.

Balanor winced in pain as he slipped his hands into pocket-like structures under the wings that had obviously evolved for just such use. Besides the lifting

power of his wing muscles, he now added the power of his forearms. The overall effect of his appearance was bat-like, yet far more pleasing to the eye.

The reason for Dercy's concern over cold was obvious. It was the wing's large surface area, covered with skin containing an extensive network of blood vessels. The loss of body heat to the outside air during flight was immediate and devastating. Balanor's shiver intensified at the thought that soon the frigid air would be passing over the surface of his shivering skin.

"This is madness," he muttered.

Dercy managed to string her bow so that the cord rested between her shoulders, then slipped her hands into her own wing pockets.

"Ready, my love?" Balanor asked through rattling teeth.

Dercy nodded an affirmative. Taking the lead, Balanor leapt into the air as far from the branch as he could. With wings fully extended, he made that all-important extension and first down-stroke. This action sent the wargwolves into a cacophony of rage. They leaped into the air continuously, frothing, leaping to pull the pair from the air. In their rage and madness, they fell upon each other. In their wrath they bit each other and anything else they could reach.

Despite his wound, Balanor was able to lift himself above the level of the trees. With the first few beats of the huge, skin-covered wings, he rose higher. He suffered a steady loss of blood as his life pumped from his wound.

Dercy's flying form was very strong, her frame being somewhat lighter than her husband's. Soon she was softly soaring beside him.

* * * * *

Far beyond the storm-swept village of Landfall, there were fields of frost cabbage. Frost cabbage was inedible raw, but when mixed with peppers, salt, vinegar and water, then buried underground in huge clay pots and left to itself for a month or so, it would ferment into quite a tasty dish. Frost cabbage was incredibly hot, and warmed a soul from top to bottom. It made a memorable meal when served over boiled starch root.

On this cold night something drew a weathered farmer onto his fields for an impromptu inspection. He'd brought a knife and a basket to harvest some of his crop.

With a start, the farmer jumped back as half a dozen ice mice scurried between his legs. He cursed roundly and chased them for a time.

Quite suddenly he stopped and looked with round eyes at a body lying prone amongst the leafy foliage of his cabbage. Running to the body, he found a nearly naked woman, quite young. He frantically wondered how she had gotten here. Standing over the still body, he thought her dead, frozen. Her wings were outstretched. 'Her exposure to the cold must have been tremendous,' he thought. "Frozen to death trying to soar in the cold of winter." Iffrum was a hard month, the very heart of winter.

Reaching down, he lifted her arm. He immediately dropped it. Amazed, he had found a pulse! Again he reached for her arm, and found the pulse again, though it was impossibly slow. He muttered to himself, "Alive?" Shock followed shock as he lifted her and found, huddled under her right wing and torso, a young man. He was also nearly bare, but alive and breathing. His shoulder was moist, sticky with blood.

Hurrying now, the farmer placed his parka over the boy. As gently as he could he tried to pick him up, but

the unconscious and half-frozen girl instinctively tightened her protective grip around the boy. She had been shielding him from the cold, and was determined to give him her last measure of warmth. With reverence, the farmer moved her arm and placed the boy over his shoulder. Running to his cabin, some distance away, he began shouting to his wife.

A short, portly woman opened a thick wooden door and peered out at the farmer. Her eyes grew wide as her husband stumbled through the open door. He gently laid the boy on a small, hand woven floor rug. "Do what you can!" he shouted, and ran back outside. He returned shortly with the girl. The sight of the boy had left the farmer's wife wondering, but the sight of the girl left her speechless.

"Mama, you watch these children while I go to Landfall for help. God alone knows why they are not dead already. Build up a fire! Throw some wood in the stove! Get some blankets! Rub their arms and legs!" He was still shouting as he ran outside. During his race into town he wondered to himself again and again what had brought them to his doorstep?

CHAPTER FIVE

THE PROPHECY

"What a damned mess! God's blood, what a mess. Lieutenant, have you left me a live one?"

"No sir. They fought to the death. I've never seen such zeal in a Ragnall. The last two fell on their swords rather than be captured."

Thandor strode around the table where two uniformed creatures lay stiff and bloody. He looked like he was inspecting troops who had slept in their clothes. Wounds to the center of their chest left little doubt as to the cause of their death. "I suppose that would be these two. Very commendable of them."

"Yes sir. They were the only ones in uniform."

Thandor stared at the uniform's mottled pattern of dark green and brown blotches. "This doesn't bode well. It doesn't bode well at all. If they've organized enough to commit to some form of military discipline..." The thought died a quiet death, unexpressed. "Militarized. A soldier class." He looked up at the officer. "Dran could be facing a whole new threat."

Thandor continued to march around the table, as if his concern alone could change what he was seeing. It did not. He stopped when he realized what he was doing. "I don't suppose flanking them now will help." He didn't smile. The monsters, even in death, were a grave threat. Though he was one of the oldest living LandGuard, and that made him old indeed, Thandor had never seen the likes of this before.

"Warrior Ragnall." His thoughts went dark. His movements swirled his maroon cape as it flowed through

the thick air of the great room. Each stride made him look more and more like living sculpture. It was as though his clothes themselves were agitated by the sight of the Ragnall.

"These are their weapons?"

"Yes sir. Steel, not iron or copper. The edges have been fire tempered and honed to a razor's edge. General, the steel is layered. We have examined it closely. In battle we lost fifteen to their thirty."

"Lieutenant, we cannot afford to lose men at anything like a ratio of one to two!" To himself he muttered, "Layered steel, and all that it implies."

"Lieutenant," barked Thandor in an unmistakable tone, "this cannot stand! We will not trade men for Ragnall, not at two or even twenty Ragnall to one. If we did we'd be overrun in a single week, and they'd have one hell of a party right here. Then we'd be specimens on a stone table, and Castle Dran will be their playground."

Thandor, more than anyone else, was responsible for defending the lands to the north of the city of Dran. His were all the fields on the opposite side of the river Dran, the fabled Fields of Dran. Thandor's rank was Field General. In this position he knew very well the strengths of the city. He also knew its weaknesses.

Though he was well known to the inhabitants of the capital castle, his life was a personal mystery. He was LandGuard. The LandGuard answered no questions and spoke neither truths or lies about themselves. For all that was known about them, they might as well not exist. However, their looming presence seemed proof enough to any who had ever met one. They defended Dran. That was it. Their primary attribute was loyalty. They lived for the soil, the rock and the waters of the city-nation.

Thandor stood two hands taller than the average man-height, which is normally measured at seventeen

hands. His armor was the dark red rust-brown color of his high rank. His rank was the pinnacle of authority. He carried his red and white-plumed helmet under his arm. The helmet was the standard accouterment of an officer in the 'Guard', the name used by citizens of the city. The feather plumes were not standard issue. The metal of the helmet seemed to reflect a deep blue hue beneath its gleaming surface, as though it were polished to an impossible gloss. Its like could not be found the world over. Ornately trimmed in gold, the helmet was arabesque. Crowned with a brilliant white plume, the helmet marked Thandor as having ambassadorial status in the Confederation of Nations.

His voice was thunder; deep, full and stern. Its quality of sureness came from a life of unquestioned obedience by those he ranked. There was no vanity in that sureness, just trust. His manner spoke of confidence without its dark side, arrogance. His physique was flawless, square-shouldered with a strong chin and nose. Experience strode with him. He was the objectification of strength, both in will and being. At a distant glance, he might have been guessed, poorly guessed, to be in his mid-forties. Any guess taken at his age while his sea-green eyes smote into one was impossible, not to mention dangerous.

Thandor had been the Field General of the LandGuard for several generations. Before being posted to that lofty position, he had been an exceptional officer for a hundred unblemished years. Despite his apparent youth, everyone knew of his great age, though it was not a topic of discussion in his presence. Such talk would show poor etiquette and zero wisdom.

Thandor ceased his orbit of the table and looked down a last time. "The Ragnall have never tried to get past the mountain border. They have always attacked headlong into Ragnall Pass, resulting in their slaughter. Their officers have always been buffoons. Their murderous attempts at rape and plunder have always been easily stopped. Now they are slipping out of Thickthorn and lands to the north at night. They have been skulking their way into the Barrier

Forest. Why now? Where are these beasts going and what is their intent?"

His voice returned, clear. "This means that for the first time that the Ragnall have organized. They will no longer mob-riot through the borders with any weapon they can lay their hands on. I find it hard to believe that they are doing this on their own. What is driving them?" The question remained unanswered.

A brief smile passed his lips, echoing some distant, private remembrance, lost in time but newly recalled. Like a soap bubble that had popped, releasing its contents, a memory was released into his mind. "The way it used to be," he whispered. "They'd fight. They'd die."

Thandor paused to stare into the beautiful carpet that covered most of the room's floor. Made with workmanship of the highest order, the detail of the weave was fashioned into the stirring symbol of the LandGuard, crossed halberds over the green flag of Dran and a golden crown imposed over a castle's gate. These symbols touched even the dumbest man with such feelings of pride and resolve as to swell his chest. High rank and heavy responsibilities didn't immunize Thandor to these powerful emotions, but it's hard to feel proud when you are deeply worried.

* * * * *

Deep inside the triple-walled city of Dran, and snugly set against the massive granite cliffs of Table Mountain, was Castle Dran.

Every two years, three of the twenty non-veto national ambassadors that came to Dran were elected to the ruling Council of Governors. The Council, a body of nine representatives, had six permanent members, empowered

with vetoes. These veto members represented the dwarves' Empire of Clanggedin, the eleven forest nation of Setland, the Northern Giants' nation of Darwane and the desert port city-state of Sarke. The Lord Mayor of the city of Dran and the Field General of the LandGuard (presently Thandor) filled the final two Council chairs. Many years ago there had been a tenth representative, beings known as Sarahan, but their species was thought to be extinct. They had disappeared from the face of the planet when, on a terrible night a long time ago, every member of that race had been struck dead by forces unknown. All attempts to make sail for their homeland island of Loft were driven back by a vast horde of black carrion dragons. Normally not aggressive, these beasts had gone mad since the loss of the Sarahan and would, for many years now, as soon gut a man as not. No one knew why.

The Council of Governors elected one man from themselves (excluding the Ambassador of the LandGuard) to be Minister of Nations, and Lord of the Council of Nations. Usually he, or she, had to be dragged to their position, which was heaped with responsibilities and starving of glory and compensation. Ruling for six years, it was not allowed that a person be elected twice. The Lord Minister alone held final responsibility for the well-being of the free men and women of the city, the safety of the lands beyond and the containment of the Ragnall from all lands south, east and west. This is the person before whom Thandor now stood.

The Lord Minister sat uncomfortably in a throne that was too small for him. Prior to his appointment, which he fought and lobbied against, he had been the ambassador from the nation of the Giants, Darwane. The smallest giant, as that race was generally called, tended to be large, and The Lord Minister was far from the smallest of his race. The chair was ornately carved and solidly built, yet it looked dangerously close to failing its august task of supporting His Lordship's bulk.

"Lord Minister, these attacks are of a different nature. There are ominous signs that the Ragnall are

undergoing some potent changes. I believe an organized attack is imminent."

"Imminent, Thandor? For example?" His Lordship's voice boomed, another quality peculiar to their race, even in its females. "Can you be more specific? Who would be behind this attack? It doesn't sound like the Ragnall I've known."

Your Lordship, if I may?" Thandor walked to a table where two swords lay. One was a greenish metal of shoddy construction. The other was the weapon possessed by the latest Ragnall casualty. "A typical patrol led by a LandGuard officer found weapons like this in the hands of our enemy a year ago." Thandor then held forth the superior blade, the weapon made of steel with a keen edge. "This is what they are fighting with now." Thandor took the new blade and used it to slice off the blade of the older weapon. The sound of the quick, clean blow to the severed blade of the older weapon made a clear, sharp note that hung in the air for a moment, a perfect punctuation to the act. "The technology of this weapon is one hundred years ahead of the other. They have made this leap in twelve months! Also, the Ragnall now have well-schooled bowmen in their ranks. We have lost more than fifty men to their recent attacks, which we believe are but tests of their new skills, probes only. We haven't taken a single prisoner alive in ninety days, not one! Sir, we must petition the emissaries immediately! We must send for additional manpower. We will need vast armies if an organized attack of Ragnall takes place. The unified nations must mobilize! This must be done as quickly as possible!"

The Lord Minister lifted himself from his chair and walked to a door. The door was seldom opened. It was set in a wall near a long bookshelf full of countless heavy volumes, all gilded in gold and silver. "Thandor, before I make a decision on this, there is someone I'd like you to meet." He opened the door and motioned, obviously to someone in the next room. A hooded man in a brilliant white robe strode into the Receiving Hall."

Thandor, may I introduce His Most Holy Worship, The Bridgeman."

Thandor knew of this man by reputation. His immediate and intense frown left little to the imagination as to what he thought of him personally. He looked like he had bitten into a fruit and found half a worm. The Bridgeman, Thandor knew, was the theocratic leader of a religious sect called The Prophets.

"I must tell you, Thandor," said the Lord Minister, "that he used every favor he had, would ever hope to have, to attend this meeting. It seems he knew about the meeting before I called it. Before you came in he spoke to me of some of the things you would say." The giant looked at the man in the flowing robe. "It's all very interesting." The minister looked at Thandor. "He claims that he must speak to you. All depends on it." He cast one doubtful eyebrow higher. "We shall see."

Thandor's eyebrows also rose, both of them. It was not easy to surprise him, but that was his condition now. However, the look fell to contempt again very shortly.

"Yes Lord Minister, I must speak." Turning to face Thandor, the man droned in a soft melodic voice meant to be hypnotic and comforting. A glance at Thandor showed it wasn't working. Nevertheless, he began to speak his message.

"One hundred years ago, at the loss of the winged race, the Sarahan, our prophet died. Upon his death many writings were left to his students, the founders of our church. The Prophet died of light. His writings were of the light. His words were his truth of and to the future. . ."

Thandor interrupted abruptly, "Your Lordship, must we listen to this? There are matters of great import. . ."

"Shut up Thandor. Listen and learn." Thandor remained quiet, though he clearly was not used to being spoken to in such a manner. However, he was outranked.

The Bridgeman, not in the least rattled by Thandor's rudeness, continued. "He wrote that the proof of a true prophet is that he be correct one hundred percent of the time, never wrong! Our Prophet wrote of the coming of the Ragnall under a new will, a mind of great evil, the dark spirit that overcame the Sarahan. He spoke of the rise of four great generals, four to mock the generals of the LandGuard and the points of the compass. Four Generals to gather under one army all the force of the united Ragnall. Yet not all of The Prophet's words were as well understood as these, for he wrote in the language of prophets. That language is paradox."

Slowly raising his hand to point at Thandor, the Bridgeman continued in round, measured tones. "He wrote of you, Thandor. In writings we, his students, hold most sacred and most secret, he wrote that the Field General of the LandGuard, the Ambassador to the Council of Nations, must leave his home to save his land."

His voice became a chant, spoken with a deep reverence. "Thandor, by the power of The Prophet's writings you must become a friend to the lost. You must bring by land those that travel by sea. You must fight for those who are unwilling to fight. You must save a lost city and meet the unexpected. You must lose a battle to win the war. These words The Prophet did write."

The Lord Minister spoke before Thandor could focus the storm that he was about to unleash upon the Bridgeman. "Thandor, I know how you feel. No LandGuard has ever left their post. However, you said yourself that someone had to gather the men of the nations to help! It seems to me that in his own obscure way, the Bridgeman has said the same thing."

Glaring at the cleric, Thandor said, "I'll go."

"Now Thandor, Don't take that attitude. . ." It was the giant's turn to look surprised. "What did you say?"

"I said I'll go."

The Minister's face went white. He was stunned. Thandor's countenance was a perfect picture of grave concern and the Minister could pull nothing from it. The Bridgeman stood mute, devoid of all emotion. He seemed to have expected Thandor's surprising answer. Thandor's keen eyes noticed the man's breathing was deeper, more relaxed. The cleric was deeply relieved. The Lord Minister sat heavily into his throne. It creaked in protest.

"I'll go because I knew the one he calls The Prophet, many, many years ago. He was," there followed a substantial pause, "my friend. If he said those things, then I have no choice. I must go."

Scarcely believing his luck at the turn, the Lord Minister blurted, "Thandor, that was a hundred years ago!"

"I said it was a long time ago," Thandor said, rigidly, his tone inviting no further questions. "When I knew him he always spoke the truth, always. I respected him."

The Bridgeman re-entered the conversation. "There is more. You must find a man. If you fail to find him, then all is lost. The Ragnall will defeat us all. This missing person is of the Sarahan, one of the lost race."

"General," interrupted the Minister, "is there any evidence that any of the Sarahan still exist?"

"No Lord Minister, none. They all died. On the same night that The Prophet was found dead. All of the Sarahan died on that single night. There is not one left alive on the planet."

"Personally," continued Thandor, "leaving my post while trouble is growing rotten-ripe galls me. Besides, just where am I to find this Sarahan, Bridgeman?" His tone a threat, Thandor had spoken into the face of the cleric.

"We believe that you must go to the sea, Field General."

"That certainly narrows it down to the shoreline of the entire world." Warm sarcasm leapt from the blazing eyes of Thandor into the face of the cleric.

The Lord Minister muttered to himself, "The sea," then spoke directly to Thandor. "If you must go, why not go to where we hope it may do some good? Many of the ships that trade up river to Dran come from the city-nation of Onserf, a great port. A month ago we seated their first ambassador on the General Council. The man is an unabashed obstructionist. Perhaps you can see to it that his assignment is re-evaluated?"

"Perhaps," said Thandor, still deeply troubled. "I know little of this new Ambassador. What is he like?"

"Don't ask," remarked The Bridgeman. Both Thandor and the Lord Minister looked at him with expressions of surprise. "Sorry your Lordship, I am not an ambassador. It is none of my business, but I have met the man in question. He is an ass."

Thandor reconsidered his feelings about The Bridgeman, but put a hold on it. Right now he didn't like him, or the man's followers.

"Well, yes," returned The Lord Minister, "he does have a rather 'what's mine is mine and what's yours is negotiable' attitude."

Thandor looked at The Bridgeman with new eyes. If this man could so effectively insult an ambassador, he might not be so bad after all.

"So. I am to go to Onserf. Anyplace else?"
Thandor was not finished.

"I have been meaning to send someone to Circa to gather some overdue support."

"Why Circa, your Lordship? That river island hasn't been worth a damn for fifteen years. All they bring to Dran are worthless charms, tomes and trinkets."

"It is precisely because they are not worth a damn that you must get help from them. How long do you think the confederation can last with our member nations dropping off into uselessness?"

Thandor added wryly, "Like ticks leaping off a corpse. So be it. First to Circa and then to Onserf." He turned to the Bridgeman. "Does that meet with your approval, cleric?" The hooded figure nodded in the affirmative.

Thandor strode the two steps that separated himself from The Bridgeman. "I don't think I like you. If I do this thing and return to find that my men, or this city, has suffered in the slightest because of my absence, I will search you out. If it takes the rest of my long life, I'll find you." The remainder of the thought was left unexpressed, but the wideness of the Bridgeman's eyes reflected his understanding.

"I will be here, Thandor. I too have work to do." The robes flowed as the Bridgeman turned, nodded for permission to leave, and exited the way he had entered.

After a pause, the Giant rose from his too-small chair. He spoke to Thandor. "I fear that soon all the doors in this room will be open to trouble. I will request assistance from the member nations, but Thandor, you must find this Sarahan and return to us soon. Do not delay long your return. Dismissed."

Thandor turned and strode with stern purpose,
quickly, but not hurriedly, out of the long room.

CHAPTER SIX

THE RIVER WITCH

"Pssst! What that be?"

"That be the biggest damn farmer in da smallest damn boat I did ever see!"

"Well, are we gonna take 'em?"

"'Course we gonna take him, you pisser idiot! You know what da Witch said. Nuttin' gets by here without dem paying for da privilege. Let's go roast the dirt digger."

The two figures, tall and very thin with rank, filthy, straight hair, stepped silently into their rotting craft. River water, green with slime, sloshed around the bottom of the boat. The motion disturbed countless nesting insects and one small minnow that had somehow found its way into the filthy water.

"You row," said the first man into the boat to the other.

"By Bung I won't neither! I rowed the last time we drowned one of these diggers. You row or I'll tell da Witch you been stealing her swamp wine!"

The receiver of the threat scowled a few dull daggers and mumbled some dire threats at the blackmailer. However, he quickly sat at the oars and bent his back into the work of rowing the dinghy out to the slow water river's middle. The other pulled a short bow from his shoulders, picked some clinging mist-moss from the bowstring, and notched a less than perfect arrow.

The lone figure coming towards them sat cramped in a laughably small boat. He pulled the oars with

ease, almost carrying the prow of the dinghy out of the water with each powerful stroke. He seemed oblivious to the larger boat and the two men now almost upon him.

"Strike those oars, farm rat!" shouted the figure holding the short bow, " or I'll put an arrow in your back!"

The man in the boat twisted slowly around and looked at the two scrawny characters. He pulled the oars in.

"Now tie this rope on the back of dat boat there and row us to shore. Hurry up or I'll put this here shaft through you Bart!" Through his mouth and nose, the other spit wine from a drink he'd just taken. 'Bart' was the name many thieves gave to farmers.

Under a thick hooded robe and keeping his thoughts to himself, the man in the boat secured the rope and began to row ashore. At the first powerful tug of the rope on the second boat, both river pirates lost their footing and fell into the moss-green water, breaking the boat's bench and nearly destroying the rotting craft. The green water sloshed about their boat's bottom and the tiny minnow panicked. Reaching shore very quickly, they jumped into the sand-mud shallows at the bank of the river.

"Get out dat boat! NOW!" The hooded figure stepped onto land and removed his hood. The glare that he glared into their eyes froze them where they stood.

Recovering a portion of his limited senses, the river pirate with the bow decided he had seen enough. He pulled back the bow's gut cord and let fly the shaft in the general direction and elevation of his target. With mind-numbing swiftness the looming figure twisted to one side to easily avoid the arrow. He seemed fast, so impossibly fast, that he could have caught the arrow as it passed. He could have, but didn't want or need it. Leaping forward, he backhanded the bowman, who went limp, unconscious. His other hand grabbed the back of the shirt of the second river pirate, who now desperately tried to flee. Spinning the rag doll figure around so swiftly that his head bobbed from side

to side, he lifted the quivering jelly-man into the air until he was at arm's length.

In the voice as deep as that of some god of death, the man said, "I am Thandor. What are you?"

"Let me go! Please don't hurt me!" The river pirate struggled futilely against the iron grip of Thandor. "Please, please lord! I'll get ya rich, sir. Yes I will, yes, if ya let me go!"

Thandor drew the beggar closer. Their noses were separated by a mere finger length.

"So. Just how do you propose to make me rich, river eel?"

"I be The Witch's favorite thief, sir. I'm her best! She gives Brine, that's me lord, all da swamp wine I can drink! She be real rich, sir, and would give anything to get me back in one piece!"

"I doubt it. Who is the Witch?"

"Oh, lord sir, she is a powerful enchanter and a great alchemist! The most in all the world she is! Yes, 'course she is! And she takes what she wants from the river, gold and sweet roots and just anything she wants, sir!"

"Where is she?"

"Oh good sir, don't go to that place. She'll get you sir. See? I'm on your side, lord! She gets 'em all. She got the King's nephew. Got him and kept him she did. Good sir, aren't you gettin' tired o' holding me up in da air like dis, sir? Put me down and you 'ave Brine's word I won't run away as fast as I can sir!"

"No. Where is she?" Thandor drew Brine's face closer, through the desperate man's last safety margin.

Noses pressed tighter, and Thandor involuntarily scowled at the strength of the man's odor.

"I'll take ya there, sir, yes. Old Brine will take you there. Big mistake, but you be the lord!"

"Brine, you stink. Tell me how to get to the Witch or I will twist your head off and kick it into the center of the river." Thandor took his free hand and reached for the top of the man's head. Getting a firm grip he twisted it to the right until several popping sounds were heard. Brine howled like a wounded dog.

"Aghhhhh! Sir! Nea! She lives northeast of here! In the middle of this here river island! Only a day's walk from Circa!"

"Thank you, Brine," spoke Thandor politely. Gathering his strength, Thandor tossed Brine straight into the air. When the pirate fell it was chin first on a perfectly delivered right. It twisted him into a picturesque mid-air somersault. He landed some good distance from Thandor, who, with a nod, said, "Thank you very much."

Thandor gathered the two unconscious bodies and threw them unceremoniously into their boat. He saw the minnow trapped in the green water. He cupped his hands, lifted it out and set it free in the river's water.

Giving the craft a firm shove, he propelled it toward the middle of the soft motions of muddy water. The current caught and pulled it in the direction from which Thandor had come. Downstream in the dark the shadow of the boat slipped into the quiet night.

He moved methodically through the lush overgrowth, sometimes using his broadsword to chop a path into the morass of vines and ferns. This river island was a riot of green, a monster in and of itself.

As the sunlight began to fail, he entered a plot of cultivated land. Large leafy gingra trees, heavily laden

with their purple-yellow fruit, grew in rows. The succulent fruit was very popular in Dran, where it was eaten like candy. However, as of late it had been almost impossible to buy; the supply had dried up.

Thandor hacked his way through endless jungle, moving in the direction of the Witch's camp. Unexpectedly, he broke through the green hell and found himself standing near a farmer harvesting gingra. Thandor assumed the previous gingra plantings were also the property of this man. He farmed his trees well, walking from each to the next, picking only fruit ripe for harvest. The oblong fruit gave off an intoxicating perfume. Mashed and kept in ceramic pots, the pulp would sweat and ferment itself into a powerful concoction called bubble and boil, guaranteed to seat the standing.

His back to Thandor, the farmer deposited a final fruit into a large, rather rickety wheel barrow. The fragrant fruit were as long and as wide as a large hand. Thandor strode purposefully forward. "Friend!" he barked to the man, who promptly dropped his load of fruit. Sword sheathed, Thandor came beside the man, bent over and began reloading the wheelbarrow. Staring at the mammoth man standing beside him, the farmer's eyes grew as wide as his face could bear.

"I am Thandor," spoke the reason for the man's rigid stare. Making an effort not to sound threatening, "May I ask who you are?"

"What kind of god be you, good or bad?" The man began to tremble.

"I'm no god, farmer. Pull in your fear and answer me." Thandor added, "Please."

They call me Mugwamp, sir. I pray you didn't come here to rob me, as there is very little to take."

"I am not a thief, but I would take some answers from you." Thandor decided that this one was not much of

a threat and took his hand off the hilt of his sword. This evoked a smile from Mugwamp.

"Of course, Lord. Questions that don't threaten my life would be a welcome change."

"I come from Dran where the fruit you grow is highly prized, yet is impossible to purchase. Why don't you load your gingra onto a boat and float it down to the city? You could make a sizeable profit. Also, don't call me lord. I own no land. I serve the land."

"Yes sire, sir! That is exactly what I used to do with my crop, until the witch annexed it." Mugwamp had stumbled over the large word. "It used to be my property. Now I harvest my crops so that she can make swamp wine to hand out to her band of thieves and river-rats. If you are from Dran, then there are some questions that I have for you, sir. Would you return to my hovel and make speak with me?"

"Yes I would," said Thandor, and followed the man out of the field.

Mugwamp's wife did her best to lay a feast on the table, despite the family's obvious poverty. Two toddlers, twins with incredible energy, ran around and around the dining table in undisguised delight at the unexpected holiday-like meal. The table upon which the makeshift feast rested, woven as it was from the dried high-grass of the swamp, grew ever more heavy, laden with exotic foods. Thandor began to look upon the table with concern. Overloaded, the table might collapse onto his lap, or if not, he might be expected to consume an honored guest's portion of the food. A baby of indistinguishable sex cried in the corner of the room for lack of attention as its mother wracked her brain for yet another dish to set before Thandor.

"Let's see, we have swamp turnips in butter, spoon bread and macka jelly, you'll like that, sweet meats, some white pod peas, flower tea and cream, huga nut

dressing, cold hen, hot hogger slabs," the twins clapped vigorously at that, "triple bean salad, bacon with summer cabbage, mushrooms, onions and candied gingra. Mugwamp, go fetch some lily-cabbage!"

"Please madam, I must protest. Your need is too great to be so generous. I simply need to speak with your husband about the..."

She cut him off like an onion stalk. "I know you are important, but I haven't had a decent guest in my home in ten years, sir," she admonished her mate with a stern look, as though it were his fault the farmer's economy had collapsed. "And here you are, obviously a lord, an important nobleman from the great city! Goodness! Oh how I would love to go there! What are they wearing there? What's the fashion? You just sit down and start eating, but don't stop talking! Don't wait for us, I have more work to do. Begin eating!" It was an order. Thandor and Mugwamp obeyed.

One of the children bumped into Thandor's chair, and quick as lightning disappeared under the table before his brother could catch him. Glasses rattled and plates bounced to and fro. The children's parents seemed oblivious to the havoc created by their rambunctious play. Mugwamp lifted a fistful of bright yellow lily cabbage from his gathering basket and showed it to his wife. He had anticipated his wife's need.

Finally hearing her baby's distress over her need to begin the meal, the child's mother walked over to the bawling, kicking infant and picked it up and called to it by name. "Lilly, hush!" She gave the child countless soothing kisses and reassurances, promising her that she was the most important child in the world. "You wouldn't mind holding Lilly while I get some swamp wine for you, Sir Thandor, would you?" Without waiting for an answer she plopped the child into Thandor's lap. The teary-eyed toddler quelled her sobbing for a moment and turned around to see who was holding her. Seeing Thandor's stern face, she burst into new heights of protest, crying wave

after wave of frightened tears. Thandor blushed red as blood.

He left Mugwamp's hovel over-well fed and rested of spirit. Mugwamp had steadfastly refused payment for his generous hospitality. Thandor, sorely wishing to leave him with something, arranged to lease the farmer's crop for his city. It was a new concept to the farmer, and to Thandor. It took some improvisation and explanation before Thandor passed over several gold coins. The farmer was to try his best to take the gingra crop to Dran and sell it. The payment brought moisture to the farmer's eyes. It was more treasure than Mugwamp had ever seen.

Mugwamp had told him a story of men of the city of Circa, some of them important men, being captured by the Witch and held hostage. "Ransom is what they want," he'd said.

Thandor walked away in contentment. Mugwamp had been very helpful with directions. He had also supplied details about the location and layout of the Witch's camp. He traveled a day and a night to reach the center of the river island.

Though not built for stealth, Thandor moved as quietly as possible as he approached his goal. Soon the smells of cooking and the sounds of activity came to his ears. His approach became hunter-like. At the edge of the swamp forest, he stopped and waited.

It was approaching dusk, and the sounds of the camp grew louder, even rowdy.

There were many huts in the area, some larger than others. A necessity in this jungle environment, the huts sat on pillars of bamboo that raised them off the ground half as high as a man stood. This allowed whatever cool air there might be to pass beneath the reed huts. Besides keeping them cool, having the huts off the ground kept most of the creatures of the night from bedding down with

the hut's occupants. Sleeping on the ground was not a good idea.

The heat was oppressive. Thandor observed the camp for a long while. Over one hundred men and women moved about at one task or another. Prisoners did most of the work; he had counted a dozen or more chained men. They did all the heavy lifting. It was brutal work. They were trip-shackled in heavy iron with thick, black chains, too short in length to allow a full step. Many of them bled from open wounds on their ankles where the iron had rubbed off their flesh. Thandor sat motionless among the riot of vegetation bordering the camp and devised a plan.

As the night sank deeper into darkness, the near-moon rose full into the glittering night sky, and shown brightly amid the background of stars. Far-moon wasn't in the night's sky. In a moment of contemplation, Thandor looked into the night. bright-bugs occasionally lit up around him, turning a swift spiral circle while illuminated. Their activity was meant to attract mates, but to the eye they were hardly less than magical. "So much beauty and so much ugliness in one place," Thandor wondered to himself in a personal whisper. Through the broken visibility of the canopy, he could see hundreds of giant fruit bats, wings beating impossibly slow, as they passed silently overhead. Their silhouette eclipsed the white orb of the near-moon for blinking moments. It was an incredible sight, and a wicked one that sent chills down Thandor's spine. His last night sight before putting his plan into action was a glimpse of the swift star as it whizzed through the blackness of space. Sighting this brilliant, swift dot against the almost unmoving stars was thought to be an ill omen.

In camp, after all the tasks of cleaning and gathering had been done, the chained men were dragged to one of the smaller huts near the center of the camp. Thandor's countenance was grim, and his eyes went dark as he heard the unmistakable sound of a whip scarring the back of some miserable prisoner. His screams and pleas for mercy contrasted hideously with the laughter of the camp's

drunken party. Finally, tired of his fun, the punished left his post and discarded his blood-stained whip, nine strands of leather with small metal balls on their ends, into the dirt. He stumbled drunkenly to a campfire where two of his fellow thieves and pirates swilled from a large ceramic jug. Soon the guard's companions grew drowsy and left the circle of campfire light for their huts. The guard returned to the steps of the prisoner's hut where he sat with his face in his hands. Thandor made his move.

Drawing his knife, a weapon with a blue-hued blade that would have been a short sword for a smaller man, Thandor moved into the camp. Taking advantage of building corners and moon shadows, he soon found himself beside the hut containing the prisoners. Within walls made of reed, faint moans could be heard. From the front steps of the tiny hut came muted snoring. The guard had fallen into a drunken sleep, head still in his hands. Using the knife, Thandor cut a wad of cloth from his tunic. He then looked carefully around the corner of the hut. At the other end of the camp there was a fire being tended, and sounds of drunken laughter came from the circle of drinkers unwilling to submit to sleep. Putting the wad of cloth into his knife hand, Thandor moved in a crouch to the front of the sleeping guard. With his free hand, nearly swift enough to break the man's neck, Thandor shoved back the guard's forehead and stuffed the cloth deeply into his mouth, now shaped in a perfect 'O' of surprise.

A quiet "Mummmph!" was all that came from him as he focused his eyes down at the great blade resting against his throat. "Hurremph Hummmph!"

"Shut up or the edge will bite you," whispered Thandor. As he disarmed the guard, he held his knife so that his prisoner could see it. Fear blazed like a grass fire in the man's bloodshot eyes. Thandor lifted the pirate, no fight in his limp form whatsoever, onto his feet and entered the hut. All but one of the men inside were fast asleep, and that man gazed at the incredible scene with unbelieving eyes.

"Get up!" Thandor growled to the man in a shouted whisper. The tone implied a command, not of request but of force. Thandor reached into the soiled vest of the guard and pulled out a ring of keys. "All of you get up and free yourselves." He kicked a few to emphasize his urgency. Soon whispered questions came to him from a dozen directions. Thandor quelled their curiosity with a single impatient head gesture. "Later! Now we have to get us out of here! Move quietly. You," Thandor pointed to the man he had caught awake. "Yes, you! Bring one of those hobbles. Quietly!" Thandor turned to smile at his captive, whose shoulders slumped when he guessed who the hobbles were to be for himself! Thandor dispersed his captured weapons to three of the prisoners.

With each step of the escape, Thandor reconnoitered the path they took. Soon they had reached the edge of the jungle, and slipped through the green wall into a smothering riot of green plants. The former prisoners now lost themselves in the dark night.

Having moved for some time, enough to be far beyond the hearing of anyone in the camp, Thandor stopped his ragged following and questioned them as to the quickest route to Circa, the supposed capital of the river island. Hearing this, his prisoner began to struggle in a feeble attempt to escape. Apparently Circa was most definitely not a place the pirate wanted to go. Thandor shook him hard enough to mix oil and water. The man went still.

Slowly and quietly at first, but with a growing sense of joy at their escape, the men moved along a narrow jungle trail that was no wider than their bodies. Bright bugs whizzed around them, adding to the magic of their escape. Soon Thandor had to quell their gathering celebration, but even as he was demanding that they be quiet, Thandor smiled at the glow that had come over their faces. Without sleep, and eating only the food which Thandor carried on him, the ragged band of men followed his lead.

They came to the city gates as the first shaft of morning light pierced the eastern sky. Thandor pulled off his robe and moved to the great wooden doors. With the hilt of his knife he pounded thrice on a steel bolt that supported the great door's lock-beam and shouted, "Open up! I am Thandor of Dran, Ambassador to the Council of Nations and Field General of the LandGuard. Your men are free!" The twelve men leaped and shouted, expending the dregs of their energy, in a paroxysm of cheering and joy.

* * * * *

Thandor was ushered into the modest throne room where the king of the river island was still rushing into his royal accouterments. The usher whispered to Thandor, "His Highness is very interested in speaking with you. Please address him as King Edwin or 'Your Highness'." Thandor nodded slightly. He had much experience with the do's and don'ts of a court. The usher took a position of attention against the eastern wall of the room, directly under a magnificent tapestry. The art caught his eye; his sight was riveted to its beauty. It portrayed a hunting scene, horse and rider racing across an endless meadow. The longer he stared at it, the more he could swear that the horse and rider were actually moving, passing through hand-high grass in a perfect gallop. It was hypnotic. Thandor momentarily forgot where he was and wondered if horse and rider were chasing some unseen fox. Suddenly he realized that the damned picture was actually moving! He blinked and shook his head, breaking his concentration, and once again the horse and rider stood still upon the wall.

"I see that the LandGuard are not immune to the magic of our weavers. That is good. The 'tapestry in motion' is an old art, and a well kept secret."

King Edwin stepped out of the commotion that was homecoming for the lost men of the city. He sat lightly on his throne, sitting on its edge and poised forward so as not to miss a moment of the celebrations. He ignored any ceremony his functionaries tried to impose on the moment. He looked to the eastern wall and saw who stood there. Speaking with the moderate tropical accent so common west of Dran, he spoke with obvious glee. "General, what manner of miracle brings you here? How did you manage to wrest those men from that parasite witch? Gods, this calls for a drink!"

"Your Highness, I came here at the bidding of the Lord Minister who resides in Castle Keep atop the city of Dran which abides by the river Drew. The absence of your people vexes him much! I can clearly see that you have troubles here aplenty. I return your men through guile, not force, though perhaps a force of one." Laughter rippled. "I brought you a prisoner to question. Be gentle with him, he's had a hard day." This generated several grunts and some wicked smiles. "I suspect he should be considered a criminal as I myself saw him torturing your citizens." Angry sounds greeted this announcement. "As for the Witch, I recommend you use force to eradicate this vermin that infests your island."

"Spoken like a LandGuard! Did you encounter the river witch? Did you see her cast any magic spells?"

"Ahmmm," Thandor cleared his throat, intentionally loud. "Excuse me, your Highness, forgive my frankness, but there is no such thing as magic. It is my long experience that every case of magic I have come across has actually been some form of technology that wasn't understood. I have seen many strange things in my days, many produced by an extraordinary race, now lost, called Sarahan, but never anything that was unexplainable. To answer your question, no, your Highness. I entered the camp only once, and that was by stealth to free the hostages that she had taken."

"For that brave act there is to yet be a reckoning
..."

Suddenly someone entered the room from a door to the right of the throne. It was one of the men freed by Thandor. The man was cleaned up somewhat, but Thandor recognized him as the one who had been awake when he had entered the hut containing the prisoners. His cleaning had been perfunctory, but still he appeared before the king, disheveled but proud. Though less grim than an hour ago, he still looked to be in poor health. His pride held him erect as he walked to the throne, almost stiff with resolve not to show his emotions. The King looked at him with swimming eyes. The King's face twisted with pent-up emotion, and he rushed to the frail figure standing weakly before him.

"Robert! You live!" were the only coherent words that Thandor could make out. The two embraced each other as though they each wished to squeeze the life from the other. Pride of man was clearly there. Thandor watched the display without the slightest bit of embarrassment. He simply shared their joy.

After long moments passed the two disentangled. "Yes, brother," the man cleared his throat of many emotions, fighting to speak with clarity. "Your Highness, It was he who had the courage to come for us. Him, sire." Robert pointed a shaky finger in Thandor's direction.

The King moved to Thandor's side. "Sir, it seems that I owe you much. Robert is my mother's second son, a prince in this realm. As I have no children of my own, Robert is heir to the throne. My debt to you is heavy indeed." The King stopped and thought for a moment. "Where go you now, General? What is your goal? Can you linger with us here a while?"

"I must leave for Onserf, Sire. I'm tasked with a quest most imperative."

The King stopped, looked around, then began to shout orders in rapid fire. "We shall break the evening's fast now. Quickly, everyone!" Servants were sent into frenetic action throughout the castle. "Thandor, Robert, come with me!" The two men followed in the wake of the King as even more servants scurried through every hallway and room. Soon the three of them reached a great dining hall, dominated by a long table structured to seat dozens.

The king himself seated Thandor to his right and his brother on his left. Dishes, hot and full of sizzling food, appeared as if from nowhere. Goblets of good, soul-warming wine and other delights were brought to the long table. No one was allowed to empty their glass as they were refilled endlessly, inside bottoms never having been seen. Every sip of the sweet wines brought with it a servant to top off the liquid treasures.

"I do swear, King Edwin, your people delight in serving food and drink, don't they." Thandor said, not as a question but a statement of fact.

"May it always be so," wished the King.

Robert ate like a man possessed while the King pleaded with him, "Be careful, brother, lest you kill yourself with food!" He directed many questions at him. One answer passing a mouthful of food was, "I'll never take food for granted again." Between other mouthfuls of eggs and sliced meat, he gave estimates of the strength of The Witch's forces. His Highness turned to question Thandor.

"What are your estimates of her power, General? I would rid this island of her once and for all, if I could. Can it be done?"

"I estimate that you could beat a path through her camp with half as many soldiers as I have seen servants here today. I do not understand her hold on this land."

"You have not seen her magic. I know your feelings on the subject, but general, this magic is real. She throws light into the sky that explodes with a loud report. I have seen it with these eyes! Thunder and smoke! How can I send good men to die at the hands of her devilish alchemy?"

"I have seen no signs of magic. If she is a great wizard, she chooses to live with her pirates in squalor and spoil."

"Maybe so, General, but she's able to send great bursts of fire to wherever she wishes. Others have seen these things. Once she touched a large bamboo tube with a torch and it sent up a great puff of smoke, sparks filled the sky and there was a huge, booming thud. It was as if the sky erupted in a huge net of sparks, a great ball of colored fire! My men fear that she works directly with the dark elements of the evil deep itself."

"Brother, I have seen how she does this! I myself have worked with the substances that make up the sky-fire! You wouldn't believe the things she mixes together to empower her magic!"

"Perhaps, as I have suspected, it is not magic at all, your Highness. Perhaps it is alchemy in a form never seen before." Thandor paused as his thoughts altered direction. "Robert, what do you suppose will be her reaction to losing her prisoners?"

"She is quick to anger, and exceedingly cruel in her punishments. I would guess that several men will lose their heads to make up for the loss of her hostages." Robert smiled at the delightful thought. "And she will not let it stand thus. She may come here to portion out some retribution."

"That is your answer, Your Highness. Take the men you have and meet her coming to Circa and your castle hold. She will probably be in great haste to catch the lost men and will take little effort at protection. I estimate

you have," he paused to calculate, "five hours to gather a force and rout her beside the trail before she reaches your good city."

The King thought quietly for a long moment, then looked sidelong at Thandor. "General, would you lead my guards in an attack on her forces? I will place them all in your direct command."

Thandor's expression mirrored conflicting desires. "Sire, I must hurry to the quest. I have lost so much time already. I don't think..."

"What if I could give you a way to make up that time? What if I could speed you on your way as soon as the battle is over? Speed you faster than you'd imagine!"

Thandor looked at the smile rising to the face of the King and wondered. He didn't have to wait long to find out. The meal ended as abruptly as it began. The King shouted rapid-fire orders, one of which was a call for the Captain of the Guard.

"Follow me, General. There is something I want to show you." Thandor followed, worried that the fighting advantage they had would be squandered in a tour of the castle. It wasn't long, however, before the three men came to the rear of the castle and the stables. They entered a barn that was well kept with fresh straw on the floor. The crowd moved to a stall near the end, four times larger than the rest. Inside, step-dancing, head high, was a magnificent stallion with a hide so white that it gave the illusion of being shades of blue.

"Thandor, I'd like you to meet Traveler." The King paused and looked with great affection on the animal. "Take him as a gift from the people of Circa, payment of a great debt. He will take you to Onserf faster than any animal alive."

Looking at the great beast, Thandor believed the King. This animal looked as though he could run longer

than a rider could sit. Traveler stared at Thandor as deeply as he stared at the horse. "What intelligent eyes! Where did you find such a treasure? I swear I haven't seen his equal in my long life." Thandor approached the animal slowly so as not to startle him. Traveler reached over the posts of his stall to sniff Thandor's outstretched hand. His soft, warm muzzle gently brushed against Thandor's hand. Satisfied with the introduction, Traveler wheeled and trotted around his stall, fully aware that he was the center of the group's attention.

"I purchased him from the Invokers, the desert riders. He cost was two tapestries of the type you saw in the throne room, each one the equivalent of one lifetime's work. They are the 'motion tapestry'. They work on the mind's eye. I paid the exorbitant price gladly. Just look at him!"

"This animal will make the difference," thought Thandor out loud. He knew that this was exactly what he needed to reach Onserf quickly.

"Words cannot express..."

"Your Highness! You sent for me?" interrupted the Captain of the Guard.

"Yes. I'd like you to meet the Field General of the LandGuard. He will be leading you into battle in one hour."

The Captain's surprise was complete. He looked the general up and down once. It was enough. "Your orders, sir!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE STARSTONE

An old man, bright blue eyes glowing with concern, sat staring. He watched Balanor roll his head on the feather pillow. For three days the boy hadn't moved. Sitting in a chair made of pieces of driftwood woven tightly together with dried fronds of red seaweed, the stout figure continued to wait and watch with perfect patience. His chair creaked in a homey, comfortable way as he shifted his weight to find a comfort zone.

Balanor's healing took its natural course, and soon he opened his eyes, though very slowly. Although the light was dim, reflex forced him to squint tightly upon first seeing. Balanor blinked and began to focus on his surroundings. After a moment, Balanor noticed the man sitting at his side.

"Good afternoon, Balanor. A farmer found you three days ago, almost frozen and nearly dead. Be calm. Everything's all right now," he added with gentle reassurance.

"Hello Efferæet," the boy said weakly. Pulling himself up in his bed, he took stock of his condition. Bandages covered his shoulder. He winced as stabbing pain answered his slightest movement. He suddenly remembered that he hadn't taken the journey alone.

"How is my wife? Did you find Dercy?"

Efferæet smiled to himself. "She's in the next room. Can't you hear her? She must have stopped yelling. Next door is the furthest she would allow us to keep her. She wanted to share this room with you. Your wife is rather a fearsome character, Balanor. She's quite remarkable, that one."

"Is she all right?"

"You two worry about each other a lot, don't you? She's suffering from exposure and frostbite, but otherwise, she's fine. I spoke to her yesterday. She saved your life, you know." Efferæet's smile grew corners. "You should have heard the things she called me when we separated the two of you. She's been gifted with a remarkable vocabulary. She spawned fifteen minutes of insults, never once repeating herself. I was quite impressed."

Balanor blushed, and his face grew warm at the thought of what Dercy must have said to this gentle old professor.

Seeing his patient's reddened cheeks, Efferæet smiled again. "It's all right. No doubt I deserved it."

"Dercy is combustible. She is frightened for me and her anger is the result. She doesn't understand."

"Do you understand? Do you understand why I have arranged for you to be the one making the Crossing?"

Balanor looked into the aging blue eyes of his teacher. He sought an answer in their undiminished brightness. "If you've asked me to do this, then there must be a very good reason. I've never known you to make an important decision without giving great thought to its consequences."

"Thank you, but that's not enough. We, your people, can't afford to fail this time, Balanor. I chose you because I knew that if anyone could reach the mainland, you could. Our time here has run out."

"You already know much of this, but let me remind you of a few things. One hundred years ago our ancestors came to this island in three ships, a major scientific expedition to a new land. There was a great storm and one of the ships was lost, along with every man

and woman on board. The other two ships were beached in Landfall harbor and later destroyed by the storm swells against the rocks of the harbor. The survivors found the land to be extremely harsh and inhospitable. At first it was a struggle just to stay alive. The cold was the main killer. Several died. Finally, after the birth of a second generation, things got better. A stable community was fashioned. Still, after all these years and five generations later, we only number several thousand. Obviously we are not built for cold. We have come to think of this place as our home, but it is not our home. My grandfather, and your great-grandfather, came from Loft, an island paradise that rests in a warm ocean. For years it was hoped that others from it would come and rescue us, but no one ever did, and no one knows why not. All these years have passed and we have not heard from anyone, not from the other races and not from our own. Now we are the ones that must search them out, so that they can help us get home. We must leave soon or not at all."

"Why now? Why must we find them, professor?"

"There are two reasons. First, measurements have been taken, readings of the passing of stars and the length of the seasons, and it has become clear that our adopted home is getting colder. We think it is due to a wobble, or some kind of perturbation, in the shape of the path of our planet around our sun. Our scientists have found that all the spots on our sun are gone, thus making it cooler. Whatever the reason, it is getting colder. Soon it will be too cold to sustain life. Soon after that this island will be under a sheet of ice."

Efferet stopped and looked at Balanor with a mixture of hope and wonder. "There is a second reason." He reached into the breast pocket of his coat and pulled out a small wooden box. It was intricately carved, lacquered in black and exquisitely inlaid with mother of pearl.

"Open it!"

Balanor slowly opened the box and peered at its contents. Resting on a small bed of aged white silk was a stone the size of a child's fingernail. Sky blue in color, it was shaped in a half oval. "Professor, what has this got to do with leaving the island? What is it?"

"That is a Starstone. It's the only one on the island of Adopt. It was mined on the island of our great-grandparents and it is extremely rare. As for what it has to do with leaving the island, that is a question better experienced than answered."

Efferact gently removed the stone from its bed of silk. "Hold the stone so that it sits in a shaft of sunlight."

Balanor moved the highly polished gem into the light. As soon as the sun's distant rays caught it, a brilliant six-pointed star appeared on its surface. As he moved the stone within the shaft of light, the star moved in directions relative to how it was being held. Though a normal effect of the refractive quality of the gem, the moving star seemed to be magically alive, as though it had a will of its own, and its will was to point to whomever possessed it.

"Take the stone into your hand." Balanor did so, and closed his fist around the glittering gem. He reopened his hand and once again held the stone in the light. "I am asking you to tune this stone. Tuning a stone can be difficult, but it is not impossible. With practice, any of our people can do it. It is a gift given only to the Sarahan. Your ability to focus will depend on your intuitive grasp of the powers of the stone. Look into the star and focus your thoughts, any thoughts, on that point."

Balanor looked at the stone with caution. Suddenly, without a hint of warning, he was looking into, not at, the stone. His sight took him deeper and deeper. Something distant within him moved closer. An intuitive awareness of where he was took over. Insight moved to his experience foreground. Effortlessly, he was drawn past the point of the star into a grid of light. Illumination was everywhere, fantastically white but not painful. White, not

a color but a quantity and quality of experience was all around him. Balanor began to walk in a place made of light itself. Slowly at first, then with great rapidity, his concentration traveled through the light. Soon he came to a junction of gossamer white lines. He envisioned the lines branching off into regular angles, becoming an array of hexagons that, while very large, was finite. The distances within the stone were not endless. Through the experience Balanor thought he heard something. Insight is sight without eyes. He was hearing without ears.. What it was he was hearing he couldn't know. His focus wavered. He squeezed his mind like a hand making a fist. With new focus he noticed that some of the delicate lines contained breaks, weak portions where the line was indiscernible. Other segments were twisted, bent, or distorted. Finally, after his brief exploration, he effortlessly pulled his mind's eye back along the line to the point where it began. As he moved his focus from the stone, he looked again at Efferæet, and grinned a puzzled smile. He had returned from whence he came.

"Don't worry, Balanor. As I said, not everyone can see the inside of the hexagonal array. It takes a lot of practice." Efferæet stood and reached for the box containing the stone. Balanor gently but firmly grabbed his teacher's wrist.

"Professor, I saw the array. I saw it all." Balanor smiled shyly.

Efferæet sat still. His face expressed joy and doubt simultaneously. "You saw the array? Clearly? I can hardly believe that you saw it so quickly!"

"I did, sir. I saw the whole thing, stretching a great distance. I saw distant borders. I thought... I heard something. I also noticed that some of the lines of the array seemed to be distorted or broken. What causes that?"

"Details like that are usually only seen by a technician, Balanor. Also, you should know that when

talking about seeing inside the array, it's called vision, not sight. Noises? You heard noises? Are you sure?"

Balanor smiled. Efferet was ever the teacher. He never learned without an intent to share. "Just sounds," he said.

Efferet continued, "Hmmm. Well, it is extraordinary that you could perceive that much that quickly. Quite fantastic." Efferet moved his hand to his face. He rubbed the long stubble of his graying beard. He stared at Balanor with shining eyes. "I have always known that there was something special about you. Something very special." He shook his head as if to wake himself from a daydream. "The Starstone is a natural phenomenon. Flaws in the stone cause the distortions and breaks. Remember that it is possible for the stone to be flawed but the vision to be perfect. Perfect vision can tune a flawed stone into a flawless one. Like bubbles in glass, the flaws can affect or even block a cusp perception. Without strength and insight, flaws can be very dangerous. They can, in fact, be traps. Your consciousness can fall into a flaw and never find its way out." "

"I'll be careful. What is a cusp?"

"A cusp?" With his hands Efferet formed a crude hex shape. "Like my fingers, the grid lines form the shape of a hexagon. In the surface space of non-broken hexagons, like on the top of water, there is film that represents. no, that isn't correct. A cusp isn't a symbol, it is a moment of true perception. It is an intuitive knowing. A cusp cannot exist independently of the presence of a mind, or so it is thought and taught. A cusp is not a fiction. It is a something, a moment. The use of a cusp is a very advanced form of tuning a Starstone. It requires that you move off the grid and," Efferet paused for a thoughtful moment, straggling to capture a word, "float into, or experience, the cusp."

"May I try it?" Balanor's will showed a strength his body didn't necessarily reflect.

"Balanor, there are dangers in moving too fast. Some have gone in and have not come out!" Efferæet raised bushy eyebrows.

Balanor countered with a smiling doubt. "I don't think I could ever be lost in the array, sir. Its use seems perfectly clear."

Efferæet was torn. His concern for the boy teetered in a balancing act. Should he allow Balanor to take risks or should he insist on safety? "That's a risky confidence you have, son. You are asking to do something that a Starstone technician might do after a year's practice." Efferæet was smiling, but a passing thought replaced the kind smile with a worried frown. "I see in you a passion for this thing, and we are very short on time, aren't we?" With obvious reluctance, he nodded yes. "Go ahead, son. Seek the first cusp you come to. I'll be here when you return." Risk had won. Efferæet knew that Balanor faces dangers far greater than he might find in a starstone. Soon the boy must face the mighty sea.

Once again Balanor stared at the stone, though he felt that having to actually look at the gem might be unnecessary. He sensed that he'd found a place that would always be open to him. With even greater ease than before he found the interior of that place. He focused upon, then slid along, the array line that led to the first cusp. Reaching it quickly, he mentally took a deep breath and allowed himself to fall into the line of light as if falling from the side of a cliff. He moved through the surface of one of the array's countless hexagons. Passing through, he felt as though he had ruptured some incredibly thin membrane.

Time stopped. He wasn't in his recovery room at all, and his mind's vision of the array was replaced with an image of himself, sailing a distant sea in a small boat. He stood near a mast, and with him sat his wife, who held the rudder steady. He saw himself pause, speak words unheard, and point a dark direction.

First the edges, then the entire vision, began to fade into a bright, white fog. The edges of the vision refracted into a circle of color, like seeing through an imperfect lens. Softly he heard a rushing sound, like that made by formless waves washing over a beach of agate and shell shards. The vision went dark and silent. After a long moment, color returned to his sight. He was staring into Efferæet's worried face.

"Balanor, are you all right?"

Balanor forced a breath. After a perfect sleep one can awaken to find that one's breathing is too shallow. This was like that. Balanor willed air into his lungs. The deep breath filled him with life. "Yes, professor." The two words required another deep breath. "I'm a little tired, though." Balanor blinked.

"That is normal. It is called Separation Effect. Tuning a cusp drains the body and moves the soul. The effect can lessen in time. Also, remember, it's insight, not sight. Well, what did you see?"

Balanor ignored the obvious contradiction. He described in great detail the vision within the cusp.

Efferæet's eyebrows rose at the mention of Dercy. To that point he had remained nonplused. How Dercy got into in a skiff of Balanor's imagination was quite the problem. Efferæet's eyebrows rose still further at the description of Balanor pointing out a new direction. Old concerns came to the surface. "I hope you weren't pointing to any direction but south. South is where the land is. Only to the south. If this vision was your crossing, you must only travel south! In all other directions there is but open sea. As for having Dercy with you, I don't imagine that will come to pass. This could be a false vision."

Balanor wrinkled his nose. "Vision? Was what I experienced a moment from the future or not? I think it was factual. Professor, Dercy has to come with me. I promised her."

"You what?!" Efferaet lost the question.

"I gave her my word that she could come." He looked solemnly at his teacher. "I think that it's very important that she come with me."

"Balanor, a cusp is a possibility, not a certainty. I don't think you should risk your wife's life on this crossing." Efferaet was alarmed. "Son, do you understand what your chances are?"

"I do," he said. "So does she. I'm not leaving without her," Balanor insisted bluntly. He thought for a moment. A gambit was possible here. "Teacher, I suppose that if you were to ask her to stay I would be released from my promise to allow her to go. If she agreed that is."

Efferaet's expression spoke with eloquence. "Son, I have been thought mad by many but I am not so mad as to take on such a thing." He looked glum. He gathered himself into glassy confidence, one easily broken. "I am sure your vision was false."

"It seemed clear enough. The moment was as real as... now!" Balanor belief in the insight was as much a part of him as wetness is of water.

"Listen," insisted Efferaet as he stood up. He paced around the bed. "I must tell you this. I've held that stone for forty years and I managed to tune a cusp just once, ONCE, mind you!" He shook his head. "That was twenty years ago." Efferaet bent to one knee at the head of the bed on Balanor's right. He squeezed his eyes closed tightly and raised his face as if to catch a ray of sunlight that could not pass through the ceiling of the room. "I spent half my lifetime trying to achieve what you've done in a morning."

For one disturbing moment, Balanor thought his old professor was about to cry. Instead, Efferaet opened his eyes, and they were afire with excitement.

"In that one cusp I saw you, and you alone, sitting on an outcropping of dark stone. Mind you I tuned this one cusp before you were born! Anyway, behind you there was an immense cone-shaped mountain. It spewed smoke and fire. Its height and width covered my sight from horizon to horizon. Around you there was strange foliage, impossibly lush. It was a riot of green! You were, as if it weren't a momentous thing, calmly speaking to a huge, green-black beast! She, for the creature was surely female, had wings the size of trees and teeth as long as knives! It was a dragon, Balanor! Most incredibly, she was listening to you speak!" Efferæet looked at Balanor carefully. "They say you never forget a cusp. I'll never forget that one. The face of the boy I saw in that cusp is the face I see now. I saw you!"

Balanor leaned forward and winced in pain. It shot from his wound and traveled into his neck. He rested on his elbows while placing his face in his hands. "This is too much. I feel like I'm being swallowed by my own future." He paused and shook his head. "I have never thought of my life as being anything but mine. Until today." He looked at Efferæet. Despite his best efforts Balanor couldn't keep the moisture out of his eyes. "Sir, I don't know if I'm ready for what you've seen. All of this frightens me. Am I being asked to change my life or just live it? Do I make these things come to pass or will the moments make themselves? Will I ever see my cabin again, or sleep in my own loft? Will I ever plant or harvest another crop?"

"Balanor, the fact that you hold these things to be important proves that you haven't lost them. You never will. There is a future ahead of you. There is also a vast blackness behind you. If you turn around now you have chosen the void rather than the light. Have you ever wondered what's out there? Can you live in darkness?"

"Not well," Balanor replied. As they always had, Efferæet's words reminded Balanor of what he already intuitively knew. "No, I cannot." He smiled a thoughtful

smile. "The cost of living in the light is having to see everything, isn't it?"

"This could cost you much, son." Efferaet spoke from under a heap of guilt. It was he who had brought this burden to his favorite student.

Balanor nodded his head. He understood the consequences. he would accept the risk. "I need to speak to Dercy and then I need to sleep! Holy crow how I need to sleep! If there are important things to be done, then I must be rested to do them. Choice or chance, whichever it be, I'm not leaving without Dercy."

* * * * *

She was ushered into the room by a comfortably thick woman, Efferaet's wife. Fatness made a warm sense in this cold climate.

It made Balanor smile to think that his mentor had taken efforts to avoid another onslaught from his wife. Dercy stood at the foot of his bed with her hands on her hips.

"I don't know why I bothered. You're hardly worth saving." She sighed with feigned indifference.

Balanor noticed that her fingertips were wrapped with gauze. "What have you done with your hands?"

"These? Oh, nothing. The Sarahan elders caught me picking my nose. My, my! Aren't we in good shape! Ready for another FLIGHT?" Dercy sighed. "You're the bravest Sarahan I know but you're no genius, husband."

Some things never change, Balanor reminded himself. "No more flights, not just yet anyway. I thought

I'd wait until it got really cold." He paused to change the subject. "Dercy, you really must stop bad-mouthing Efferæet. He is..."

Off she went. "He's insufferable! That bird is self-important! He thinks his thoughts are so clearly correct that others should live and die by the very sound of them! His mind is a bucket with a hole in it. He is **CLEARLY** crazy! He collects trouble the way crap collects flies!"

"Dercy! Please! This is his home!"

Dercy turned away to complete her thoughts. She wasn't about to leave them unexpressed. She turned back around, smiling. "Well, one good thing will come of this. You're not even strong enough to carry a conversation! There is no way you can make The Crossing now!"

Balanor smiled despite himself. He always did. "I am going on, wife, and you are coming with me."

Dercy kicked the end of the bed hard enough to make it bounce. "What! You can't be serious!" she shouted. "I don't believe this! That shoulder wound is big enough to stick my finger through! What do I have to do to make you see reason?"

"Do you want to go with me or not?" he said.

Dercy contemplated throwing a first class tantrum, one that would bring the rafters down, but thought better of it. Somehow, the look on Balanor's face was a new one, but she felt she knew what it meant. In his mind, he had already made The Crossing, and all that was left to do was to be there when it happened.

"Yes, I want to go with you," she growled through clenched teeth.

"Good. Now go and let me get some sleep. Please leave poor Efferæet alone!"

"Fine. Just fine," she said as she stomped from the room. "As for him, fire and ice!"

Balanor went to sleep quickly, dreaming of storms about to break over his life.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE CROSSING

The council meeting was the only excitement that Balanor was allowed to experience in the following two weeks. Dercy saw to that. It was there, propped up by a petulant Dercy and a grave-faced Efferæet, that he made his formal commitment to The Crossing. The Elders looked doubtful, but Balanor acted as though in perfect health. He slept through the following day, exhausted by the ordeal of countless greetings of encouragement. Efferæet, fearing Balanor had contracted a case of separation sickness, forbade Balanor to attempt another cusp until he regained his strength.

The bitter cold morning of The Crossing finally came, and nature was in a poor mood. Heroics were not in order. The seas were rough and the skies were an endless mottling of clouds sitting squat over the land. It was as if the air itself was peopled with insulting giants that rested their rolling, purple-black butts over the heads of the assembled.

Covertly, Dercy had rented a skiff and loaded it with two weeks of water and survival rations. In the pre-dawn dark over Landfall Bay, it rested alarmingly low in troubled waters. She had pushed her boat into the water, stepping into the tiny craft as it bobbed in every possible direction. The waters seemed alive, a living, dangerous thing.

The morning came, but just barely so. The day of his ordeal had come. Shades of gray rested on the eastern horizon. These clouds soon turned reddish, though dark sky remained overhead, as if to keep the warmth of the sun stingily hidden away. It didn't seem to be day at all, just a lighter shade of night.

Being the month of Iffrum, each day grew shorter and shorter. Soon, for an entire month, there would be no sunlight at all. Paradoxically, now was the season of least frequent storms, or so it was supposed to be.

Without cheer or waving hand, a small group of people saw Balanor off on his quest. Efferæet and his family were there, as were some of the families that had lost sons or husbands to The Crossing. Icy tears traced down the cheeks of two mothers as they recalled, in solemn silence, the loss of their own sons.

Efferæet spoke a last wish. "Bring back hope!"

In an utterly final moment, Balanor set his sail, and pointed his boat in the direction of the open seas. His wife waited for him.

The craft's green canvas sail was filled by abrupt and unfaithful gusts of wind. The boat's modest yardarms pulled taut against beams. Balanor made way for the middle of the bay. It wasn't long before the humble little crowd at the pier's edge grew too small to see. It was then that he heard his wife's faint shouting. At first, the wind made it difficult to divine her location, but by cupping his hands around his ears and turning slowly around, he found the direction where the shouts were clearest, that being somewhat to port. Moving in that direction he observed a dark spot rising and falling on choppy waters. The spot grew to be recognizable as his wife.

"I thought you had left without me!" shouted Dercy across the shrinking distance. "This is madness! My soul, how I love you!"

"I could not have left without you. We were together in the cusp. I love you too. Be calm, Dercy. I wouldn't have left without you." Balanor replied with a smile that tugged at his wife.

"Catch this rope," he said. The two boats were soon hauled together and the supplies transferred without

the loss of a single package. The added weight of his wife and her supplies sat his own craft disturbingly low in the water, but nothing could be done about it.

"Well salty, what say we sail for lands unknown?"

"Yes Captain, my Captain. May we drift into a higher loft, a better life and more bed time! I'll secure this boat I captured. On seas like this you never know when you can use a spare." The jest was ripe with truth.

"Take the rudder and point her south, Dercy. I'll stow these supplies."

"Okay, boss," quipped Dercy. She paused before speaking, a rare thing. "Balanor, why are boats called her?"

"Because they won't do what you ask them to and because you're always in danger of losing 'em, that's why."

"Sounds logical to me. The wind is out of the northeast. We are going to have to tack once in a while to keep a southerly heading."

"Yes, a waste of time, but necessary. I hope those storm clouds clear."

"They'd better," said Dercy, "or we will be food for bottom feeders."

* * * * *

For two weeks the storm pushed the pair steadily southward. On the fifteenth day the wind shifted and blew directly east. The weather worsened.

Balanor shrouded his eyes and looked through the misty rain that had begun to fall. "Dercy, look over there. See that squall line to the west? With the wind blowing directly east, we are about to take a hit."

Having to raise her voice to be heard, Dercy worried aloud. "I'd hoped we'd already seen the worst of it. We sure can't outrun that front, especially if we keep tacking. What are we going to do?"

Balanor stood in the center of the boat, grim. He measured long odds in several directions. Good choices were in short supply. "You're right. We can't outrun it, we'll have to fly before it."

"Oh Balanor, you don't mean."

"I mean fly as in to sail fast, and the only way we can sail fast enough is with the wind at our back." Balanor paused as he pointed to port. "We must head east."

For a sudden instant Balanor was dizzy and nearly fell. When he regained his focus he realized that he had passed this way before. He had seen this cusp, this moment in time, and now he had actually passed through it. The sensation of passing through a moment in a bubble made the fine hairs on his arms stand erect.

"Balanor, are you all right?" Dercy yelled in alarm.

"I'm fine. I'll be okay. Dercy! Quickly to port! Quickly! We must head east!"

Dercy frequently took the liberty of questioning her husband's judgment. Not this time. He spoke as though he was certain what to do. She trusted him with her life, and did as she was asked. With the wind full on the triangle sail, the boat moved lively over the water. Strong winds in their face prevented any progress against the black squall behind them. All day the curtain of boiling ink loomed closer and closer. Night came, and soon it was too dark to

see the doom clouds behind them. Yet, in the dark, they knew the clouds were there, seeking their lives.

"No one is going to sleep tonight!" shouted Balanor. The rain grew heavier. After a thoughtful moment he took his knife and cut the rope to the smaller boat, setting it adrift. Dercy nodded in agreement. Already the spare craft had started to fill with green sea water, and there was no way to bail it out. Removing the rising water from their boat became a full time job. A nearby flash of lightning gave a nightmare glimpse of the ocean frothing. The sea was now totally amok. The storm was directly overhead, or nearly so, and the rain blew so hard it fell horizontally.

With unfathomable suddenness the worst of the storm passed over their heads. No longer able to stand against the wind's insistent push, the sail separated into tattered, haunting shreds.

"Balanor!" Dercy screamed as the onslaught ripped at the air in her lungs. The roar of the pounding rain and the crashing waves reached a paroxysm that made all other sound inaudible.

Out of the darkness Balanor found his wife. He had her bow in hand. Pressing it against her he shouted directly into her ear, "ON YOUR BACK!" At the very moment she had strung the bow behind her, the boat fell, as though the water under it had vanished. They both lost their footing as lightning flashed, freezing for an instant a terrible sight. Ahead, waves crashed against black, foaming, rocky cliffs. Behind, the sea lifted itself in a looming wall of water that was about to crush them. Hopelessness became a real thing, and all was darkness.

CHAPTER NINE

THE ELVES

Balanor's first conscious thought was that someone was poking him. Slowly he became aware of his surroundings. His face, gritty with sand, was resting in a mass of smelly seaweed. After several more nagging pokes, he lifted himself weakly to turn his face to his tormentor. The end of a long, extremely thin sword was pointed at his nose. Holding the sword was a pointy-eared person, a person-thing really, dressed in dark green garb.

Efferet had told him stories of the other races, but of course he had never seen any but his own race. With very little joy, he said aloud, "I guess I made it."

"This one talks too," the sword holder spoke to no one in particular. The voice was unmatched in its pitch. It was uncomfortable to hear.

"What is it?" asked another of the race. Balanor realized he was surrounded by a dozen of what had to be Elves, of the Drow. Efferet had spoken of them. They couldn't possibly be as bad as his teacher had made them seem. Drow elves were the monsters of children's dreams. Mothers got children to eat vegetables by threatening visits from ferocious drow elves.

"What do I look like, a sage? Pick it up. We're taking it to the Seer."

Balanor risked staring at his tormentor. It was shocking. The elves seemed more insect than person. They stood tall and slim. Their waists were as thin as their necks. Their necks were long, impossibly long it seemed to Balanor. Atop the necks were heads shaped in wedge with a blade of a chin jutting forward. Their hair was yellow-blond and every single elf wore its hair long. Balanor

couldn't begin to get the sex if the individuals he could see. He couldn't begin to guess if the species had sexes. Elfish eyes topped strange with weird. Balanor had seen drawings of the compound eyes of insets. These eyes were compound. Each orb contained countless lenses. The eleven eyes were, in a word, eerie.

Balanor looked around to see the rocks his boat had crashed against. They were about one hundred strides from the beach, a beach littered with the debris and former contents of the proud little craft. He wondered how he had crossed that final span of water and land. Away from the shoreline stood a grove of trees unlike any Balanor had ever seen. They were misshapen and twisted, sprouting flat leaves rather than needles. Somehow, the stress of countless storms had twisted their shape. It was while examining the trees that Balanor first saw his wife. The elves had tied her hands behind her back and secured her around the trunk of a particularly stout tree. Her feet were hobbled.

"Dercy," shouted Balanor as he leapt through the sand. "Dercy, are you all right?"

"Of course I'm all right! Gods, am I glad to see that you're okay!"

As Dercy turned to greet her husband, Balanor could see a large, bloody bruise on her left cheek. His sprint had only gained him a few seconds on his captors, who were soon upon him. They searched him mercilessly. "What did they do to you?" he roared.

"Its nothing, Balanor. I said something that impugned their ancestry." Dercy smiled, though the effort was painful.

Balanor fought back the rage that was about to blind him. He would wait. It was then that he noticed that they had already taken his knife, and one of them had Dercy's bow.

"Shut up, both of you. Your speech is like the squeak of a rat!" Their leader had spoken. "Kalar, untie that one and watch it like a hawk. If it tries to kick you again, kill it." Directing his words to Dercy and Balanor, he said, "I suggest you two mind your manners while we try and find out what you are. Any stupid moves are likely to be your last. Iffereum," he directed to another elf, "notch an arrow and have one in hand. Don't be shy about putting shafts in their back if they run." Again he spoke to the pair. "What say you we go to the Seer? He will know what to do with you."

Balanor and Dercy traded worried glances as they were marched into the camp of the elves. Balanor sent a questioning look at Dercy. The camp appeared transitory. He'd expected a town or a village. Instead, dozens of tents were thrown up amongst the trees. No permanent structures were in evidence. Dercy managed to keep her questions to herself until she saw something that was clearly unbelievable.

"What in God's name is that?"

Kalar answered, "What are you, an idiot? That's a horse. Haven't you ever seen a horse?"

"Well... No, I haven't."

Balanor realized that Dercy was giving away valuable information with every word. He silenced her with a stern and steady frown.

"Come on you two. In here."

Entering one of the larger tents, Balanor looked around for hints as to the reason they had been brought to this place. The air inside hung sickly sweet, as if a whole field of flowers had been set afire. Sitting on the side of a hammock was a very old elf, with thin white hair, golden yellow eyes and skin grooved with uncountable ridges and valleys. Though he had been warned by runners of the

nature of the visit, the old elf was clearly taken aback by the appearance of the pair.

"Sarahan! By Gods, you're Sarahan! I had thought you all dead, or a myth! What a treasure!" He moved to Balanor with greater speed than looked possible for one his age. "Where did you come from? Tell me! Are there any more of you? Ea? Speak! And who is this, your mate?" The question sent Dercy into a fit. She struggled futilely against the two elves holding her.

"Ah, yes! You two will make a fantastic contribution to this year's Black Ship. We'll be rewarded with a release from our taxes for at least a year! Yes, you both must be taken, alive, to the Black Ship. But first I have some questions!" He produced a dagger so delicate it could have been mistaken for a toy. With artful skill, he placed its point behind and below Dercy's ear.

Dercy could have raised her chin to ease the pressure of the knife against her skin, but she refused to do so. Balanor's anger ignited as he saw a crimson drop of blood flow down the dagger's blade.

"Stop it! I'll tell you what you want to know!"

"Very reasonable of you. Now. Where have you come from?"

"First, I must know why they call you The Seer."

"I have the power to search a being's mind. And I can tell if it is lying or telling the truth. So tell me your truth, Sarahan."

"It would be easier to show you than tell you."

"What do you mean? How can you show the truth?"

Balanor looked at the Seer and then cast a glance at the other elves in the room. "I have something important to show you. Shall I show the others also?"

The Seer balanced his greed against his danger. It wasn't much of a contest. "Out! All of you, out! Surround the tent and close the flap behind you." Drawing a second, longer, dagger from a jeweled sheath, the old elf held it against Dercy's chest. "Don't test me, Sarahan. I can easily kill you both. Know you that there are fates worse than death." The threat, made implicit by the leer he gave Dercy, was unmistakable.

"I know that," hissed Balanor as he fought to maintain control of his anger. "That's why I want to show you this." Balanor reached inside his sand-covered coat to an inside pocket. Unfastening the wooden button that secured his treasure, Balanor pulled out the small box containing the Starstone.

The Seer looked at the stone with suspicion. "What's that? I have never seen anything like that." He continued to hold the dagger painfully close to Dercy. It was clear he thought her life of no consequence.

Dercy looked at her husband as though he'd gone mad. Balanor saw the rising panic in her eyes, but all he could afford was a glance. His reassurance seemed to calm her. "This stone will tell you the future, but you will need someone to show you how to use it."

"So show me already!" The elf's hissing voice rose to an ear-bleeding pitch.

"Careful with that dagger! If you harm her I won't show you anything. I swear on my life." The pressure of the steel against Dercy's skin relaxed, but only slightly. "First you must rip a small hole in the tent to let the sunlight in."

With his second dagger, The Seer deftly punctured a small hole in the canvas tent, allowing a shaft

of sunlight to beam in. "If this is a joke I will give this one a very broad smile right here." He traced a line under Dercy's neck. "I'll make you watch her bleed. Do you wish to see her light go out?"

All doubt as to what to do left Balanor. He held the stone in the light, and the Starstone blazed with its six-pointed star. "Now, you must concentrate on the point," said Balanor. "Let your mind carry you into the point."

As the Seer stared into the stone's star, Balanor took a deep breath and relaxed his mind. Once again he slipped easily into the array, but this time things were different. Gone were the calm, perfect lines of the hexagons. Replacing them were a thousand thunderous sounds, ripping and stretching the entire nightmare scene. There was power here, more than he imagined could ever exist. Force battered him. Mere movement became agony. Progress seemed impossible. Charges of lightning-spawned illumination blinded. Shimmering threads of power arced from point to point. The normally calm black background was fluctuating wildly in a riot of spectral colors. Of all these things, the most disturbing was the psychotic presence of the Seer. Like an object being pushed into a too-small hole, the essence of the Seer's mind was crowded at, and pushing against, the opening to the array. Most obvious of all was that the mind of the elf did not belong here.

Balanor moved his mind back to the invisible obstacles holding back The Seer's presence. Reaching out, he touched the mind of his tormentor and grasped it, pulling it through the opening. The pressure ripped and tore at the corners of the eleven mind. Balanor felt the fear and agony of the elf. It was a real, palpable thing. He pulled, dragged and carried the frozen weight of the other's mind, down, down the line to the hexagonal cusps. The chaos all around him grew. Sounds of glass shattering and haunting screams reverberated all around. Finally, at the exhausted end of his search, he came to an incomplete cusp, one broken by a natural flaw in the stone. With a great heave, he forced the screaming presence of the elf over the

precipice and dropped it into the void. The chaos around him lessened as Balanor moved wearily back to the entrance of the stone.

As Balanor's vision cleared his wife's concerned face was his first sight. "Are you all right?" she questioned in a whisper. "What did you do to him?"

Balanor looked to where The Seer stood, arms limp at his side and mouth agape. Two daggers lay where open hands had dropped them. Moving closer, Balanor peered into empty eyes that stared straight ahead without seeing. The old elf's expression was dull and vacuous. Balanor shuddered involuntarily at the mindless, soulless gaze.

"I took him to a place from which he cannot return."

"Is he dead?"

"His body lives, but his spirit is gone. What made him a person is lost. He is an empty husk."

Balanor looked at the two daggers. "We'll never fight our way out of here, and they are certain to search us when they find this." He nodded toward the elf, a statue of living flesh.

Before the pair had time to implement a plan, the elf that had led their capture peeked through the slit between the tent's door flaps. Seeing Dercy out of The Seer's grasp, he entered the tent with his own dagger drawn. A single glance at the limp form was enough to tell him that something was very wrong.

"What have you done to him?!"

Balanor took the many blows that smashed down upon him without speaking a word. His interrogators would have killed him outright if they hadn't recalled that he might be of some value to them and their Black Ship.

Having gotten nowhere, and still mystified at the condition of their Seer, they tied Balanor and Dercy back to back, sat them down and left them in the tent. The limp, mindless Seer was carried away under the care of the camp's herbalist.

Finally alone with her husband, Dercy spewed forth a thousand questions, most having to do with the Starstone which Balanor had managed to secure in his vest pocket.

"Efferæet gave it to you! Well that explains a lot. Anything that could cause that much trouble HAD to come from him! But I never thought you would dabble in magic."

"It's not magic, Dercy. It's just a new way of...seeing things."

"You had better keep it..." Dercy stopped speaking as yet another elf entered the tent. He cut the cords binding their legs and stood them up. Dercy was surprised to see her bow hung over his shoulder.

"My name is Elmarrand. I am leading the trading party to the south coast where we will meet the Black Ship. I was told the Seer thought you might be worth some coin. He named you Sarahan. What is a Sarahan?"

"Well, I suppose we are Sarahan, you lump of Elf shit!" Dercy barely had the words out of her mouth before the elf slapped her, hard.

"I can only guess that Sarahan are not very smart." He removed the bow from over his shoulder. "Your weapon is no better than an eleven toy." With this he took the thin bow and attempted to bend it double to break it. It wouldn't break. He tried bending it over his knee; still it wouldn't break.

"What is this made of? Come on, speak!" Dercy and her husband remained mute. Elmarrand pulled his knife and attempted to cut a sliver from the bow; it wouldn't cut,

but he left a nick. In evident frustration he shoved the pair out of the tent. "We are going for a little walk!"

Outside the tent, a dozen elves were packing their horses for the trip to the coast and the Black Ship. An extra animal, a rather bony creature, stood rider less in the middle of the pack. Husband and wife were made to mount the animal without saddle or blanket.

"You don't suppose this thing eats people, do you?" Dercy squirmed nervously on the horse's back, eyes wide and white.

"No, Dercy. It's just a giant deer without horns. See its teeth? They are flat and worn, not pointed, meant for chewing vegetation. It's an herbivore."

The horse reached down to crop some grass. Dercy squealed upon seeing the horse's teeth. Balanor looked at her in astonishment.

"How can you stand in front of an elf who is holding a knife and insult him without fear and yet be afraid of this poor, harmless beast?"

"I don't know! But I'd rather be adrift on a stormy sea than on the back of this monster! And it smells!"

As the caravan got under way, Balanor observed that a scout rider was sent ahead. Bows rested on the elves' laps, arrows were notched and made ready to fire. They stopped infrequently. Once they stopped to loot honey from the small nest of some insect. When they continued, worried eyes searched the trees and grass for movement. Somebody was preparing for a fight. What puzzled Balanor was that the elves spent as much time scanning the skies as the ground.

Three days of travel did nothing to moderate Dercy's temper. They continued to ride through coastal terrain, down sandy paths through storm-shaped trees.

Balanor, riding their horse double and forward with Dercy, learned a whole new vocabulary. He didn't complain about her verbiage; he was fascinated by it. Once he had the pleasure of listening to a solid hour of mutterings so insulting to the elves and horses in general, that if they'd heard a single portion of it, the elves would certainly have killed them both, profit be damned. During that hour, Dercy cursed, maligned and slandered the elves without once repeating herself. It was an artful, inspiring and utterly scary performance.

Balanor was first to notice sea sounds coming from the wrong direction. He had been expecting it from his left, the side that he had been beached on, but these sounds drifted in from his right. And there were other sounds, a buzzing that was almost inaudible. Moments later a keen-eared elf shouted, "Horns! We've reached the Cape of the Horns!" The entire caravan cheered.

Seconds later the face and hair of the elf burst into flame.

"Hold on," shouted Dercy as she slung her arms, tied at the wrist, around Balanor. She intentionally pulled him off the horse, shoving with her foot against the rearing beast so that they landed on sandy soil at the trail's side. Balanor's fall was softened by his landing, on top of Dercy's shoulder. Dercy gasped for air after having the wind knocked out of her by her husband's fall. "Keep your head down! We're being attacked!"

The buzzing of a thousand swarming insects filled the air, and the beating of countless wings set up sympathetic vibrations that could be felt through clothing. Against his cheeks, Balanor felt heat from a dozen living fires.

Though hugging the ground, he could clearly see that the elves were being devastated. Creatures the size of an open hand, appearing to be a nightmare mix of insect and bird, buzzed angrily around the elves and their steeds. Balanor watched as a handful pointed their abdomens at

one elf trying to escape. He erupted in fire. One elf drew his sword and attacked, only to have a fiery liquid spewed directly into his eyes. Horrible screams rent the air as living, flailing, eleven fireballs ran blindly in all directions, trying to escape. The bird-insect creatures attacking the horses applied fire only to the animal's flanks, causing them to rear and dump their riders. One elf, aflame over his entire body, fell at Balanor's side, crawled a small distance and died, still bubbling.

"Don't move," said Dercy. "They are all around us."

"I know. One has landed right in front of me. It appears to be looking me over. Why haven't they attacked us?"

Dercy moved slightly to see if she could provoke a response. She did. A dozen or so of the fireflies pulled back to give her some room. "We don't much look like elves, perhaps that is why..." As Dercy spoke, another of the fireflies joined the throng that watched her and her husband. At the upper limit of her sense of hearing, Dercy was astonished to realize that the newcomer was squeaking speech at the high-end range of audible sounds. Without warning it flew away.

"Dercy, something is about to happen." Balanor looked around with apprehension as more and more of the fireflies crowded around. A space opened above them. "Stand up. They want us to stand up."

Hands still tied, they stood. Fireflies behind them crowded in, but the way in front of them cleared of the creatures. They had been told to leave, and the way before them opened. One of the fireflies squirted a fraction of a drop of the liquid fire onto Dercy's rear.

"Hey! Cut that out! I know when I'm not wanted! Balanor, let's get the mischief out of here!"

"Good idea, my love." Balanor led the way through the smoldering carnage all around him. Coming to the front of the caravan, he paused long enough to reach down, with bound hands, and take his knife and his wife's bow from the lead elf, now unrecognizable from his burns. The stop earned him a spark of fire, but he held onto the weapons.

"Damn it," spat Dercy, "they burnt the cord of my bow! What good is it now?"

"What good would a cord be without arrows? I, for one, am not stopping to collect any."

"Me neither." She spoke with emphasis. Looking behind, hundreds of the fireflies had gathered. A narrow corridor was being made for them to pass through. It extended as they approached its end and continued in the direction of the sea.

"Balanor, you don't suppose they are going to herd us into the ocean, do you?"

"We're about to find out," said Balanor as he came to the crest of a final sand dune. Stretching out before him, from horizon to horizon, was the vastness of the sea.

"This promontory is over a sandy peninsula. The sea is everywhere!"

"Balanor, look! There are some empty boats at the base of that dune. Joy! Wonderful! It looks like we are going sailing again."

"Stifle the sarcasm, Dercy. Let's go."

Husband and wife climbed down the rib of sand dunes that divided the finger of land jutting into the sea. The fireflies did not follow, but remained above until after the pair had cut their bonds and selected a boat to push out into the water. Dercy used the cut rope to tie the bow ends together, allowing her to shoulder the bow.

"What direction shall it be, north, south, or west?"

"I think the choice has been made for us," Balanor said as he stood in the middle of the boat, hands on his hips. "There seems to be a current heading south and a breeze blowing to the west. We're heading southwest!"

"Brilliant."

Later that evening, several hours before dusk, the land to the east moved over the horizon. Once again they were alone upon an endless sea.

"Any ideas, Balanor? How 'bout using that magic stone?"

"What magic stone? Oh, that. The Starstone is about as magic as a lens. I think we had better spend the night at sea then try the land to the east again."

"Have you noticed that? Look for a black spot over there," Dercy said as she pointed south.

"What is that? A bird? The tip of an island? It's moving against the background of the clouds!"

"Balanor, it's coming this way."

CHAPTER TEN

THE VENTURE

Two men sat across from each other. One man, very much older and well weathered, destined for distinguished old age, paid rapt attention as the younger man spoke.

"I see no other choice. The Venture must set sail or she will be docked permanently. You've this one chance to find the Black Ship. If you come back empty handed, Venture may be scuttled."

The old Captain wrinkled his nose as though some noxious odor had filled the room. "Hurremph, emmm. Yes, I know it's come to that. I just can't believe it. What her enemies could never do, The Steward would have us do ourselves."

"Old friend, I will not let it come to that. I will find my father and put this thing right. That's my job. Yours is to sink that ship. We must prove the threat and remove it at the same time. Captain, you must recall the crew and leave immediately. Take no provisions on board and don't wait for the tide."

"Will you be all right, Sire? I... I am reluctant to leave you alone."

"I have friends that no one suspects, Longstaff. But I must leave now. Do what you do best. Shout orders and set sail. Captain, resume command of this vessel!"

Longstaff smiled. How could one so young command so instinctively?

The younger man pulled on a thick, nondescript gray robe, passing its hood past his head to hide his

features. The Captain escorted him to the deck and off the ship. Holding his hand in a guarded gesture of farewell, the lithe figure moved into the shadows cast by twin moons and slipped quietly away into the night.

"Good luck, young Baktar," whispered Longstaff to the moon-full night. "I will find the Black Ship, and I will kill her in your name."

Watching his prince until he was out of sight, Captain Longstaff had already begun to plot the chase and destruction of The Black Ship. The vessel was a Ragnall pestilence that sailed in his darkest dreams. It was not a matter of 'if' he caught the ship, but 'how soon'. Longstaff was accustomed to Prince Baktar's self-confidence, but he was much afraid he would return to find the young man arrested, under confinement, or worse. He paused with his thoughts a moment, then carried out his orders. He returned to his ship and called his first mate to his cabin.

As he went below, a shadow near a warehouse moved with the stealth of a rat stealing a meal. A bent man moved into every shadow available. Against the walls of the dock's structures, the spy followed the Prince.

The first mate and Longstaff returned from below to the topside deck of Venture, both laughing loudly. Their raucous noise could easily be heard over the rhythmic lapping of the incoming tide against the sea wall.

"...And I am telling you, don't come back until you have a sampling of the best fare from every tavern in town! I'll teach you not to bad mouth Dwarves grog! And the bet is twenty dragoons! None of this worthless script." Longstaff took two intoxicated steps toward the side of the ship. He flung a fistful of paper notes into the air. They hovered a moment, then drifted gently down to the water, floating on the quiet surface like some absurd fish food.

"Captain! Begging your pardon sir, but you may wrong about that vile Dwarves piss. I hates it to death, and I'll show ya why. Permission to leave the ship, sir?"

Longstaff smiled at Dirk. He could sound the perfect drunken sailor if he wished, though Longstaff had never actually seen him drunk.

"Try not to fall into the sea, Number One. Get thee gone."

The ship's first officer made a convincingly loud and bumbling exit. A momentary smile played itself across the face of Longstaff.

A short time later, after touring the ship and mentally stacking in their correct sequence the departure orders, Longstaff came to the site where he had flung the Steward's legal tender overboard. He chanced a quick glance into the water. There wasn't a note to be seen. Casually moving to his Marine Sergeant, he whispered quick instructions that were acknowledged with a brief, under the breath, "Yes, Captain."

Less than half an hour later three sailors returned to their ship. They were the first of those rounded up by the ship's first officer. Quietly, and without ceremony or haste, the Captain gave them standby instructions.

From somewhere under the thick planks of the wharf, there came a dull, meaty thud, then a second. Moments later there was a subdued splash.

As several more sailors and the first group of Onserf Marines came aboard, a marine sergeant brought up the rear. Showing a lot of teeth, he whispered, "Got 'em, Sir." The Captain's eyes laughed.

The trickle of men became a flood, and soon there was no hiding the ship's intent. When back doors to warehouses and tiny tavern windows began to open, when curious faces peeped out, Captain Longstaff abandoned all pretext of stealth and began to shout orders. As if queued from a part in a play, the first officer appeared at the gangplank with a dozen men and twenty bottles.

"As you requested, sir, I bring samplings of the best grog, mead, ale and beer from the best taverns within the walls of Onserf. I even secured a bottle of 'Bottom-Batch' from Rosie down at the Halberd and Hammer!"

"Number one, you are a scoundrel. You'll make a fine Captain some day."

"If you say so, sir. There are those ashore who would disagree. Tillman, stack these in the Captain's cabin and return to haul up the anchor. Shall we cast off, sir?"

"Do it, Number One."

"Yes sir." Orders were now rapid fire, specific, and of course, sober. With sails unfurled, the heavy canvas began to catch the mid-evening's soft breeze. The helmsman was given an initial harbor waters course, east southeast, as a final sailor, frantic at the thought that he was to be left behind, leaped across the widening gap between the dock and the ship to land in a rolling heap at the marine sergeant's feet. With boot heel, the sergeant applied a ship's welcome to the sailor's butt and then returned to his duties.

Moving away with agonizing slowness, Venture was still within earshot when a green-robed court minister appeared. He was the first in an officious looking line of six functionaries, all frantically waiving documents. Their appearance was sudden and unwelcome.

"You must return to dock immediately! Captain Longstaff, return that merchant warship!"

Longstaff walked with great deliberation to the ship's stern. Passing out orders on the way, he reached the ship's rearmost point and cupped his right ear. His left hand shrugged in a clear sign that he was having difficulty hearing the court officer's protestations. Longstaff turned his back to the wharf and walked calmly back to where his first officer stood. "I sure wish I could have heard that man."

I'll bet he had something important to say," spoke the Captain.

"No doubt, sir," said Dirk with ever the slightest grin.

Further need for pretext evaporated as the Venture's crew took up a chorus of what was arguably the most ribald song in their repertoire, an obscene ballad called 'Winter Women Wonderland'.

Longstaff shrugged his shoulders in feigned frustration. His smile, absent for some time now, finally came to his face to stay. He was at sea again.

* * * * *

Prince Baktar moved through one of the many back alleys of Onserf, with a destination clearly in mind. He passed countless cramped, claustrophobic shops. The only large businesses in the inner city were taverns. He gave scant attention to the shops, and to the isolated pockets of laughter that echoed from the taverns that he passed. Heading to the east-most city gate, he came to the only roomy building in the entire city, Ricker's Livery. Its exclusive location and exorbitant fees marked it as a caterer to only the wealthiest of patrons. Within its tall, redwood walls was some of the best equine care and training in the land. Only the Invokers took better care of their steeds. Stepping inside, The Prince glanced towards the largest stall. Attending with brush and curry comb, a young stable boy laid caring hands across the muscled neck of a magnificent black mare. This sight was all the reassurance that the prince needed. "Destiny," he whispered, then moved quietly on.

Coming to a three-story structure whose overhanging sign featured a halberd crossed by a hammer, Prince Baktar entered.

Ducking to avoid low beams, he came into a warm, cozy-small place. The pipe smoke-filled room buzzed with the deep throated conversation of Dwarves. Someone puffed on a fragrant pipe-bowl of Old Tobie.

Here, Dwarves were given preferential treatment. The rest of the city was not always so kind. The proud Dwarves race, masters of the southern portion of the continent, knew that the Halberd and Hammer was their home when away from home.

The prince glanced an inquiring eye at the human behind the bar. A negative nod, not even directed at him, was his covert answer. Finding an empty chair near the darts wall, he moved to an innocuous corner, tipping his thumb down with a wiggle when passing the barkeep, a signal for a tankard of dark ale. Moments later, coins passed palms. The drink, resting warm and thick, was room temperature. The reddish brown drink was a big favorite here. Baktar tilted his chair back against the wall and relaxed, enjoying immensely the volatile disagreements that followed all wagers, stratagems and conduct of the Dwarves dart game. With each throw came loud, dire threats of violence and general good-natured mayhem.

Through three full games, the prince enjoyed moments of amusement. Suddenly the volume of background noise dropped to zero. Baktar peered around a thick, rough-hewn ceiling support, trying to look to the door. He needn't have bothered. The sudden stillness came to him. Dressed in his courtly green robes, and accompanied by 'Shire Wardens', the new palace guards, the Steward's first minister, and not surprisingly, his younger brother, moved through the room to stand in front of the prince. He handed a parchment to Baktar.

"Your Highness, I regret to inform you that I am placing you under arrest for patricide, the murder of your

father, His Majesty The King. Additionally, as YOU are responsible for the unauthorized departure of the Venture, you are also being charged with the theft of state property, specifically, The Venture."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE BATTLE AT SEA

"It's coming this way! Balanor, we are going to be rescued!"

"Maybe. It's late in the evening. If the sun goes down before they get here they will miss us. We must be a pretty small dot from that distance."

Dercy began waving her arms in an attempt to attract the attention of the oncoming ship. "Balanor, behind that ship is another!"

"What's that? A second ship? How did we get so lucky!"

Suddenly Balanor saw something that didn't make him feel all that lucky. "Dercy, that second ship isn't following the first one, it's chasing it!"

"Chasing it? How can you tell?"

"Watch closely. Look at the forward part of the second ship." Balanor paused as he waited for the ship to repeat what he had seen. "Did you see that? It fired some kind of flaming arrow at the first ship. Dercy, these guys are in a fight!"

Both ships continued to catapult smoking balls of fire at the other. Men stood at rail's edge on the leading ship's stern and the chasing ship's bow, firing flaming arrows toward each other. Not all arrows landed in canvas sails. Some landed in the chest of the enemy. Having the wind at their backs, the trailing ship scored far more hits than the lead. Soon fires sprang from several, then dozens, of points on the black ship.

"I don't think we want to get caught in the middle of this! Let's change course and return to the beach. Fireflies or no, this looks dangerous!"

"I agree." Balanor pulled the tiller completely to the right. "Sail and oars notwithstanding, we can NOT head back to shore faster than they are coming toward us!"

Long moments passed as husband and wife did everything they could to alter the course of the skiff. Despite their efforts, the best they could do was to remain still in the water, making zero headway in all directions.

"At least the bow of that black ship isn't pointed at us. If they keep moving in that direction ..." Dercy stopped in mid-sentence as the ship altered course directly for them.

"Why did they do that? Are they trying to wind-shadow the second ship? It's not working!"

"Dercy, I hate to sound paranoid, but I think they are headed towards us."

"That's about the stupidest thing I've ever seen! Don't they know... HEY, YOU IDIOTS! DON'T YOU SEE THAT SHIP CHASING YOU?"

"Sit down and stop shouting. They probably just want to rescue us."

"Husband, I am not interested in being rescued by a burning ship! They're on fire!" By now figures could be seen on the deck of the black ship. Several were looking intently in the direction of the skiff. Several more were arming themselves with bows.

"I don't believe this, I just don't believe this! They are about to ram us and fire on us! What did we do to them? I swear that if I ever get my hands on Efferæet, I am going to..."

"We have got to swamp this boat and get under it!" Arrows began to fly from the ship, all short of their target, but by now it looked as though every ship's hand had come to the edge of the burning ship to fire at the pair, completely ignoring their blazing vessel.

"They are insane!" were Dercy's last words. Rocking the boat had its desired effect. The skiff swayed to the side away from the black ship, and Balanor grabbed the small mast and pulled it down towards the water. Dozens of arrows pierced the water around and in front of the skiff. The dozens became a pointed hailstorm. Balanor hugged the planks of the small skiff's awash bench as Dercy whispered, "Madness. Madness!"

Suddenly the overturned skiff was lifted and pushed back by the pressure wave of the black ship's bow as it passed within rock-throwing distance. After a frightening few seconds filled with arrows passing all about, the hail diminished. Balanor heard a distinct splash. He looked over the insignificant amount of the skiff still above water to see the cause of the splash. A second figure had leaped into the water as it sailed passed the skiff. The first figure was swimming towards them with a knife between its teeth.

"Gods, Balanor, give me your knife!" Not waiting for her husband to do as she asked, she pulled it from his belt and dived under the water before Balanor could utter a protest.

"Dercy!" He screamed.

Getting his first good look at the swimmer, Balanor knew fear. He had never seen or heard of a creature like this, and its insane eyes burned with a hatred that was unmistakable.

The second of the creatures floundered in the sea swells. In its suicidal frenzy to attack Balanor and his wife, it had forgotten that it didn't know how to swim. Mere arm lengths away, the creature, much the better

swimmer, spit out its knife and clutched its midsection. For a moment it thrashed and churned. The water around it reddened. It lay still, floating face down in the blue-green sea.

Still semi-paralyzed by shock after repeated shock, Balanor was startled when Dercy surfaced next to him. She had the blue-bladed knife in her teeth and her cordless bow in her hand.

"Look what I found! It was about to sink when I saw it. Pretty good, ea?"

"Did you do that? DID YOU DO THAT!" Balanor pointed to the floating corpse.

"Don't shout at me, husband! You're repeating yourself, you know. Yes, I did that, and the second one won't bother us. I guess it couldn't swim very well. A strange creature. Dirty, too. Did you notice that there is now a film on the water where it swam?" She laughed.

Balanor was speechless. Moments later the second ship had passed them, nearly close enough to touch. Its bow waves finished the job of sinking the skiff. Balanor nearly panicked as he felt the skiff's rapidly diminishing security slipping away to sink into the bottomless sea. Seeing her husband's discomfort, Dercy motioned for him to follow her. Swimming as strongly as she flew, she reached the body of her recent victim. "It floats," she said with grim pride.

"Dercy, you amaze me. Doesn't anything faze you?"

"Are you serious? Seeing those two ships sail down on us emptied my bladder! What do you suppose that was all about?"

"I haven't a glimmer," he said as he spit out a mouthful of sea water. "I do know that since we left Landfall, the whole world has made a sustained effort to

kill us." Balanor watched with interest as the black ship burned to her waterline. It appeared that an effort was being made to take prisoners from the sinking vessel, yet he could see none being taken. "Looks like we're in for it. That second ship is putting a boat into the water. Wanna take a guess at who they're coming for?"

Dercy accidentally took in a mouthful of water. She sputtered out a curse. "I hate the sea almost as much as I hate horses."

The boat that came alongside them contained two men armed with bows and two men on oars. Floating cautiously within reach, all four looked at Dercy and Balanor with suspicion. One dressed in uniform scowled and spat out, "You're not Ragnall. What are you?"

Dercy rolled her eyes. 'Not again', she thought. "We frequently get that question. Right now, we are wet."

"Sergeant, haul them in. You two behave yourself. These men are Onserf marines."

"Is that supposed to mean something?"

"It means something to them," said the man in uniform as he pointed to the smoking ruins of the Black Ship. The blazing vessel began to slip beneath waters, its crew abandoning the thing like rats. "I am Dirk Randomeer, first officer of the Venture. Earman," A seaman lifted his head, ready for the order to follow, "take this oar. Sergeant, watch them carefully, especially the one with the knife. What is that?" Dirk directed the question to Dercy, who held her bow. The knife had been slipped between her belt and water-soaked tunic.

"That is a bow. You've never seen a bow before? It's stonewood."

"Hmmm. I've seen bows. I hold one now, aimed at you. Why were the Ragnall trying to kill you?"

"They didn't bother to tell us," quipped Dercy.

"If you mean those dead pigs in the water," fumed an angry Balanor, "I have no idea. Until ten minutes ago I had never seen anything like them in my life." Bluntly he added, "Or like you. By the way, how is it you understand us?"

"Trade speech is common in Onserf, but your accent is strange. Also, your voices are pitched high. What the darkness are you two?" It was a rhetorical question. Dirk continued, "That's all right. I have never seen anything like you either." He smiled. He was quite used to working with species other than his own. "That one is gutted," Dirk observed as the Ragnall floated nearby. "You did that? Well, any enemy of theirs is a friend of ours. Captain Longstaff is going to want to speak to you, though. Of this I'm sure." The oarsmen rowed. The boat approached its mother ship, which seemed huge to Balanor. "Welcome to the Venture." Dirk spoke sincerely.

Climbing a rope ladder, Balanor noticed that several Ragnall corpses had been taken aboard. One had obviously died of a self-inflicted wound, a dagger to the heart.

Night had come and lanterns were lit around the ship. If it hadn't been for the grisly circumstances, the sight would have been quite beautiful. "Captain!" yelled Dirk, "Sir. These are the two the Black Ship tried to ram."

"Hurremph, emmm. Number one, take them to my cabin and see to it that they are dried and clothed. I will join you momentarily."

Balanor and Dercy followed the first officer into the cramped spaces of the interior of the ship. Every sight was an incredible wonder, but soon their wonderment reached its saturation point. You can be astonished for just so long. There would be time for a million questions later.

"This way," directed Dirk. "Are you a female of your species?" The question was directed at Dercy.

"How kind of you to notice," she sparked back.

"Earman! EARMAN!"

"...Sir," responded the sailor who shot down the stairs.

"Earman, this is..." Dirk paused in unembarrassed ignorance.

"Dercy. Dercy Dan. This is my husband, Balanor Dan."

"Thank you. Sergeant, please get Dercy and Balanor some dry clothes, swab tops and bottoms I should think. Yes, that would be fine, and have Cook bring some Red Ronda tea to the Captain's cabin at once, also some hard tack and some pine-pears. Go."

He was gone. Dirk took the clothes the sergeant returned with and gave them to Balanor and Dercy. "This is the Captain's cabin. Please change in here. Don't touch anything. I will be outside. If you need anything, let me know. The Captain will be here shortly."

Dercy and Balanor spent several moments back to back changing out of their wet clothes. It wasn't long before there was a rap on the small cabin door. Captain Longstaff entered carrying a wooden tray and a well worn book. "Red Ronda tea. Good choice. Why don't you two seat yourselves and try to sip some tea. Northern waters are god awful cold."

"Hurremph, emmm. How shall I begin to put this. Dercy and uh..."

"Balanor, Captain."

"Thank you. Balanor and Dercy. You are Sarahan and you are supposed to be dead."

"Do you mean dead because that black boat almost rammed us?" questioned Dercy.

"No. Well, that too. This book," the Captain held up the tattered volume, "speaks of a people that are very much like you. Yes, very much like you. Six fingers to a hand, soft body fur, short in stature, lightweight." He searched the pages for something in particular. "Ah, here it is. Do you have wings like this?" An unflattering drawing showed a Sarahan in flight.

Dercy nodded, head swimming with questions. "It's common knowledge that your people, your species, has been, Hurremeph, emmm, excuse me, HAD been extinct for one hundred years. To my knowledge you two are the only Sarahan on the entire planet. No one has seen your kind for a long, long time."

For a moment, Dercy and Balanor's mouths dropped. They looked at each other, astonished. Balanor recovered first.

"Captain, may I call you Captain?" Longstaff nodded affirmatively. "There are hundreds of us on the island we came from, and thousands upon thousands more on the home island of Loft. That is where our people came from."

"We know about Loft, but all of that land's inhabitants died, at least we think they died. Let me show you something." Longstaff went to his desk and removed a mapped globe from its circular wooden frame. "We know there are polar caps, ice and snow, here and here." With each direction he pointed to the appropriate spot on the globe. "This land is where all known people were thought to live, that is until your race showed up many generations ago. Your people's home is—was—here." Longstaff pointed to a string of seven islands. Most were small, but the second island was huge, almost a continent. The globe had a reptile-like beast with large black wings drawn near the islands. Printed beneath it were the words, 'Beyond here be Dragons'.

"What are dragons?" asked Balanor.

"Dragons are big, flying stomachs with teeth as long as my forearm," quipped Longstaff. "No ship has been able to reach Loft. The Sarahan used to be able to control the dragons, but none of their ships have come through, and every single member of your race that was in our lands died some one hundred years ago."

"How did they die?" asked Dercy quietly.

"I wasn't there," replied Longstaff with a sad smile. "Some say that it was a plague, some say assassination. I just don't know. Balanor, did you say you came from an island populated by hundreds of Sarahan?"

"Yes, but I don't see it on this globe. Until now, we didn't know of all this land." Balanor brushed his palm over the mega-continent that dominated the globe.

"I'm not surprised your island isn't on here. What did you say it was called?"

"Adopt," volunteered Balanor.

"Ships don't like to sail these northern waters. Very risky. Icebergs and vicious storms have sunk many a ship that have tried, and there are no island turtles to hunt in these cold waters, so," he paused, "no one goes there."

"Can we sail for Adopt? Even if the ship can only hold a few of us, I want my people to know that their waiting to be found is over."

"We cannot, Dercy. We must return to our home, Onserf. There is much trouble there, and there is an important person that needs my help." Longstaff's eyes wandered a bit. "I wish I hadn't let him out of my sight."

Longstaff went into detail about the situation in Onserf, how the King had suddenly turned up missing, and how, due to the Prince's age, he being seventeen, a Steward

had been empowered to rule until the King was found or the Prince came of age. Finally he told them of the court intrigue, how power hungry men were attempting to make the disappearance of the King seem a conspiracy headed by the Prince.

"The Prince believed that Ragnall were responsible for the abduction. He wanted proof that there was a Black Ship, a vessel of the Ragnall navy in our waters. The Steward, however, wants to make peace with the Ragnall nation, god knows why. He wants to sign trade agreements with them and abrogate our treaties with the Confederations of Nations. That place is in Dran on the river Drew, here." He pointed to the globe, and a long river. "It is for these reasons and more that we are headed, as we speak, for Onserf."

Balanor reached into the vest pocket of his wet clothes and removed the box that contained the Starstone. Carefully avoiding being seen, he pocketed the ornately carved cube.

The tea, hardtack and sweet fruit had removed their hunger pains. Now both began to sag under the staccato drumbeat of shocks that had pounded them throughout the eventful day.

"Enough of this," spoke the Captain. "You two are exhausted." He opened the door and spoke to a figure in the shadows of the next room. "Dirk will see to it that you are bedded down." The first officer reported and his Captain gave the appropriate instructions.

"Already taken care of, sir. Come with me, please." He led them to two extremely small berths with blankets and firm, round pillows. They bedded down, head to head. Though the beds looked uncomfortable, Dercy fell asleep almost the moment she went horizontal. Balanor pretended to sleep.

In the imperfect quiet of the ship's main cabin, Balanor reached for the box containing the Starstone.

Seeing the stone was impossible in the weak, yellow light. A lantern swayed with a pendulum rhythm. The ship pitched to and fro, matching each measured motion of the sea over which it traveled.

Taking the smooth, sky blue stone from the box, Balanor held it tightly in his right fist. He began to search for the stone's star, not with sight, but with insight. He knew the star was there, and that the array that it foreshadowed was there also. With disarming ease, he found the line's end and began to move swiftly along it. What he could not see was his body relaxing. His breathing became deeper as he rested. His mind worked its way through the stone.

Gone was all sign of the scarring and turmoil that accompanied the journey to the broken cusp with the seer elf. Balanor moved without weight, without pushing or pulling. He floated along the bright lines of the hexagonal array. With time to explore the lines, he wondered at the simplicity of it, but that thought brought its own retort. He began to wonder if he had missed something, something that couldn't be seen at all. There was more to the array than insight showed, and he knew it.

Finally, Balanor selected his cusp, relaxed, and floated through its perceptible membrane. He tuned the moment's cusp, and lived it wholly.

With eyes high above the planet, he looked down on a great city by the sea, a city surrounded by a salt water moat and high walls. At one corner of the great city, in walls within walls, was a castle of multi-colored spires and flags of red and green. They waved in soft sea breezes. Directly below him, on a gabled roof of red-brown clay tiles, waited a large, powerful man. He seemed full of grim will and appeared dreadfully concerned.

A particular building, outside but very near to the castle walls, caught his attention. Men in green uniforms walked in and out. "Here he is," whispered his mind's voice, and he felt himself falling.

* * * * *

"That was quite a nap. You must have been bone deep tired. Are you all right?"

Balanor looked around for the intended recipient of the question. It must have been him, as he was alone except for the question's source, a sailor he hadn't yet met.

"I... I'm all right. Where am..." Balanor held back the rest of the question as the gentle swaying of the ship gave him a reassuring and ready answer.

"You wait here."

Quickly regaining his wits, Balanor looked into his fist for the Starstone. The stone, and its keep box, were gone.

Suddenly, with the grace of a puppy warg, Dercy fell past the cabin's steps and, with a single leap, fell, rolled, recovered, and was at his side.

Balanor had never seen a face explode. It was very interesting.

"Aghhhhh! Husband, I promised myself that if you ever woke up I'd kill you! Don't EVER do that again!"

Captain Longstaff came down the cabin's stairs with dignified, measured steps.

Dercy moved in for a close, whispering attack on Balanor's ear. "If I ever catch you using that jewel again I SWEAR I will swallow it and... and... Shit into deep water for a solid month!"

"That was attractive. Hi Dercy. What's new?"

Longstaff moved to the end of the cramped berth. "Have you been looking for this?" He held the Starstone between his thumb and forefinger. "What kind of magic puts its user to sleep for three days?"

"It's not magic. Three days?" Balanor ejected the question. Dercy nodded. "That would explain why I am so hungry. I wish I had a horse to cook up. How much longer until we reach Onserf?"

"Several weeks," answered the Captain drolly. "But you won't be seeing the city right away. I think it best that you be kept in hiding for a couple of days."

"That is too bad. I would have liked to have seen the colored spires of the castle. They are beautiful."

Dercy mumbled a curse under her breath and looked sidelong at Longstaff to see if he had caught the sleep-induced slip.

"Can you tell me how you came to know of the spires of Onserf? I don't recall having mentioned them."

"I, ah, dreamt of them, Captain."

Longstaff looked at Balanor for a long time, then at the stone, which he replaced in its box. "Take this, and keep it safe. If it allows you to dream visions, it is more power than I care to hold."

"No!" shouted Dercy.

"Yes," decided Balanor. He didn't try to justify the long sleep. Maybe it was just the result of fatigue? Maybe it wouldn't happen again? But guilty doubt in the back of his mind kept his mouth shut.

"I fear," continued the Captain, "that the same forces in the city that oppose The Prince may find you useful." Turning to leave, he added, "I will do what I can to protect you."

Alone with her husband, somewhat calmer, Dercy held out her hand palm up. "I don't suppose you'd let me hold that thing for you?"

"Sorry, Dercy. I wouldn't give it to you if my life depended on it."

Dercy was taken aback by the answer. "Balanor, what is that thing that you would put it ahead of your life, your wife!"

"Just a key, my love. Just a tiny little key." Balanor placed the box in the right front pocket of the borrowed pants. "Well, what have you learned about this world that we abide in?"

Dercy's answer was slow to arrive, and reflected her hesitancy to put aside the subject of the stone. "Okay. Do you want the good news or the bad news?"

"Bad news first. Pour woe upon me." He smiled ever so slightly.

"The bad news is that, as best as I can learn, horses can be found in every part of the world." Balanor smiled slightly but turned his head so his wife couldn't see his grin. "The good news is that there are very few elves, and those elves are different, not evil. Anyway, where we are going there are no "Drow Elves," the bad kind. It seems that the elves that found us were the bad kind. These 'Drow Elves' as the Captain calls them, work with the Ragnall, those awful creatures that tried to kill us."

"What do you know about where we are going?"

"Onserf, yes. Dirk says that 'Within and without its walls live about twenty five THOUSAND people'. Mostly men, he says, because it is a trading city. There are no less than seven races doing business there, eight now, I suppose." She smiled. "Well, of course I called Dirk a liar! Can you imagine beings in those numbers? Dirk didn't

even blink. He called Onserf 'a mid-sized city'. Husband, the world is FULL of beings!"

"Do you think they will be able to spare a ship to go to Landfall?"

"I doubt it. Balanor, these people have troubles of their own. Their King is missing, his son is suspected of killing him, and some idiot called 'The Steward' is setting up puppets so he can govern. Everything is going in the wrong direction."

"We have to get a ship to Landfall, Dercy. It is important. It's vital!"

Dercy continued to fill her husband in on the shape and contents of the world, but Balanor suspected that the world as described had a distinctive Dercy spin to it. Food was brought in and a noisy stomach was calmed and quieted. Soon the sun set in the autumn sky. Finally, Dercy went to bed, but Balanor remained wide awake. He'd had his quota of sleep.

On deck, the first officer had evening watch. Balanor made his way to the long figure looking out over the sea. Two moons with matching crescents gave off dim light that reflected off the water.

"Balanor. Why haven't you crammed yourself into a berth?"

"I can't sleep, Dirk. A combination of too much rest and too much excitement." Balanor looked up at the night sky's uncountable stars. With a broad wave of his hand he indicated the entire southern sky. "These are higher above the horizon than I am used to."

"You are at a lesser latitude than you have ever been before. Considering what you have told us, your island is much closer to the pole than we are now. We are going much further south, and it's going to get a lot warmer."

Balanor paused, and mentally walked through a weed field of thoughts and questions. "What do you know of the one called The Steward?"

"Hmmm. He is crazy, that's for sure. But he is not full moon crazy. There may be a method behind his madness." Dirk looked at Balanor and smiled. "At least the Steward is consistent in his madness. I expect Venture will be docked forever when we get back."

"That IS crazy. I have never seen, never even imagined, a more beautiful ship." Balanor looked again at the southern skies. This time, something caught his attention. "Dirk! What is that? That star is moving!"

"That is The Orphan. Seeing it is said to be a powerful bad omen. That is ridiculous. Everyone has seen it! Can it be bad luck to all? Who gets the good luck then? Anyway, it's called Swiftstar by the Elves, and Addock by the Dwarves. Others call it The Evil Eye because of the way that it blinks in and out. See?"

"I do see! How can a star shine and then not shine?" Balanor found himself shuddering involuntarily. Dirk noticed his shaking and led him back to his berth. His question unanswered, Balanor slept fitfully between countless nightmares.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE ARRIVAL OF THANDOR

"Pardon. Can you tell me if the city gates are open after sunset?"

A dusty, sweat-covered farmer stopped pulling his rickety cart loaded with produce and looked up at the man sitting astride a blue-gray stallion. "Nay, Sire. They used to be, a year ago, but these are troubled times. Things aren't as safe as they once were."

Thandor wiped drops of sweat off his brow with a dirty sleeve. "This weather may be good for growing crops, but it is uncomfortable as hell."

"Aye, Sire. Onserf has four seasons; wet hot, dry hot, hot wet and hot dry." Amused at his old joke, he smiled broadly despite many missing teeth. The dark-tanned farmer looked out over his fields. "I can grow the crops fair enough, but no one will buy them. If I could sell all that I can grow, I'd be as rich as thee! Don't know that I could ever afford such a fine horse, though. What a good looker he is!"

Thandor patted his steed's neck with obvious affection. "Yes, Traveler is of a kind that is hard to come by. I was lucky. I won him in a fight."

"And by the looks of you, Sire, someone took a beating." Again the farmer smiled. "You had best make quick time to get to the city by closing, and I had best haul my butt home to mother and children. Smooth sailing, Sire."

"I wish you light loads, old man."

Thandor pointed Traveler down the dusty trade trail and moved away. The voice of the farmer brought him up short.

"Sire, don't take the road into town. Follow the banks of the river instead. There is a robber tax collector charging for rite of passage into the city some distance ahead. The river will take thirty minutes off your journey, put that great beast in cool water and cheat that tax collector."

"Thank you, friend! Good day!"

* * * * *

Traveler galloped through the approach to the eastern gate of Onserf with effortless, measured strides. Thandor looked as if he were born in the saddle, particularly this saddle on this horse. As he approached the city, a green-uniformed guard picked him out of the crowd of villagers, farmers and merchants. The guard was one of several such, all of them slouching or leaning against walls. Foot traffic flowed through the gate, coming to or going from the city.

"You! Yes, you, on the high horse. What is your business here?"

"Grog," barked Thandor, managing to make the word sound a threat.

"Well, mind your manners in here or we'll throw you out of the city and into the sea." Other Shire Wardens laughed, but not loud, and not long.

As night fell, activities within the city walls evolved from that of business to that of pleasure. From

many hostels came sounds of laughter or passion. Onserf took its pleasures seriously.

A crowd of street urchins jostled each other, calling for Thandor's attention. Selecting one better kept than the others, he reached down and grabbed the boy by his shirt and lifted him to sit on Traveler's hindquarters.

"I need a guide. Think you can handle the job?"

"Oh, yes, Sir," came a quick answer. The gangly man-child wanted the job. "You couldn't hire a better guide than myself, if I do say so sir, no matter how rich thou be! How rich are you, Sire? Never mind. If there be anything ..."

"Shut up. Where is the livery?"

"Go left here, sir. Put me down and I'll lead you to Ricker's livery. Rich like the King I'm sure you are!"

"You flattering little toadstool! If you wish to remain in my employ, you'll address me as Thandor and remain quiet otherwise." He did his best to sound gruff, but ended his admonition with a half grin.

Soon he had reached Ricker's. Thandor swung the boy down and dismounted himself, patting Traveler's dusty neck.

"What is your name, boy, and what is your situation?"

"Fetch De'Geer, Lord Thandor. I am an orphan of the streets and an independent businessman. I sleep where I want, eat what I want and do what I want."

"Very well, Fetch." Thandor winked as he pulled a golden dragoon, high coin of the realm, from a leather pouch tucked under his shirt. He flipped the golden coin to the boy. "As long as you are in my hire you will

sleep where I say, eat what I feed you and do as I ask. Do we have we a contract?"

Swift's eyebrows rose. The coin was worth a month's hard scrabble! His jaw had dropped when Thandor produced the dragoon. Warm in his hands, the gleaming coin seemed all the money in the world. Struck mute, Fetch nodded a vigorous yes.

"Fine. Contract hereby terminable by either party at any time for any reason. Now, let's find you and Traveler a proper stall for the duration of my stay here."

As Thandor had an apparently bottomless supply of cash, and as Fetch inferred from his employer's words that he would be standing guard over Traveler, Fetch argued for the largest open stall in the establishment. Its negotiated rent per evening was more than a month's cost at most hostels. Thandor paid in advance for three days.

Traveler, though he must have been exhausted by the endless weeks of travel from Circa Island to Onserf, exhibited himself with proud, upheld head and pawing in the air. The reason for the show was a beautiful black filly in a nearby stall. Smaller than Traveler, the animal was from like stock as he. The black raced to and fro within the roomy boundaries of her stall, raising dust and tossing straw.

Thandor's eye caught an upturned nose. One of the grooms thought little of Dodger's appearance. The street snipe didn't meet the livery's standards, not even as a stall sleeper.

"Take that dragoon, leave and return bathed and wearing new clothes."

"Lord? You wish me to purchase these frivolities out of my own pay? Why would I need such?"

"Because I said so. You must spend money to make money, Fetch. I think I shall terminate our contract

and hire a clean boy. Let me see...?" Fetch ran past Thandor in search of a bath.

Thandor watched as his horse was bathed, brushed and fed. He tipped a groom generously for further attention to the saddle, bit, bridle and blankets. He asked about lodging for the evening. The groom passed a judgmental scan over Thandor.

"Sir, you are likely to find quality bedding at The Royal Crest, or Seaside Breezes."

"Any places that I should avoid?"

"Well sir, that list is much longer. Things haven't been their best of late. Bad things happening all about. Best to stay away from the castle and the wardens. Also stay away from the ships at dock. They are all quarantined. Stay away from the Halberd and Hammer. A low life tavern anyway, and the Prince was arrested there! He was not the last to be arrested there." The groom finished with a self-satisfied sniff.

Fetch returned with wet hair and new clothes. "Groom, this is Swift De'Geer. He is staying in the stall with Traveler. He is not to be bothered. De'Geer, feed this to anyone that tries to move Traveler." Thandor pulled a dagger from his boot. It was unremarkable except for the thinness of the blade and the bloodstone set in the hilt. "Make arrangements for your own bedding, but don't leave Traveler unattended to get it. Send out for bedding - your dinner too."

Fetch looked pained. "Do I have to pay for that, too?"

Thandor gave a single nod in the affirmative and walked out of the livery. Fetch kicked straw.

Moving quickly but in no particular direction, he found a seafood vendor busy at his stall. He was doing a brisk trade selling oysters cooked in their own half shell.

Thandor consumed several of these and a shot of some particularly strong concoction that nearly stopped his breathing. He paid the vendor and asked, "Where might I find The Halberd and Hammer? Someone owes me money."

* * * * *

Thandor entered the cramped confines of the Dwarves tavern, bending low to avoid ceiling beams. Though this was the time of night for rowdy partying, none was to be had here. The stools and chairs of the business were, for the most part, empty. The human attending the bar gave a long look at his newest customer.

"What kind of fare do you offer tonight, Keep?" asked Thandor.

"Beans and beef or pork and sour slaw, the hot kind. And be sure to try a tankard of the house specialty, 'Metal Test', or maybe some 'Bottom Brown'."

"One order of pork and a 'BB'. Let's hope it's dark and wet." He found a table where he could watch the dart game. As Dwarves darts games went, this one looked rather sedate. The tavern's half-dozen patrons soon lost interest in the newcomer. After all, he hadn't arrested anybody.

A Dwarves woman in bright attire jaunted up to his table. She was heavily beaded and bangled, wearing many silver bracelets, and necklaces strung with multiple scores of river pearls. She had long, full, black hair. As Dwarves go, she was a good looker. "So, giant, I don't suppose you have what it takes to make a woman scream? The big ones are always a disappointment. Gods knows the rest of these sots don't have what it takes!"

This brought out protests of "Slander," "Taint so," and one "Shut up, Rosie!" from the many maligned.

Thandor smiled broadly and replied, "Doubtless your standards are higher than my attributes, lady. Could quarters be found in this establishment to test my resolve?"

"I suppose we could push three Dwarves beds together, if you didn't mind your feet hanging over the end. Did you get so big by eating your vegetables, or by swallowing children whole?"

"What are vegetables? As I have been sleeping in the saddle for weeks, three beds sounds about right. I'm way behind. Sit down and sip some grog. I'm buying."

"Bet your butt you're buying!" She put on her best smile. It was attractive, not wanton. The bartender delivered his drink and wooden bowl full of steaming food. Rosie signaled an order of dark grog with a wiggling thumb down. "Of course, its not mother's milk, but it will do! Here's to havoc!" She gave the traditional Dwarves toast. Thandor gave a felicitous smile. "Don't bother telling me you live across the street," she said. "I have never seen you before."

"Who, me? No, I'm from Dran. I'm here to sample your pork and sour slaw." Thandor took a heaping spoonful into his mouth. His eyes widened, then flooded with tears. His face turned red and his nose began to run, but he refused to blink or drink from his mug. He chewed and swallowed the spicy mouthful. The hair on his arms stood erect.

"Hottest damn chow outside of Clanggedin! That makes it the best damn chow outside of Clanggedin. Hi, I'm Rosie, the owner of this delightful little dump. You say you come from Dran, ea? None of my business, but what brings you to Onserf?"

"I'm looking for something." Thandor was startled by her laughter.

"You, too? Ha! It seems everybody is searching for something nowadays." She leaned forward and spoke quietly. "Onserf lost her King, ya know."

Softly, Thandor questioned, "How do you lose a King?"

"The million dragoon question. I have no idea how his Highness disappeared, but I have a pretty good idea how he didn't disappear."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't suppose you know that the Shire Wardens have arrested the King's son, Prince Edwin Baktar." Thandor's disbelieving countenance revealed that he did not. "Well, they did, right here. The Steward had him arrested for aspiring to the throne a bit early. It's all a bed pot full of shit. The Prince comes of age in a week. That's when he comes to the throne legally, but I doubt if he'll make it. He'll either die while attempting to escape or be tried and executed." Rosie lapsed into a string of potent Dwarves curses. "Excuse me. What are you called?"

"The name is Thandor."

"Well Thandor, as I have already told you enough to have myself hanged, I might as well tell you the rest. I think the Steward did the deed with the help of Ragnall sympathizers. He sees profit in trade with those pirates. But I have said enough. Tell me what you are looking for. In this city, I have seen it all! Ask me anything. I find you charming, in a huge sort of way."

"I find you charming, in a knock-me-down sort of way." He paused. "Ahem, ea," Thandor stuttered, "I am searching for a Sarahan."

"You are looking for a myth? Good luck!"

"Oh, they're not myth, I have seen them before..." Thandor realized his mistake instantly.

Rosie sipped her grog looking straight at her guest. Thandor was about to distract her when she leaned forward. She whispered, "You have what? You have seen them? The Sarahan have been dead for a hundred years. I suppose you are a hundred years old?" No doubt about it, it was a question.

Thandor's face twisted into an ugly frown. "I don't..."

Suddenly the door to the tavern crashed open. Through it people could be seen running in the streets. A winded Dwarf panted between breaths. "It's... been set!... The... date of Prince Baktar's trial is set! The entire city is gathering at the gates of the castle!" He turned and ran toward the castle gates. The tavern emptied in seconds. Throughout the city, those concerned with the fate of the popular Prince had moved onto the streets._

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE VENTURE ARRIVES

The crowd that gathered was not ugly, just restless and worried. There was no shouting or pleading, just a nervous quiet. Thandor looked over the faces and knew at once that the Prince was deeply admired.

Shadowy figures talked amongst themselves and looked down from the towers. Someone in authority began to speak, loudly. "Go home, all of you! It is not well that you have left the safety of your homes to come here! Curfew orders are being drawn up and signed by the Steward, and the command to close the city gates is about to be given! If you remain on the streets you are in danger of being arrested! Return to your homes. Now!"

As the official finished speaking, a half-dozen Shire Wardens formed a line across the castle gates. Soon they were joined by ten more. Several people left, but many more joined the throng, leaving a swollen crowd of hundreds. The armed men loaded their weapons, crossbows, the wicked looking top and bottom two-shot kind. Those that left were joined by twice their number.

"If you knew him, you'd understand why they are here." Rosie indicated the crowd. "It's small things, like coming to the tavern to play darts with anyone of any race, or big things, like spending his royal allowance to see that orphans were fed. But you're a stranger here, and you shouldn't be a part of this. It's our problem, not yours. Let me take you back to the tavern."

"How long are these people going to be out here?"

"I don't know." She turned to look at the gathering crowd. "But I don't expect to come back to my

room tonight. I won't be coming to your room either." She winked. "Your loss, giant. Come! Let's get you back to that room."

* * * * *

Thandor awoke to knocking on his door.

"Hey! Wake up! Get your big, tall butt out of bed! The Venture has been sighted. She is flying the black pennant and she's docking!"

"I'll be down in a moment, Rosie." Thandor was quietly glad that she hadn't gotten arrested or shot during the night. He dressed and descended the stairs to the tavern.

"Rosie, you look like hell."

"It's not my fault, giant. I finally met a man that could keep me up all night. The Prince." She smiled and winked.

"I hope you left enough of him to bury. What's this I hear about a ship coming into port?"

"Not a ship. THE ship. Venture! She went out to prove the prince was right about the Ragnall being responsible for the disappearance of the King. There is a large crowd waiting to see her dock."

"I know a little about the Ragnall. I would like to see if the Venture's crew managed to take any Ragnall prisoners."

The unequal pair walked the distance to the dock without comment. Rosie sent questioning glances his way, but remained silent.

The streets thronged with people who were buzzing about the news of Venture's return. Thandor was startled at the size of the crowd that waited. Looking over their heads, he could see the ship, most of her sails furled for docking, moving majestically towards the pier. She was flying a black pennant.

Rosie kicked him in the ankle. "Giant! Pick me up! Right now all I can see is every ass in Onserf!"

Thandor cracked a smile and picked her up, setting her on his left shoulder.

"That's better! I knew you'd be useful. Look at that! She's flying the black flag! Damn, Longstaff is good! This is fantastic!"

There was a disturbance on the right side of the crowd. Rosie stretched to see what was happening.

"Sorry about this," she said as she moved to stand on his shoulders. With a firm grip on a mass of Thandor's rich, red hair, she peered over the crowd. "Oops! Put me down. Quickly!"

Thandor swung her down from her high perch. "What's wrong?"

"Shire wardens, and no less than the Steward himself. Its not safe to be seen here. We had better get back to the tavern."

Thandor's daunting presence parted the crowd as he moved back into the alleys of the city.

* * * * *

Longstaff refused to turn an ear to the insistent calls of the Steward until his ship was docked and properly moored. Some in the crowd laughed.

"Captain, you are ordered to leave that ship immediately! I will not have her setting sail again!"

The Steward looked with disgust at the three sets of leather armor nailed to the main mast of Venture, plus a Ragnall head or two. Longstaff caught his glance.

"I am sorry, sir. That is all we were able to salvage from the black ship."

"Captain, get off that ship!"

Waiving to the cheering crowd, he stepped off the ship. "Yes sir. You have some questions for me?"

"Not here! Come with me." The Steward looked at a Shire Warden officer. "You are to clear this crowd. Any seamen that wish may leave the ship, but they may not return!"

"Number One!" shouted the Captain, "proceed with the celebration without me! I may be... indisposed for a while."

Dirk snapped a smart salute.

* * * * *

It wasn't long before the victory party aboard Venture spilled onto the dock. As was the order, sailors leaving the ship were not stopped, but were not allowed back on board. One of the first to leave went immediately to The Halberd and Hammer.

Despite the grim news of the Venture's quarantine, the party took on a life of its own. By dusk, many of those on board were the perfect picture of a drunken sailor. More than one lay down on the deck or across rails and snored as only the intoxicated can. Amidst the loud laughter and celebration, many versions of the story of the chase and sinking of the Black Ship were told. Several sailors fell overboard in wild re-enactment of the fighting. The noise made fishing off the deck impossible.

As the day's shadows disappeared and were replaced by those from flickering torchlight, Thandor, holding an empty jug, joined the revelry. Soon, a reveler, having returned with news from Rosie, whispered instructions to Thandor. He nodded and returned to the party going on all about him. The holiday mood had infected everyone, save only the Shire Wardens, who were obviously nervous and jumpy.

The sound of breaking ceramic announced the return of the first officer to the deck of his ship. Coming from below, he carried over his left shoulder a sailor in a drunken stupor. In Dirk's free hand was a second empty jug, which he threw against the mainmast.

"Empty, by Gods! They're all empty!" He nearly fell, but righted himself. "ABANDON CHIP, I mean ABANDON SHIP! She's going down with us or without us! Pick up those sots and let's go find an empty tavern!"

Others picked up the sleeping bodies. The marine sergeant came from below carrying yet another sleeping form. "Drinks on Number One!" He belched. There was a cheer as the remainder of the men on board left in a single hurried mass.

Not wishing to question so many drunken sailors at once, the guards gave them a perfunctory glance as they moved off. As the group splintered and traveled in different directions, Thandor turned to follow Dirk, the sergeant and three others.

Just as he separated himself from the revelers on the dock, a sinister, mousy figure took a clandestine position to the rear of the sailors. Pausing a moment, Thandor followed the sailors and their unwelcome tail.

Raindrops, warm as summer bath water, fell on street cobblestones. Smoothed by generations of trade and traffic, they made travel clean and swift. Dirk, stepping over a raised brick, slipped in the puddle behind it and fell, losing his passenger. Far from asleep, the bundled-up sailor yelled in pain and cursed loudly. The voice was not that of a sailor. In the shuffle of putting the figure back over his shoulder, the blanket fell from its head.

Though it had been a long time since he had seen a Sarahan, Thandor knew instantly what and who it was. He had been warned by Rosie, who had been told what to expect. The first officer to leave Venture had arranged everything.

The fall and recovery had also been seen by the shadow. He froze, squatted low and hissed when Dercy's features were revealed.

The figure moved fast and with incredible stealth to a position just strides behind the group. From folds within its black cloak it produced a throwing dagger, its blade covered with a black-green iridescence. It was a poisoned blade.

Thandor abandoned his noiseless approach and leapt forward, shouting. Covering the intervening space between the shadow and himself in the fraction of a second, he drew his sword as he moved and attacked. Startled, the assassin did not attempt to escape or defend himself. Instead he drew his hand back to loose a deadly missile. Having no time for a proper strike, Thandor leaned into his momentum and twisted his broad sword into a cutting blow that severed the assassin's arm at the elbow. So swift had been the strike that the assassin didn't realize he was short one appendage. Finally, a scream came, but too late. Thandor throttled him with his left hand as his right hand

guided his sword under the man's ribs. The figure stiffened a moment, then died.

Thandor looked up to find three swords pointed at him. The others had hurried away.

"You had a tail. Put your swords away, seamen. I am Thandor of Dran, and I am here to help." He quickly explained how Rosie had received the news of the two Sarahan, and how she had forwarded that news to him by messenger. "I am headed for the Halberd and Hammer."

"Looks like the result of a bar fight," said the nearest sailor as he looked at the dead spy. "Most unfortunate." He sheathed his blade.

Thandor spat. "Good riddance."

"Yes, a bar fight," added another sailor. The spontaneous imagining was adopted as truth. Three men escorted Thandor to the tavern. As they entered, the noise and activity within reached its summit. The escorting sailors mixed with the crowd. Rosie came down the stairs that lead to the rooms on the second floor.

"Thandor! Get up here!" She turned and climbed the stairs two at a time, no small feat for a woman her size.

Trying his best to appear nondescript, Thandor followed. Rosie led him into his own room. Inside were the Venture's first officer, an Onserf marine sergeant and two Sarahan.

"Who is he!?" questioned Dercy as she pointed to Thandor. "I thought we were going to be kept a secret."

"Your secret is safe with me. My name is Thandor. I am here representing the Lord Minister of Dran and the Confederation of Nations. I am Landguard."

A quick gasp from the marine showed how shocking that revelation was! Dirk's jaw dropped in undisguised astonishment.

"You are Thandor? From Dran? You can't be. I don't believe it!"

"Believe it. I have ridden across a third of this planet in search..." he paused and looked directly at Dercy and her husband, "of Sarahan. Until now I thought it was a hopeless search."

Balanor moved forward to introduce himself and his wife. "Sir, why are you looking for our kind? I've been made to understand that our race hasn't been seen for a hundred years."

Thandor recounted his meeting with The Bridgeman and the stirrings of the Ragnall. Food was brought up and many stories were told. As the evening grew late, Captain Longstaff made his appearance. Rosie pulled at his arms and presented him with a warm hug and a kiss.

As soon as Thandor was introduced to Longstaff, the Captain abruptly changed the direction of the conversation.

"Rosie, It looks like I'll be keeping you company for a long while. Both the Venture and I are being de-commissioned." Longstaff turned to face Thandor. "I have much to discuss with you, Landguard, but for now we have a problem, as serious as life and death. I've been informed that tomorrow, the Prince is being placed on trial for the death of his father. If what I have seen is any indication, I expect it will be a very, very short trial. We must find the King!"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE TRIAL

"You are on trial for the abduction and murder of your father. Treason is the crime, patricide is the deed and you, sir, are guilty!"

The young Prince sat in silence and listened to the Steward. Tied to an iron chair, Baktar's silence was due in full to the wooden bit, wrapped with a rag, that filled his mouth. The device was kept in place by some rags knotted behind his head. Though he spoke no words, the fire in Baktar's eyes spoke volumes.

The Steward picked up an attendant's stool and sat in front of the bound and gagged Prince. "You are a very stupid child, aren't you? I tried to protect you from your own ambitions. I tried to redirect your faulty thinking, but you would have none of it."

"We are alone, and now I can tell you. Remember when I said that the time had come for change? There is a new force in the world. It resides in Thickthorn and it is about to roll over everyone that stands in its way. Today, immediately after your death, I am signing treaties with the representatives of the Ragnall. Onserf will trade with them, Onserf will serve them, and Onserf will have no more of your Confederation."

Many emotions played across the face of the Prince, but surrender wasn't one of them. Slowly, he shook his head in the negative.

"No? You think not? Child, let me tell you how badly you have lost." He moved closer and looked directly into his prisoner's eyes. "Onserf has four merchant-warships, the most powerful weapons afloat, here anyway. Tomorrow, I intend to set crews on board them that will

take them to the naval base of the Ragnall. There, they will be re-fitted to support a blockade of the river that leads to Dran. When Dran is isolated, the doors of Thickthorn, the doors of hell itself, will open and pour fire over the entire world!"

The Steward stood up and moved to a wall that displayed dozens of oil paintings. Ships, past and present, of the navy of Onserf had been faithfully reproduced on silken canvas. "I have saved the fleet, you know. It's true, saved them from a fate worse than death!" He returned to stand in front of the Prince. "And speaking of death, I would so like to do this myself, but one must abide by the formalities. GUARDS!"

Three Shire Wardens entered the room. They took up positions beside and behind the prisoner. "The Prince has confessed to the murder of his Father. I have sentenced him, mercifully, to death, rather than cruel torture followed by banishment. Take him to the tower. It is morning now, and when his last sun sets this evening, the fun begins."

* * * * *

Thandor opened his eyes and looked around. There it was again! Someone was softly knocking on his door. "Who is it?" He thought for a moment it must be Rosie, but she wouldn't have bothered knocking.

"You don't know me. Rosie told me I could talk to you. It's about... someone that needs help." The female voice had an unfamiliar accent.

"Just a minute." He quickly dressed and armed himself. He opened the door and allowed the figure standing without to come within.

Someone had taken intentional steps to tone down this girl's striking beauty. Long black hair looked unkempt and windblown. Her perfect, velvet soft light-brown skin was smudged with soot. Her plain white clothing looked disheveled, even slept in. However, no amount of disguise could diminish the soul that burned from her startling aqua-blue eyes. Having seen those eyes once, Thandor knew that he would have no choice but to remember them for the rest of his life.

He realized that his staring had raised a blush to the cheeks of his guest. "Forgive me. Do you know who I am? How may I help you?"

"No, I do not know who you are. Rosie told me that I must ask that of you myself. She wouldn't tell me. Whoever you are, you must help me! Someone I care about very deeply," she paused to control her emotions, "is about to be murdered. I want you to help me free him."

"Who is this person, and by 'help me', do you mean that you will attempt to free him yourself?"

"Yes, I must." Without the slightest change in her expression, tears filled her mesmerizing eyes. "I don't know who else to tell. Rosie believes you can be trusted, and I've trusted her judgment for quite a while."

"My name is Destiny, and I have been coupled with the Prince of this city. We have shared our water. I am an Invoker."

Thandor had heard of the Invoker's custom of coupling. Only they did it, or could do it. Shrouded in mystery, it was thought to be preliminary to the bond of matrimony, a betrothal of sorts. More than an engagement but less, in important ways, than marriage. The coupling was a mystical, almost magical act that bound two people together so closely that they shared strong emotions, even thoughts, with each other. As mortar binds bricks together, the magic of coupling bound two individuals into one mind. It was the ultimate act of respect, the ultimate act of

love for another, the ultimate act of trust to couple with another. It was supernatural, and Invokers were widely known for their supernatural acts.

"If you are betrothed." Thandor stopped to complete his thought. What the Prince and this woman had done was an extremely personal and private act. "May I ask... I have heard that two people so joined can share thoughts and feelings. Is this true with both of you?"

"Some," she whispered as she blushed.

"I am sorry if I have made you uncomfortable. Tell me what you know, and what you fear."

"This morning he met with the Steward. I'm sure it was the Steward, because he felt such hatred for the man. During that meeting, he was told that he would never see me again, at least that's what he was thinking! Tonight at dusk he will be tortured!"

Tears washed down Destiny's cheeks, but her face remained soft and quiet, without a hint of sobbing or distress. Regardless of tears, Thandor decided that, for her age, she might be the strongest woman he had ever seen. He told her who he was. His august rank meant little to her.

Invokers were extremely isolationist. They lived in a pocket of land, a desert, surrounded on three sides by impassable mountains. The land itself was holy to its people, and closed to outsiders. How this woman came to be coupled with the Prince of Onserf was an utter mystery to Thandor.

He mentioned in passing that he had been given an Invoker stallion by a king who had been given the animal by her people.

"That horse is yours?" Now she was clearly impressed. "I have seen him eyeing my own filly! I feel better! I thought him stolen. Oh, Thandor, you are blessed

amongst barbarians. Ahem, excuse me, sir. No offense intended. Its just that you ARE an outsider. If you can claim ownership of one of our breed, you should be trusted. They do not come into the hands of just any being."

"You mean that magnificent filly in Ricker's stable is yours? Ha! I knew that filly was Invoker!" He wasn't embarrassed that she had been vastly more impressed with his horse than with his rank and title. He understood the value of his mount, Traveler.

"Never mind that now. Where is Edwin being held?"

"He is in the tower, and there are a dozen guards between him and the entrance."

"Guards don't worry me. They will die. It's those that are with the Prince that I'm worried about." Thandor played with his sword, as if itching to be at them.

"I haven't time to ask, but I am dying to learn how a prince of Onserf met an Invoker beauty and the two fell in love." Destiny bent her head in the perfect image of shyness, but her tears had stopped and the tiniest smile appeared. She wasn't going to tell.

"I will speak to a certain Captain with whom I made contingency plans. Wait here, please," Thandor asked politely.

Leaving his room intending to awaken Longstaff, Thandor saw something that stopped him cold with horror. He watched as Balanor climbed out a window facing the alleyway and up an exterior ladder to the roof of the tavern. He was shirtless, and his wings were clearly visible. 'If he dies...' Thandor was assaulted by visions of his mission ending in failure, his Sarahan dead.

"BALANOR, get back in here!"

Balanor ignored Thandor's shout and continued to climb.

Destiny followed in Thandor's wake, firing questions. "What is that?! What is wrong?! Thandor!"

"If anyone sees Balanor, everything is lost! He'll be killed!"

"Sorry, Thandor, but if I am going to find the king, I must see the city from the air," Balanor shouted as he moved quickly up the ladder.

"Kasab Rolok!" shouted Destiny. Balanor disappeared from sight.

Dercy entered the hallway, rubbing sleep from her eyes, Thandor stuck his head so far out the window he was in danger of falling. Destiny stood, mouth agape, staring at Dercy.

"Where is Balanor?" Dercy stared back at Destiny. "Who are you? Where is my husband?"

"All Gods! He's fallen, or flown away!" Thandor climbed out the window and up the ladder. Soon he stood upon the red clay tiles of the adobe roof, looking frantically for Balanor.

As soon as he reached the roof, Balanor leapt into the air and gave a strong, lifting beat of his wings. A soft sea breeze gave him added lift. Soon he was high enough to take in the entire walled section of the city with a single glance.

After the previous evening's meeting, and having learned about the predicament of the Prince and the lost King, it had been clear what he had to do. Not knowing how, Balanor knew that he must try and locate the King.

He was in the air. 'This is the way to fly,' he thought, 'not in the cold, thin air of Adopt, but lifted by the

warm, full air of Onserf!’ Balanor luxuriated in the feeling of freedom. Beneath him were the spires of the castle and the sails of the fisherman’s boats. Merchant vessels of every description rested at anchor. People of many races conducted business with street vendors in open markets. The smells of fresh food cooking made him salivate. Directly beneath him was Thandor, scanning the skies.

"Time to get the job done," he muttered to himself. Pastel tiles covered many of the roofs. Cobbled streets were clean. Most of the shops were very old, looking as though they had passed through the caring hands of many generations. The beauty and diversity of Onserf was a wondrous thing.

One building stood stark and apart from the others. Its architecture seemed abrupt and regimented compared to the quaint structures around it. Balanor gained altitude and flew over the building. Below, guards in green uniform saluted three officers entering from the streets.

Balanor recalled Longstaff’s misgivings at the rise of the Shire Wardens. Something about the place felt very odd. He flew back to the air over the Halberd and Hammer. Taking a final look at the city, he was struck, once again, by the dream-like beauty of the spires, the pennants, and ships moored at the docks. Abruptly, he realized that this wasn’t a dream scene, it was the vision of the Starstone! As had happened when he had reached the real time of his first cusp, waves of dizziness overcame him. He moaned and fell.

Thandor’s search had brought him no sight of Balanor. The future looked uniformly dark.

At the peak of his consternation, and as he was about to give up and return to inside the tavern, odd noises came from directly above him. He heard a moan, looked up, and a lump of the clear blue sky fell directly upon him.

Thandor shook his head and fought back unconsciousness. He was on his back, gripping the roof’s

crest with one hand, and holding onto Balanor with the other.

Not waiting for explanations, he doubled his grip on the boy, then trebled it. He moved to the alleyway stairs, and shoved his way back into the building through the window. He nearly took its frame with him as he stepped down into the hallway. Balanor hung limp from Thandor's tightly-closed fist.

It seemed as if half the town was waiting for him. He didn't stop or let go until he had stomped back to his room. Dercy and Destiny followed frantically, and were quickly joined by Rosie, Longstaff and Dirk.

"Oh Gods, you've killed my husband," shouted Dercy.

Thandor released his death grip on Balanor, and the boy wolfed in a gulp of air. He had been turning shades of purple and blue.

"WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN!" There were dozens of other questions from around the room, but Thandor's shout got his attention.

"I had to get a look at the city," Balanor whispered, looking at no one. Amid the bedlam, the answer was unheard.

"What?" shouted several in the room.

"I felt that I had to see the city. I hoped it might come to me where the King was being held."

Dercy dropped her head between her knees. She had figured out what had happened. Thandor's face boiled with emotions. Longstaff and Dirk sighted Destiny and gave each other a questioning glance.

"You FELT? You HOPED? Gods, son. You risked EVERYTHING! WAS THAT YOU THAT KNOCKED ME DOWN?"

Dercy was quietly laughing, head still between her knees. The image of an invisible Balanor dropping from the sky and knocking down Thandor was hilarious. Balanor only weighed about sixty stones, Thandor must weigh over two hundred sixty, yet skinny little Balanor had knocked Thandor down. It was all too funny.

"Please, Thandor, let me speak! I think I know where the King is being held!"

"How could you know that? Did you see him?" questioned Longstaff.

"I felt his presence, when I flew over the Shire Warden's building."

"You didn't fly over anything," insisted Thandor, "or I would have seen you. By the way, where did you drop from?" He rubbed his head.

The answer was so obvious that Balanor didn't need to speak. He simply pointed straight up.

"That's my fault," injected Destiny. "I did that!" She smiled briefly, but wiped it off when she saw the expressions on everyone's face. "I'm sorry. Did I do something wrong?"

"Who are you?" Dirk managed to get in his question a moment before the conversation broke down completely.

"SHUT UP! Please! Everybody! This is Destiny. She is... betrothed to the Prince. She has told me that the Prince is in the tower, awaiting torture tonight." Ignoring Longstaff's gasp and Rosie's understanding smile, Thandor continued. "Destiny, how is this incident your fault?"

"I changed his color." She spoke as though stating the obvious. "I placed an illusion around him. Should I have not?"

Thandor took a deep breath. 'I must control my tone,' he thought. It took remarkable effort.

"What illusion, young lady? And how did you change his color? And to what?"

"Oh! I changed it to background, with an invocation." Seeing nothing but lost looks, she continued, "You know, a spell. Invoker technology. You see, anyone looking at him would see only background colors, like blue sky. The illusion is of the 'Yonerf' type, and may be invoked by..."

"You're a magic user?" Dirk was awed.

Destiny looked insulted. "Excuse me! I am an INVOKER! Let's give credit where it is due! This is technology we are talking about!"

"Thandor, may we go back to the part about the execution?" Longstaff looked grieved.

A lengthy discussion ensued. Plans were made based on what they knew, and on what they thought they knew, and in Balanor's case, what he felt he knew.

They knew, through Destiny, that the Prince was in the castle tower. As for the location of the King, Dercy, showing remarkable patience, convinced the others to trust Balanor's intuitive feelings as fact.

Thandor, and as many marines as could be found before dusk, would attack the Shire Warden's headquarters. Dirk, Longstaff and the marine sergeant would use the crews of the docked warships to take the city gates from the inside. Destiny and Rosie would arrange for a distracting riot at the castle gates. Balanor and Dercy would be sent flying to the top of the tower, made invisible

by Destiny. They would then move down to where the Prince was being held. A tower attack wouldn't be expected from above, but any risk to Balanor made Thandor nervous.

They had decided to do more than rescue the Prince, more than find the King. They were going to take the city.

As the others left the room, Dercy poked her husband in the ribs. "The only reason that you are getting away with that stunt on the roof is because it's going to lead to a fight. I've got to get a bow cord and some arrows!" She left the room smiling. Thandor and Balanor were alone. "What will you fight with? What is a Sarahan's weapon of choice?"

"My weapon of choice is my wits, but on our island we hadn't enough steel for swords. Besides, there is no use for them. I'll use a staff. I once killed a warg with a staff!"

"What's a warg? Never mind. I'll get you a staff. You'll have to strap it to your back." Thandor paused. Worry came to him yet again. "Don't let anything happen to you! I have GOT to take you back to Dran. Fly away from danger if you must, just don't get hurt!"

Balanor didn't think he would get hurt. One thing he knew for certain, he had no intention of going to Dran with Thandor.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE KING OF ONSERF

There were three entrances to the Shire Warden's headquarters. Thandor, with three marines in common city garb, took the door nearest the castle. His actions were to trigger responses in many places throughout the city.

Lookouts at each corner of the long streets leading to the city gates watched for that first attack. On horseback, they waited to ride to the gates and commence fighting. "Open City," was the code word. Once spoken, the battle would commence. The end of the rule of the Steward and the Shire Wardens rule was nigh.

There was an understanding that was basic to the plan. The Shire Wardens supported the Steward, and probably knew much of the abduction of the King. They would be attacked with live steel and not given quarter. It was to be a fight to the death.

Thandor wore his cloak, disguising himself for the last time. Beneath it was the battle uniform of the LandGuard Field General. There was only one such uniform on the planet.

His muscles fairly quivered in anticipation of combat, but first, one last ruse. He moved to the door guarded by two men in green uniforms.

"Is this where I apply for a commission?"

"Inside with ya! What is that you are wearing?"

Thandor answered with a hammering blow to the man's solar plexus. He executed a perfect, full twist, and the second guard received a boot to his head. Marines

caught the guards before they crumpled to the ground. Thandor shouted, "Open City!" at the top of his lungs. A third marine drew his sword and followed Thandor inside.

Through the city, the mayhem commenced. Guards were garroted from behind, clubbed from horseback or skewered by swords hidden in the folds of cloaks. Bows silenced lookouts. Yet not all went according to plan, for as the crowd in front of the castle began to swell, the gates were closed by Shire Wardens.

Catching the Wardens in the safety of their own quarters, the attackers found the men inside were resting, and without so much as their leather armor. The fight was brutal, and lightning fast. The attackers were outnumbered, and the fight was close. Yet wherever marines were pressed, Thandor waded in. His cloak discarded, the splendor of his rust-brown uniform was the last sight seen by many a Warden.

Behind a final line of men, three officers made good their escape by exiting through a door in the floor. They descended into the dark hole beneath the room.

Seeing their escape, but busy with an opponent of exceptional swordsmanship, Thandor stomped his boot as he attacked. Distracted for the smallest fraction of a second, his opponent dropped his guard. Thandor executed a perfect corkscrew attack to the chest. It bit home.

"I'm not impressed," spat out the dying man.

"Perhaps not, but you're dead," replied Thandor as he pulled the sword from the man's chest, a fitting sheath. Blood covered it in a bright red. Thandor rushed to the opening in the floor.

Dust and small rock rose up past him. Deep vibrations confirmed his worst fears. The sound of a cave-in resonated in the chamber. The three had made good their escape by collapsing a tunnel. He followed his blood-

dripping sword into the black dust. From one corner came the sound of a sputtering cough.

"Get a torch down here, quickly!" He groped through the blackness. In seconds he came to a poor wretch chained to the wall. Thandor looked at the man's chest in disbelief. He had a dagger planted breast high. It gently bounced up and down in a perfect echo of the man's still-beating heart.

A marine carrying a blazing torch entered the dirty hole. Construction materials littered the floor, and rock and dirt filled the end of a tunnel. It led in the direction of the castle walls.

"Come here! Help me with these chains!" Thandor pulled at the metal screws imbedded into the earthen walls. Both men's muscles rippled and knotted, and soon the corkscrews of iron pulled free.

Thandor gently carried the failing man from the dank, dusty room. He laid him on the floor, and watched, hypnotized, as the dagger beat its grotesque rhythm.

"My God, its the King!" whispered a marine.

Thandor's heart sank. He'd hoped to find the King unharmed, but the treason, and the dagger in the Sovereign's heart, was very deep.

"You! Fetch the nearest healer! Find more than one! The rest of you, tell the people that the King has been found, a prisoner of the Shire Wardens. Tell them he is hurt but alive! You two, stay here with me! Here's what you must do!"

* * * * *

As planned, Balanor and Dercy flew to the towers before Thandor signaled for the uprising to begin. They were careful not to touch each other, lest they dispel Destiny's 'Kasab Rolok' illusion. Destiny had explained that any contact with another person would negate the invocation.

Atop the tower, he paused, and found the door into its depths. It straddled the middle of the tower floor.

"Dercy, are you here?"

"Yes. I'm over here, on this side of the door! Stay back! I'm stringing my bow."

"I'll open the door." He did so, slowly, cautiously. Inside the tower, wrist-thick yellow candles dimly lit the circular stairway. The accumulated wax of years of such candles glistened on the walls. Balanor whispered a quiet count to help Dercy keep her distance. He had only gone a short way when they came upon the Prince. Their companions had described him perfectly. He was chained to the wall, and sleeping.

Balanor didn't waste time wondering how to address an imprisoned Prince. "Your Highness! We have come to free you!"

The Prince opened one eye and scanned the stairs. "Who is 'we'?" He opened the other eye and looked for the bodies belonging to the whispers.

"I am Balanor and this is..." He realized that it was absurd to introduce his invisible wife. "Never mind. We were sent to rescue you!"

The Prince filled the room with his smile. "Destiny sent you, didn't she?"

"How did you know that?" puzzled Dercy.

"She likes to sneak up on me while I'm disrobed. She'd be invisible. Then... ah, she would... ah... Never mind. Forget it. Who else could have sent you?" The Prince blushed.

"Bedroom games," whispered Dercy to her husband.

"You're going to have to get the keys to these." The Prince rattled his shackles. "The guard at the foot of the stairs has them. He wears them around his neck, and under his shirt. There are no doors in this stairwell, so be careful and quiet."

"I'll do it. I'll get the keys," volunteered Dercy.

"No my love." Forgetting that she couldn't see him, Balanor held his arms wide to prevent Dercy from passing. "And before you say it, I DO remember what Thandor said about not taking risks, but I will do this."

Dercy wrote her concern on the dark air with a huff, then silence. Balanor nodded to himself. "Okay. Here goes."

With all the caution he could muster, Balanor moved with stealth and deliberation. Soon he came to the guard.

He watched as his target casually peered up the stairwell. The guard must have heard whispers and thought it only the Prince muttering prayers or curses. Balanor weighed his chances of knocking the man unconscious, but the job was too important. He looked into the man's eyes as he plunged the knife in. It was over in a second.

He stood frozen, looking at the body, looking at what he had done. Dercy touched him, softly, on the shoulder. They were both visible now. Her bow was notched and ready. She had been behind him the whole time, his protector.

"Come on," she said quietly. He nodded, not yet ready to speak.

When they reached the light on the top of the tower, the Prince's eyes went wide when he saw them. "What manner of being are you?"

"God, that question again. We are Sarahan, but there is no time for that now! Perhaps you can do an autopsy later!" Dercy took the key from Balanor's trembling hand and unlocked the shackles. "Up to the roof, but stay low! We don't want to be seen by those on the ground!"

Reaching the top, she looked for a way to lock the door from the outside. There was none. "No lock! You're a trusting people! There's no rope up here either. I thought you said there was rope up here!"

"There was this morning," Balanor said in his defense. "Damn! How is it there is no lock on this door!"

"We've no experience with invisible flying beings," the Prince said sarcastically. "I'll order a lock installed, I promise, if I live through this! So what's next? Down that tower hole they will soon discover the guard's body." From the vantage of the tower, the streets of the city were fully visible. Amidst the chaos, positions on the castle walls were being manned.

Balanor pointed. "The Shire Wardens are about to shoot into that crowd! Dercy, do you think you could pick one of them off from here?"

"I can try, but they'll know we're here."

"Do it!" pleaded the Prince. "Can your bow reach that far?"

Dercy smiled. "How about that eager, squat little guard right over there? The one shouting at the crowd." She notched the arrow, took aim and let fly.

Tracing a flat arc, the deadly missile planted itself between the shoulder blades of the guard. He fell over the wall into the crowd below. Cheers went up. "They're easier to kill than wargs," Dercy mused.

"Nice shot, Dercy!" Balanor's joy vanished as twenty guards turned and made for the tower. "Uh oh." Husband and wife looked at each other and looked at the Prince.

"We can make it. It's not that far."

"Balanor, come back to the real! We'd fall like a rock!" Dercy didn't think much of her husband's optimism.

"On Adopt we'd fall like a rock. Here, we'll make it; we'll almost certainly make it. We should make it. The air is thicker and warmer here, generating more lift!"

"You're insane. The only reason I'd attempt this is so that I can look into the eyes of your smashed and broken body and say, 'I told you it wouldn't work'."

"Make what? Do what? Work whom? What are you two talking about?"

"You tell him. I refuse." Dercy folded her arms.

Balanor scowled at his wife. "Sire, you need to hold on to our belts while we jump off the wall and glide to safety." Balanor prepared for flight. The sea breezes caught his leathery wings and lifted his light form for a moment. "See? I can hardly stay aground!"

"What? You call this a rescue? You want me to FLY?!" The sounds of men inside the tower echoed from the open tower door. "What choice do I have?" He shrugged his arms, stood on the teeth of the wall and squatted. Balanor closed the door, but not before Dercy fired an arrow into the dark stairwell. They mounted the teeth on each side of the Prince. He grabbed their belts as

they extended their wings. In such close quarters, active flying was impossible, so they set themselves to glide.

"At the count of five, everybody leap out, and as high as you can! One, two, three-four-five!" The count was rushed by an armed guard coming through the tower door.

"Aw-Shittttttt." yelled the Prince. His bare feet scraped against the top of the parapet walls. They fell into the astonished crowd.

"Dercy! Pick him up! He fell hard!"

Smoke was rising from the vicinity of the docks. Rosie and Destiny, seeing the plunge from the tower, rushed to where Edwin lay unconscious, his arm twisted and broken. Soon they had taken him to safety.

"I told you it would work," winked Balanor to his wife, doing so with relish. Dercy just sniffed, unwilling to dignify the dig with a protest.

Distracted, the guards failed to stop ladders from going up against the castle walls. Properly manned, the wall's defenders would have easily repelled the attack, but Dercy's arrow and the flight of the threesome overhead had taken the Shire Wardens off their guard. Marines, sailors, and later, merchants, farmers and fishermen, made short work of the defenders. They used gaff hooks, farm tools, butcher knives, poles and rocks.

The citizens of the city had won, but their freedom hadn't come cheap. Freedom never does.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE PARTING

"Father, It's too soon for you to be moving around. One week is not enough."

"Nonsense! You stay chained to a wall for three months, and see how much you like bed rest. Besides, I don't see you resting your arm."

"It's getting better, quickly. I'm getting a lot of tender loving care."

"So I have heard. Who is she?"

"What?"

"Edwin, don't play stupid with me! Who is this girl that the whole city is talking about?"

The Prince looked distinctly uncomfortable. The King rarely used his given name.

"Can't this wait? Do we have to talk of it now? There are more pressing matters. We've lost three warships, you know, and..."

"Edward Marshall d'voe-Rovell Baktar, stop trying to change the subject. Where did you meet this girl and HOW DID SHE COME TO BE YOUR BETROTHED!" The excitement threw the King into a fit of coughs. Edwin moved to his side.

"Calm down, Father! I'll tell you!" He paused. Gathering his will, he loosed the secret. It flew from him like a dove. "Recall how you sent me to purchase horses from the riders of the twin river?"

The King nodded, nailing his son with piercing eyes.

"It seems that there were horse sellers there at the same time. They had the best stock I'd ever seen. Trouble was, the river riders were hoarding all the best stock! Anyway, after arranging a meeting with the leader of the sellers, I accidentally met his niece. They were Invokers. I assure you, despite what you have heard, it's all been altogether innocent and..."

"What is her name?"

"She is called, err, her name is Destiny. Don't you think that's an attractive name?"

"What is her full name?"

The Prince battened down his mental hatches and braced for the coming storm. "Her name, including her royal title, is... Princess Hermodie Antillis Sequentor Ta'jor. She is the first Princess of the Royal House of Ta'jor. She is a desert Invoker."

"You performed a joining, a water ceremony, with this Invoker Princess!"

Edwin held his breath. Silence filled the room to every door and rafter. Now, all were listening.

There was a knock on the door behind them. Thankful for the reprieve, he opened it with his good hand, as the other was still in a sling. Captain Longstaff stood without.

"Pardon, your Highness. May I have a word with you and the Prince."

"Yes, but first let me sit down. My son has been heaping woe on me and I'm weary."

Edwin frowned. His father didn't look all that weary.

"Your Highness, you were right. We have been unable to locate the Steward."

"That is because he is not the Steward. The real Steward died in chains, next to me, a month ago. Something took his place, and whatever that something is, it has taken someone else's place by now. If you can't find him, he has taken a new form." He paused. "It is the reason he kept me alive, you know. He intended to take my place," the King focused on his son. "As soon as you were dead, I would have died. He couldn't have fooled you. But you were saved by that Sarahan pair. What a miracle that was!"

"Yes. I've always believed I had friends no one else knew about. It turns out I had friends even I didn't know about."

"Speaking of which, Captain, please arrange to have our guests attend a banquet in their honor. We will also receive the Field General of Dran. I will attend, even if I have to do it lying down!"

"Oh, father, no! You came within the thickness of a dagger's blade of being dead!"

The King ignored the protest. "Continue to look for the Steward, Captain. You won't find him, but look we must. Edwin, this kingdom has been attacked. Stay with me and learn what we are to do about it."

"Yes, father."

* * * * *

"As much as I hate to leave Edwin and Destiny, I seem to be the best man for another job." Rosie laughed, roundly. The best jokes were always the ones she herself

told. "So it is off to Clanggedin! Home for the first time in twenty years! I hope they haven't taken to eating snails or drinking white wine or some other detestable thing!"

"Rosie, if they have, I am sure you will yank the end of their ropes until they stop." Thandor relaxed. In his pipe was a bowl full of the city's best smoke, Black Bandit. There had been little time for such relaxation until now. The fragrant, blue-white smoke wafted around the crowd that packed the tavern.

"I must say, giant, you have brought excitement back into my life." She looked at the full tavern with a broad smile. "You have returned my business to profit!" Suddenly she leaned over and planted a full, round kiss on him. He grinned in surprise. "Pretty good! Not bad! I've never kissed a General before!"

"Their loss!" They both laughed. "When do you plan to leave? Have you found a Dwarves ship?"

"I've found a berth on a merchant trader. She's 'The Porous Scupper', an honest vessel. I'll keep my feet dry, by God."

"Tonight I will put to parchment a letter to your King. We of Dran hope Clanggedin will come to our aid." Thandor replaced his sober frown with a happy smile. "But I have my Sarahan! I will soon return to Dran. Who would have thought it would be this easy?"

With that, Rosie was caught in a spasm of coughing that lost her a mouthful of ale through her nose. "Ha! You call this easy? You attract lightning like the tallest tree on the tallest mountain! You will continue to do so, I trust."

"Maybe so," turning serious again, he continued, "but I don't think I'm the tall tree. That boy Balanor is the lightning rod." Renewed laughter at a nearby table broke into the moment. It would be a long and glorious night in the Halberd and Hammer.

* * * * *

Several attendants saw to the needs of the three honored guests. Balanor and his wife had never seen such foods, and in such quantities. Thandor had. He displayed the practiced ease of one who's been to many state occasions.

Rumors and echoes of rumors bounced around the great hall, most having to do with the Prince's betrothed with the dark complexion. Though hampered by the splints on his arm, Edwin insisted on dancing with Destiny. Her pretense at plainness had been put aside. She was adorned with all the trimmings of her rank in her native land. Her sand-dune colored dress, woven from the incredibly expensive thread of the weaver moth, shimmered. A necklace of silver and rose-colored gold, jeweled with aqua-sapphires, lifted the effect of her shining eyes to mystical heights. Once, while resting her head softly on his shoulder, she had whispered a single word and they danced, surrounded by the sparkling, misty-white glow of Invoker milk light. It was magical. They finished the dance to the subdued applause of all in the chamber, each man and woman at once envious and enchanted.

Edwin looked as though he wished the dance to never end. When it did, he escorted her to the seat on his right. He returned to the center of the room and held his uninjured hand up for attention.

"I would like to express my personal thanks, and extend the thanks of our kingdom, for the timely release of my father, His Majesty the King!"

Shouts and cheers rose anew from the tables in the great hall. Feet stomped and fists beat on sturdy tables. Plates bounced and ruby-red wine sloshed from golden goblets. "Thandor! You came to our land on a great quest,

and you put it aside to save the life of our King!" Cheers and whistles rang out. "You chose to fight our fight, and we will not forget! You are awarded this medal," the prince held up a glorious ribbon holding the golden likeness of a merchant warship, "and given the honorary rank of vice-admiral of this city-state."

"Onserf will pay her debts!" continued Edwin. "We will fight at your side against the Ragnall! The marines of Onserf will lead the way into battle. Your foe is now our foe!" This news was met with rapturous applause. Thandor stood and bowed deeply in the direction of the King. Edwin spoke again. "King Duncan d'voe-Dragoon Baktar, my father, has something to add! Attend, all!"

The room grew quiet as the wounded King stood to address his court and his guests. "Balanor and Dercy, of the house of Dan, come to me." Though husband and wife had been warned to expect this, still they found the attention unnerving. "I thank the Gods for the return of the Sarahan to our lands. The myth is made real. To compound our wonder, you have saved the life of my son, a life no less precious to me than my own. Bard!" A man in soft, tanned leather wearing a jaunty green hat with two points approached the throne. "You are commissioned to compose a great ballad! The tale of Balanor and Dercy will be sung in this hall one month hence! It will be sung every year on this date, and you," he pointed to the pair, "shall be remembered as the Freedom Givers." Further cheers echoed off walls covered in warm tapestries.

"It is the right of a King to grant a boon. Ask of me now that which you would have, and it shall be yours."

Dercy nodded at her husband. She knew what he would ask for. He stepped forward, resolute.

"Sire, I have but one wish. That is to travel to Dran, to oppose the Ragnall. But first I must return to my people. Could you command your remaining warship, Venture, to return me to my adopted homeland, and from there to Dran?"

Collectively, those gathered caught their breath in surprise. With three of Onserf's warships sabotaged by the Shire Wardens, burnt to their keels, the Venture was the city's only remaining defense.

"No!" shouted Thandor. "You must return with me to Dran, or all is lost!"

"Thandor, you can return to your city with my wife to represent the Sarahan. She is as much Sarahan as I am."

"NO!" screamed his utterly shocked wife. "You cannot leave me alone! I will NOT ride to some far off city without you! I would never see you again!"

"Yes you will, Dercy. I know that you will, my truest and best love. I will return to you. I have seen this. But I have also seen that I must return home, alone. Thandor needs you to return with him, and I must go back to whence we came. I am sorry, Dercy. That's how it must be. I must ask this."

Saddened that his gift had become a parting, the King granted Balanor's wish.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE RETURN TO ADOPT

Balanor looked over the ship's rail into the icy waters. The warm waters and blue skies of Onserf were far behind them.

"Worrying about your wife?" Dirk had taken a place at the rail next to him.

"I suppose so. We didn't exactly part under the best of circumstances."

"No, you didn't. But Thandor wasn't about to let both of you get away. She'll be safe with him, as safe as anyone can be in these times. I wouldn't worry about her."

Balanor smiled. "Yes you would. It's not her I'm worried about. She'll live forever. I just don't like the separation."

"We have sighted Adopt, and there are no storms on the horizon. It looks like we will be coming into Landfall soon, and you'll be with your own kind."

"Not for long! We leave for Dran a day after we arrive! They will be hoping to come with us to Loft, our ancestral homeland. Instead, we are headed to war."

"An ugly thought. It is the times we're in. But you will see your wife again, and all will be well. You'll see."

Balanor didn't give voice to his misgivings. He had a feeling that things wouldn't be fine. With each splash of the bow into the water, he knew he was drawing closer to an inescapable doom. Yet, no matter where he looked for an enemy, he could find none.

"Craft ahead! Ahoy!" The lookout shouted from his freezing perch atop the mainmast. Everyone within earshot looked in the direction he pointed.

"There it is! I can see it!" The sight drove the gloom of his thoughts from him. That was a Sarahan fishing boat out of Landfall. His eyes swam in their eye-oval pond of tears. The Captain came on deck and ordered the helmsman to make for the craft.

Dirk came to Balanor's side. "That is the sort of craft you tried to make the Crossing in? Unbelievable." He smiled. "You may be the bravest, or stupidest, being I know."

It seemed as though the pair of fishermen looked at Venture several times before they actually saw it. Balanor had learned that one couldn't truly see that which one had never seen before; different was effectively invisible.

Soon, however, the reality of the war craft came to them, and as the ship pulled alongside their fishing boat, they stood, aghast, looking at the merchant warship looming over them.

Surprise compounded surprise as Balanor greeted them. "Hello!" he shouted. "This is Balanor, and I have returned from the Crossing with friends!"

* * * * *

Balanor, Captain Longstaff, and the Venture's first officer were ushered into the town hall. It was here that Balanor had lied to the Council of Elders. He had told them that he was fit to attempt the Crossing. He had failed to mention that he had nearly been torn asunder by a warg.

Soon the room filled with inquisitive islanders. The fishermen who had been towed into dock with them smiled broadly, as though they had caught the biggest fish of all.

Balanor tried to answer twenty questions at once when a familiar voice cried out his name.

"Balanor!" Efferæet rushed to his side and flung his arms around him. "My son, my son. I knew you would come back. I knew it." Glad tears rushed unashamedly down their cheeks.

Longstaff and Dirk stood a head taller than anyone else in the room. After a while they grew uncomfortable with their own height. Children surrounded the group, and when one of the men gave the slightest glance of attention to one, the child would squeal and run away. Most of the town's people were less nervous, but only the fishermen were absolutely sure that they wouldn't bite.

"Where is your wife? I hope she's all right. I mean that."

"You needn't worry about Dercy. The new world is her toy. I had to leave her with ... friends. There is so much I have to tell you, and rather than tell it a thousand times, could you arrange to have the Elders meet right away? Not all of what I have to say is good news."

Word of his return spread like a sudden snow covering the ground. Soon the entire council was seated and waiting for his report. Introductions were succinct.

"My friends have brought me from their great city, which is many day's sail from here. We, as a people, are found. That is a good thing. However I must tell you that there is very bad news. Those of us on this island are all that are left of our race."

Balanor paused as murmurs rose to shouts. "No!" and "It can't be!" they called. Many refused to believe the news.

"At about the same time as our great-great grandfathers reached this island, the Sarahan race was subtracted from the face of the planet. No ships have come from the homeland and it is suspected that there is no one there at all. We are alone in the world."

"Listen to me!" The pandemonium in the room settled enough for him to continue. "There is more! I am not here to rescue anyone. My friends have brought me here, but they must leave tomorrow, and they are not going to Loft! They are going to WAR!"

The room exploded into chaos. It was several minutes before Efferact was able to regain control. "Who are the men fighting, and why?"

"We are fighting a people known as the Ragnall," answered Dirk. "They were responsible for the abduction and near death of our King. They are maneuvering to attack the city that corks them up into their own land, and that city is Dran. We are taking Venture there as soon as we leave here."

Balanor spoke. "I have seen these Ragnall. They are mindless killers. They attacked Dercy and me on the open sea, without cause! They fight with lies, subterfuge, infiltration and assassination. In addition, I am going to help these men because they helped me."

"You cannot expect us to endorse this war! All we want is to return to our home!" Others from the crowd shouted objections.

"You are not bound by my choice, and we are not here to draft anyone into a fight, but if you want to come, we welcome you."

Longstaff raised his voice above the general din. "If the Confederation of Nations loses this fight, there is no telling when another ship can come to this land. If the Ragnall win, you may not like those that eventually come here. Your race has lost so much. We cannot ask any more of you. You must decide for yourselves!"

The Captain finished. They had done all that they could. The help they could get here was insignificant compared to the task, but they had to ask.

Balanor moved to Efferæet's side. "May I stay at your house tonight, while the council decides?"

"Of course you may, and Balanor, I will be coming with you. You really are like a son to me."

"Thank you. I feel the same. I'm going home now. Dirk and Captain Longstaff will stay here to answer questions."

* * * * *

Any hope of resting vanished as a crowd of questioning adults followed him to Efferæet's cabin. He was cajoled into recounting the adventure from start to finish. His impromptu audience paid rapt attention, making rapturous sounds at each and every mention of Elves, Ragnall, Fireflies, Men and Dwarves. Finally, when he couldn't bear to tell the story yet again, Efferæet, having gotten home from the meeting, asked them pointedly to leave.

"The council has decided NOT to support the war. But they have also decided not to interfere with those who wish to leave. I made sure of that! My wife and I will be coming along. Let's have no argument from you, young man."

"Yes Sir." Balanor knew it was time to retire, but Efferæet would be packing and he had a pressing question. "I have been wanting to ask you something."

"Just one thing? It must be quite a question to be on the top of what must be a long list."

"I do have a lot of questions, but this one burns. It's about something that happened with the Starstone. I tuned a cusp after leaving here. Afterwards, I wasn't just tired, I was exhausted. I slept for three days."

"Three days! Are you sure? Of course you are." Efferæet sat down and thought to himself. "As you know, the fatigue is called 'Separation Sickness', and it accompanies all tunings. But I have never heard of it lasting three days!"

"Why is it called Sep..."

"...Separation Sickness? It is because tuning a cusp is a function of mind, and mind is reluctant to re-enter body after separation. For a moment, your soul, the person you are, is moved from your body. The amount of separation is insignificant, but what separation there is results in the fatigue you experience. But three days! That seems an awful lot!"

Efferæet paused again. "Perhaps you had better not use the stone again. If you still have it, how about returning it to me?"

"I don't have it. It was lost at sea," Balanor lied.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE INVOKERS

He was obviously angry. "You've GOT to put aside this involvement with Destiny! There's too much at risk to continue this ill-advised infatuation!"

"Infatuation! Thandor, that's pretty presumptuous, don't you think? Do you understand how we feel about each other? I see no good coming from a separation. I love her, and you won't make me send her away!"

Thandor placed a meaty finger on the map in front of him. "We've been traveling for two months. Destiny tells me that tomorrow we enter the Invoker desert. If we are going to make any time at all, we have no choice but to move through Eue. They are not likely to allow us to do that IF WE HAVE THEIR MISSING PRINCESS WITH US! We need their food, water and safe passage!"

"She came to Onserf of her own volition! Good luck trying to make her go on ahead without me." The Prince circled the table that held the map. Eue, the ancestral homeland of the Invokers, a vast desert, was spread out before them. "I have explained it to her, gently, patiently, LOGICALLY! You know what she said? She said, 'I understand, and I'm not leaving you'." For a moment, her words made him forget he was angry with Thandor, and he smiled with pride at the remembrance of her promise to stay.

"Wipe that grin off your face! We're talking about going to war! Taking an alternate route around Eue puts an extra month on the journey! We MUST be allowed to cross Eue or we'll miss the fight!"

"I've had enough of you, Thandor! YOU try and make her leave!" Edwin left, kicking sand and fuming.

Thandor paused, then mumbled to himself, "I'd rather be naked as the day I was born, about to fight a legion of heavily armed Ragnall."

* * * * *

Thandor reviewed his battle plan as Destiny walked into the circle of light cast by his camp fire. He stood. "Thank you for coming, Princess. I hope you've been comfortable on this journey of ours."

"Yes, I've been comfortable. Thank you."

"Princess...ah, I must speak to you about a matter of great import, and some delicacy. As you know, I'm in a hurry to return to Dran. It is likely that the city will soon be embroiled in a war, and I would hate for them to start the battle without me." Thandor forced a laugh.

"But Thandor, why do you plod along with the rest of us when you own such a swift horse?"

"Yes, Traveler is very fast, but I need to return with Dercy, and you know how she feels about riding horses, especially fast horses. There is also the matter of an army of marines to consider."

"I understand." She smiled.

Thandor squirmed a bit. "Very soon, we will be approaching Eue, and your Invoker brethren may hesitate to grant us passage."

"They may indeed."

"Yes, well." She was not making this easy. "I think it likely that having you with us, will, that is to say, they may think that we..."

"I will be sure and tell them that you've treated me with consistent gallantry. You needn't worry. My parents know where I am."

"They do? How do they know?"

"I sent them a message."

"How did you do that?"

She smiled.

"Never mind. Of course they know!" He paused. "They don't object to your being gone?"

"I didn't say that, but they will be glad to see that I have been well cared for."

Thandor's scowl reflected his suspicion. "Just what did you tell your parents when you left home?"

"Thandor, that is personal, but let me assure you that I said nothing that would alarm them."

He looked doubtful. "Given your presence, your people could even be hostile to us! Don't you think you should go on ahead? We would be sad to see you go, but..."

"You would send me out, alone? I don't think that Edwin would care for that, or my parents! Edwin would undoubtedly insist on accompanying me, and the marines are under his command..."

Thandor was cornered, and he knew it. "But, Destiny, you were alone when you came to Onserf, weren't you?"

"That's because I had to come alone. I am in love. Have you ever been in love?"

The final shot. Thandor was beaten. He walked into the night, talking to himself yet again. "I'll have gray hairs by morning..." The pause hung in the air.

Thandor threw up his hands.

* * * * *

"Hello Dercy, please sit down. I have something I must speak to you about."

"Sure! What is it?"

"First of all, I would like to thank you for coming with us. Finding and returning to Dran with a Sarahan was the reason I came to Onserf!"

"It's not like I had a choice. Balanor is the most stubborn person I've ever known. He treats his intuitions like they were sealed orders from the Gods."

"So I've noticed. But we've another problem, one that's quite immediate. Your help may be our last hope for a workable solution."

"Go ahead. Set 'em up and we'll see if I can knock 'em down."

"The problem is the Princess. If we enter her homeland while she is among us, the Invokers are likely to think we are responsible for her absence. I've no idea what they will think, or do, when they learn that she is betrothed to the Prince!"

"So what can I do about it? Want me to fly ahead and apologize?"

"No, of course not! I want you to talk to Destiny and ask her to return to her father, without Edwin."

"Sure, I can do that. I'll go talk to her right now."

* * * * *

Dercy approached as Destiny tended her filly. "She won't bite, will she?"

"Of course not. She's as gentle as a flower. Would you like to feed her?"

"Feed her what? My husband said horses are herbivores."

"Of course they are. Most horses wouldn't harm a fly."

"That explains why they attract so many flies." Dercy cleared her throat. "Ahem. Have you thought about riding ahead to return to your family?" Just asking the question made Dercy nervous.

"Oh, I couldn't do that! I can't leave Edwin. I love him!"

"You do? I mean, of course you do! But can't you stand a tiny, little separation?"

"He was nearly executed the last time we were separated. I'll never let him out of my sight again. If you only knew him." The dreamy look in Destiny's eyes would have been funny if it hadn't been so heartfelt.

"I'm not interested in the princely type," Dercy's gentle sarcasm was utterly lost on Destiny. "Won't

your parents be angry at your return with a man in your company?"

"They'll get over it. Especially when I tell them how I feel about him. I imagine it was like this for them when they were coupled." She paused and beamed a smile at Dercy. "He's very special to me."

Destiny moved to within an arm's length of the horse. She reached out to stroke the filly's sable-smooth neck. As she did, the horse rent the air with a piercing call. It caught Dercy off guard, and she stumbled back to fall squarely on her buttocks. Rising to dust herself off, she approached the horse again.

"I was right about horses, but I'm wrong about you and Edwin." Dercy stopped and weighed what she had heard. "You know what I think? I think that what you two do is none of my business. It's none of Thandor's business either. I suggest you tell the big guy to butt out. He's being a bully."

Both women laughed.

* * * * *

Many a marine wished for the soft sea breezes of Onserf as they marched over the grainy red clay of Eue. To their left, at the limit of their vision and resting snug against the horizon, were the snow-capped peaks of the Hellors, the highest and longest mountain range on the planet. In all other directions, the desert stretched for seemingly infinite leagues. With an annual rainfall of less than four fingers, only stumpy, sparse desert grasses and tiny, stunted trees grew here.

Thandor had to admit that he had lost the battle with Destiny and Edwin. The princess remained with them.

In truth, she had been quite useful. She shared her desert skills and helped cut the water needs of the marine army by teaching them how to conserve.

They traveled twice each day, early morning and late evening. The blistering heat of the afternoons made travel impossible. Water had been wasted in great quantities until Prince Edwin commanded eating and drinking limits that had been suggested by Destiny. Everyone observed the limits. One desert night, a rare rain shower fell on the parched land. None of the precious liquid was wasted. The next day the desert bloomed in a wild explosion of colorful flowers. For two days, eyes feasted on delicate blues, pinks and yellows, and insects that came from nowhere buzzed busily about.

The next morning Destiny was up with the sun. As it rose over the distant northeasterly mountains, she smiled. Moments later she entered Edwin's tent.

"We have reached Eue!" She didn't wait for his sleepy response. "Now you are a guest in my land!"

Edwin smiled back. "You're enjoying this, aren't you? I'll bet you plan to make me stand before your father and mother and have me ask them for your hand."

"Oh, yes!" She moved very close to him. "You must observe the letter of our law. You must ask my father and you must ask my grandfather. You must give them examples of your courage and cleverness!" She wrinkled her nose. "You are clever, aren't you?"

"You are a wicked tease, did you know that?"

She acknowledged the fact with a brisk nod that threw her hair over her face. Pulling it back, her aqua-blue eyes blazed with careless happiness. "Did you know that three of the Sheiks of Eue are my uncles and the fourth is my father? First you will meet Lord Strifus. If you have been in the least mean to me he will bury you up to your head in sand and cover you with wild honey. We have a

particular sand flea that will, well, it's unpleasant. My uncles love me very much!"

"Mean to you! Why you..." Edwin leapt, catching her about the waist, pulling her to the sandy floor. Riotous tickling produced gleeful, spirited laughter. Soon their struggles stilled, and as their arms entwined, they shared a kiss, as sweet and as fragrant as a desert bloom.

* * * * *

"No question about it, we are being followed." Thandor stood in his stirrups and scanned the horizon. Gone were the desert flowers, replaced by endless miles of dunes.

"Destiny," said the Prince, "has told me that someone was in the camp while we were sleeping! We are alive because they wish it."

Edwin smiled as Dercy rode up between himself and Thandor. She bounced in perfect rhythm to the gait of her horse. He was quick to wipe off the smile as Thandor frowned at her approach.

"What's that?" She pointed into empty desert.

Thandor shaded his eyes from the sun. "I see nothing. What is it you see?"

"Someone's coming toward us. A lone rider."

"You have sharp eyes! I see nothing... Wait!" Edwin leaned forward in his saddle and squinted against the morning sun. "Halt!" he called to his Captains. The order passed down the ranks.

The distance separating the rider and the army of Onserf diminished rapidly. Edwin rubbed his eyes and

Thandor sat with jaw set. The man, more nightmare than rider, came upon them.

His robe snapped and whipped in an unfelt wind. Its color changed, chameleon-like, through a spectrum of unnatural and dark colors. Eerie dark green and orange flame played across his entire person. The rams-horn helmet he wore seemed a living, moving thing. Purple streamers of power, not unlike miniature strokes of lightning, arched and twisted from his finger to crack and hiss in the air.

He sat upon a great beast, for it could not be called a horse. The animal tossed its head wildly, announcing its presence with a piercing challenge. Though the morning air was still, mane and tail were blown in all directions, again by an unfelt but twisting wind. Its eyes burned amber red while black-gray smoke issued from its flaring, angry nostrils. From one instant to the next, smoke blasted past its muzzle and erupted into balls of flame. With each step of its hoofs in shifting sand, a steaming puddle of black, smoking tar had dripped into depressions the hooves pushed into the sand. Like its rider, shafts of pseudo-lightning arced about its gleaming, black-satin body.

Dercy stared at the apparition and went stiff, frankly horrified. The sight of the rider was bad enough, but the sight of the beast shook her to her core. "A horse from hell," she choked with a voice an octave too high, and fainted.

Thandor reached out and caught her as she slid from her saddle.

Destiny rode up. "Father! You should be ashamed of yourself! These are my friends! Shut that off!"

"Destiny, what are you doing amongst these barbarians?"

"They are not barbarians, they are just uneducated. Would you condemn them so quickly?" The flaming figure appeared to think about it for a moment.

"Ellgot!" he said, and suddenly, the image of the beast and hell rider lost focus. It was replaced with his real appearance. Before them was a distinguished desert warrior astride a perfect black stallion. The horse, in all manner normal, was exquisite, even elegant. In beauty, the animal was a perfect silhouette of Traveler.

Undoubtedly, something had been lost when the man's invoked image had been turned off, but something had been gained, too. Dignity.

"I am Sheik Strifus Sequentor Ta'jor, Lion of the Northern Opens. I demand to know why you trespass on the holy soil of Eue."

Destiny wiped a wet cloth across Dercy's forehead. "How can a guest be a trespasser? Have you forgotten that I am your daughter? I have asked these people to come here!"

Dercy struggled back to consciousness. Across the leading horizon, hundreds of mounted men came into view. The rising heat of the desert made them appear as if they rose out of the waters of a great, shimmering lake of sand.

Dercy looked around. "Where did the demon and the hell- horse go?"

With Dercy lucid again, Thandor spoke to Strifus. "Though we are YOUR guest, we would invite you come to our tent to make talk. We have answers to your questions."

"I hope so. I am especially curious at how the first Princess of the Northern Opens of Eue came to be in your company."

Thandor gritted his teeth but said nothing.

* * * * *

Though it was his tent, Thandor could hardly recognize it. The floor was covered with an elaborate tapestry, and silken pillows made comfortable cushions for the guests. There were no chairs. Everyone sat on the soft floor.

Lord Strifus was very curious about Dercy, and she about him. Once she learned that his frightening appearance had been an illusion, made of the same magic as Destiny's spells, she lost all fear of him. Oddly, she seemed quick to understand the concepts involved.

Thandor quickly turned the conversation into a request for safe passage through Eue and the mountain passes to Dran. "The most perfect isolation will not count for much should the infection of the Ragnall cover the free lands. It will only be a matter of time before the rest of the world is at war. Already the Ragnall have stretched their hand to Onserf. Now they move on Dran. Between Onserf and Dran lies Eue."

Though she listened intently, Destiny didn't speak a word. "You are not like them, or like us. What is your part in this?" Strifus had spoken to Dercy.

"Who, me? I'm here 'cause he needs me! It all started with this prophet named 'The Bridgeman'..."

"You were named by him?"

At first those in the tent feared that she had made some slip of the tongue, some fatal blunder that had angered Strifus, but his expression wasn't anger; it was wonderment.

Destiny too looked astonished, but she remained silent. "You are part of a Bridgeman prophecy?" Strifus asked again.

Thandor took up the question. "Not her specifically, but her race, the Sarahan, are prophesied as being required for a victory over the Ragnall. The battle may take place soon. That is why I must get her to the Fields of Dran! How is it you know of The Bridgeman?"

Dissatisfied with the direction the discussion had turned, Strifus flew into a quick explanation. "Over one hundred forty years ago, there was a student of The Search, what we call our way of belief, that was greater than all the others. His mental prowess was unbelievable. By the time he was twelve, he was teaching his teachers, but soon his thoughts turned to the politics of the search."

He moved to the tent flap and closed it, sitting in that spot with his back to the door. "You see, it is a tautological truth among us that it is wrong, terribly wrong, to interfere with the spirit of another. We do not impose our beliefs on others. Our oldest saying reads, 'give me no answer if I ask you no question'. Even teachers only answer questions, they do not direct."

"The Bridgeman, as he became known, wanted to share his knowledge with everyone. He left our people at the height of his powers to travel to the center of the world. He left us, but he's never been forgotten."

Thandor nodded. "That explains a lot. He came to Dran. Our city is often called the hub of the world, the center of all things. Philosophical and religious studies are both respected pursuits. He established a school of teaching that remains even today."

Strifus looked worried. "My first inclination is to turn you back. We do not take up the fights of others, but if you follow a path laid down by that one, I think I must take you to the King. You may not regard this as hope for

your cause! You may still be turned back. If you are, your problems will be compounded, not resolved."

"I understand. but we must try."

"One more thing. I still don't know how Princess Destiny came to be in your company, but I intend to find out. If anything untoward has happened to my daughter, you may all be practicing the gentle art of existence without heads!" He looked at Destiny with the stern eyes of a protective father. "Child, you will be staying at my camp for the remainder of this journey. Come. Let us gather your things."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE KING OF EUE

For weeks the men of Onserf rode beside the men of Eue. Euemen were masters of their rides just as marines were masters of their ships. Toward the end, a healthy competition grew between the two groups, each testing the other in wrestling, running and weight lifting. Some of the wrestling matches looked suspiciously like fights, but no man would point a finger at a provocateur, so they were judged to be tests of strength and left at that.

The desolation of the land was so complete that sighting the graceful palaces of the oasis was a firm shock.

Everything was painted white to reflect the heat of the sun. Graceful arches and spires adorned many buildings. Beautiful white fountains were set like jewels in well-tended gardens. Birds, something the expedition hadn't seen for many weeks, gathered fruits and dates from the several varieties of palms.

Even the most modest building had interiors that had bare, gleaming white walls which were painted with intricate geometric patterns. In the larger homes, the elaborate patterns were carved in relief into the stone itself.

Nowhere to be seen were pictures of people or persons, for the human form was thought to be profane and imperfect. Only thought and technology, known to outsiders as magic and illusion, was ubiquitous.

Meeting people from the sea for the first time, the citizens of the oasis city were transfixed by tales of vast oceans, giant sea-island turtles and fish of every kind. The stories that engendered the most rapturous attention were those of the huge black carrion dragons of Loft. A long, volcano-riddled chain of islands is home to the dragons,

just as they had once been home to the Sarahan. Seamen, tellers of stories, were in turn astounded by shows of magical lights and sticks that turned into snakes. The marines' favorite trick was the Invoker's cold fireballs; conjured cool into a hand, they were thrown to burst hot. It was hard to tell who possessed the greater magic, the people of the sea or of the people of the sand.

Destiny, of course, had been spirited away to her parents' compound the day before the armies arrived. Edwin agonized over her absence, even as he instructed his men to be on their best behavior. They were, he reminded them, ambassadors of their city-state. At first the marines thought the Eueans to be standoffish, but they soon learned that once their desert shyness was overcome, the Invokers displayed an innate politeness and an insatiable curiosity.

Arriving in the evening, the 'water fleas', as the Eueans came to call the army from Onserf, made camp inside the sand dune border of the oasis city. It was Lord Strifus that came with news from the palace.

"Thandor, you and your friends have been granted an audience with the King. This time tomorrow, you will know if you may continue."

"It is your father that sits upon the throne. What think you of our chances?"

"Your words had better turn to gold, man of Dran, because I don't think much of your chances. To get to the Barrier Range, the mountains that stretch from the Hellens around our nation, you must pass through the portion of Eue controlled by my brother Morcus. I have spoken with him, and he is adamant against you. It seems doubtful that our father will allow the army to pass within sight of my brother's city."

"Strifus, we must not be stopped! The time is drawing near and my city calls to me. I can feel it!"

"You may hold the answer and not know it. I had a vision last night, a strange dream. A flying being died in the desert, was covered with the sands of time, and awoke from its death to fly again. I think I know what it means. Do you?"

"Dercy, and the Sarahan," was all that Thandor said.

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As they walked through the palace, crystal lanterns burning fragrant oil lit their way. Mosaic tiles of astonishing workmanship covered the floors. Everywhere there was beauty and delicacy unmatched throughout the world.

The throne room was more than magnificent, it was pure and simple in a way that made it opulent.

The white walls were covered with the same simple canvas of the desert tents. The floor was a matchless white marble, swirled with streaks of gray and speckled with flecks of shimmering gold. The ceiling was an arabesque carving in cedar, of shapes and patterns inlaid with gold. Guards in ornate uniforms stood at attention near a singular area raised from the level of the floor by one step. Adorning the raised square was a mauve sea of silken quilt. A fountain made of glistening, untarnished silver sat atop it. It quietly bubbled forth the true power in this land; water.

Lord Strifus entered the room with a charismatic old man. Thandor couldn't help but stare at the brilliant eyes of the King. They were the perfect twins of Destiny's unforgettable eyes, and when they stared at you, they nailed you to the truth.

Destiny stood outside the room at the door where the King had entered and where she could clearly be seen.

Edwin did see her, and the space that separated them punished him cruelly.

The King sat upon many silken pillows that graced his raised space. Strifus moved to the others and directed them to sit. He sat beside them.

"You are welcome here. My son has told me of your need to pass through our lands. There are those that support your passage, and there are those that oppose it. Until now, the conduct of you and your men has been exemplary. It is not out of fear for ourselves that we ask you to turn and leave, but fear for you and yours. If, in any way, your passage became an attempt to alter what we are, if it became interference, or missionarism, then your lives would be forfeit. Since you must obey our laws without understanding them, without even knowing them, then I cannot trust your obedience, and I must not risk your lives."

Thandor had been warned of this, and, as instructed, he remained seated while the old man spoke. Now it was his turn to speak. "Your Majesty, The well-being of an entire city is balanced in the scales. If the Ragnall are allowed to flood the land, even your own splendid isolation cannot protect you. May I suggest that we be allowed to pass while the men that follow your son," Thandor nodded in the direction of Lord Strifus, "the Sheik of the Northern Opens, at once protect us and buffer us from unintentional intrusions upon your laws and your beliefs. We understand that they are one and the same."

"Indeed they are." The King paused for a breath-holding moment. "Can your men be made to understand that they are subject to our laws? Can you pass without changing what is mine?"

"Your Majesty," injected Edwin, "these are my men, and I have questioned them. They willingly subject

themselves to your judgment and mercy. We would strive to be the perfect observers, seeing without changing."

"You may find mercy as rare as water. In truth you have already touched something that is mine, and changed it forever."

Edwin saw the King's loving glance at Destiny, his granddaughter, and knew it signaled troubled waters ahead.

"This child was a fox kit, playing in the desert. Now she is a bottomless well of tears." Edwin lowered his head. "Do I have you to thank for this change?"

When Edwin raised his eyes, they were swimming. "Sire, she is not the only one with tears. You have raised good sons and Lord Strifus has raised a perfect daughter, and now she..." He stopped, for he feared he could go no further.

"Yes, I know." With great effort he motioned for his granddaughter to come to him. She did, and he turned a bearded cheek for a kiss. "Go to him now. Your grandmother, your father and I have decided this." He spoke in a shaken whisper.

If any corner of the room lacked light, the brilliance of Destiny's smile now filled it. She sat on Edwin's right and bowed her head toward her King until it touched the floor.

"You take with you our brightest jewel. Take care of her well. You must go now. You must all go back the way you came." He began to rise.

"Sire!" Dercy spoke, surprising herself.

The old King stood. "What is it? You are the different one, the one with bat's wings, aren't you?"

"Yes, Sire. I can fly."

"Come to me, furry child. You are strangely beautiful." He held his hand out in welcome. Dercy rose and moved to the foot of the step.

"You are of the race called Sarahan?"

"Yes I am, and from what I've been told, there are damned few of us left. Hmm, excuse me."

"That's all right." He smiled. "The greatest student our people has ever known thought a lot of your people. Why do you suppose he felt Sarahan were so special?"

"I don't know. I don't feel particularly special. My husband is special, though."

The King's expression made Dercy feel as though she had all the time in the world to explain herself. "Why is he special, aerial one?"

Dercy wondered if the question was genuine curiosity or a gentle but polite patronage. "His name is Balanor, and he knows things, knows them without being told."

"Do you trust the things he knows?"

"With my life! He's always right. Its infuriating." She paused for thought. "But it's more than that. I have always trusted his decisions. I can't remember not trusting him, and he told me to go this way." Now Dercy sprang forth sob-less tears. "I miss him incredibly."

He smiled. "Perhaps this trust of your husband is intuitive?"

He moved to where Thandor, Destiny and Edwin stood. "Would you leave us alone for a while?" He directed his gaze at his son, Lord Strifus. "See to it that food and drink are provided while she and I talk." In reassuring tones he spoke to Thandor. "She will return to

you soon, unharmed. Don't leave the palace until she returns."

* * * * *

Thandor was deeply troubled. He'd left the King thinking he must leave Eue the way he came. That would be disaster. He was also worried about Dercy. She had been gone for quite some time.

"Strifus, what could they be talking about for so long?"

"I don't read minds very well."

Strifus didn't laugh at his own joke, and Thandor wondered if it was meant to be funny.

"You must understand my father's curiosity. Men are the only race our people have seen for decades. Suddenly we see a race with wings, the mysterious Sarahan!"

"Yes, I know. If you only knew the trouble I've had keeping those wings of hers tucked away!"

"When we lost The Bridgeman, his fame had grown to mythical proportions. Through his followers, his interest in the Sarahan came to be known to us. So you see, we come by our curiosity honestly."

Wresting his attention from Destiny's loving stare, Edwin freed himself of a question. "Why did he leave? Why did this Bridgeman of yours leave Eue?"

"The Bridgeman was a giant, a great thinker, but in his time there came to be a schism between him and our learned men. He wanted to go to the lands of... excuse me, the barbarians, and teach them all that he knew. Our

teachings forbid missionaries. One day he left for Dran and never returned. Even today, his leaving is considered the greatest loss our people have ever suffered."

Quite suddenly, Thandor's attention was taken by a tapestry he hadn't noticed before. He must have been worried to complete distraction to have missed this! It depicted a Eue rider going into battle. You couldn't see his opponent, but you knew he was near, for the desert rider was leaning forward in his saddle, holding forth his scimitar. It caught him completely off guard when the figure began to move, as though it were a picture in motion. The rider crossed the desert at a dead run, charging his unseen enemy!

"I have seen the like of this before!" Thandor's voice was raised in pleasant surprise. He turned, and Strifus was smiling at him. Turning back, the tapestry had halted its motion.

"We know. We have all known. The breeding of your steed did not go unnoticed. This is the trade we made for your Traveler, the stallion that you earned by saving a king's son." The story had been told to him by his daughter.

The night grew long as they conversed and waited for the return of Dercy.

* * * * *

Dercy entered the room carrying a golden bowl from which she casually ate dates. Her expression volunteered nothing.

Thandor tolerated the silence only for a second. "Well?"

"I have some good news and some bad news. Which do you want first?"

"Would you like me to draw my sword and spank you with it? Do you know how many lives rest on this? What did the King tell you!"

"The good news first then. His Majesty has granted us passage through Eue, with an army escort to see to it that we don't get into trouble. He felt that if The Bridgeman prophesied that it was important for me to go to Dran, then he had better not stand in the way."

Thandor's relief was obvious. "I assume that was the good news. Let the ax fall! Give us the bad news!"

Dercy shook her head in disbelief. "It's just my luck. He gave me a gift. Can you guess what it is?"

"Tell us!" shouted Thandor.

"He gave me a horse."

The long, surprised silence was finally broken by gales of laughter.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE CUSP AT SEA

Venture had just rounded the second horn of the northern extreme of the continent. The waters were as close to the northern pole as the island of Adopt, and it was very cold.

Balanor couldn't escape the fact that using the Starstone again might be deadly, but his path had become twisted. Even Efferæet didn't have a hint as to what to do.

The ocean's currents and winds were perfect for travel to the north-east, but Venture would soon be moving out of the prevailing winds onto a pure easterly tack. Their destination was Dran.

As the ocean crashed and foamed against the bow of Venture, Balanor looked out over the endless waters and wondered about his homeland. No living Sarahan had ever seen their place of birth, home of their forefathers. No one except... Balanor suddenly remembered that Efferæet had seen Loft. He had seen it and had described it to him.

His cheeks flushed warm at the danger he now entertained. "I can go there now," he muttered to himself. "If I'm ever going to go there, it must be now! Efferæet has already seen me there!" Balanor's circular logic convinced him that he must use the stone once again.

"Did ya say something Sarahan? Damn, these are cold waters!"

Balanor turned to see who had spoken. It was the ship's cook. "Oh no, I was thinking out loud."

"Ya shouldn't be daydreaming beside the rail, ya know. Ya might fall overboard and no one would know."

"That's a dark thought!" The cold morning air bit through his coat into his flesh. "I'll be more careful." Balanor turned and went to his bunk. Twenty four Sarahan and Efferat's wife had come aboard the ship. Room was at a premium. Balanor squeezed into the space allotted him and curled into a ball. Sarahan fit into this position extremely well; no one knew why.

Hiding under his blanket, Balanor reached into his coat's pocket for the box containing the stone. For a moment he suffered shame, knowing that he had lied to his teacher about losing the stone. He didn't recall ever having told such a significant lie, but he couldn't give up the stone.

Opening the box by feel, he removed the stone and held it tight.

As his consciousness moved to the line and into the array, it seemed hard to believe that he had only done this twice. The lines seemed so real, and the black, calm space he walked upon seemed so sharp and clear. He congratulated himself on how adept he was with the stone, but intuitively he knew that it was not so. He had only begun to understand the stone's powers.

With spontaneous curiosity, he bent to examine the line he walked on, with mind's eyes as close as he could get them to the dream-quality surface. He saw that the line wasn't simple and perfect, but more like a twisted cord embedded in clear ice. There seemed to be a pattern to the cord, but it was too small to make out. The overall effect seemed to be that of a twisted, composite crystalline structure.

He returned to his mission. Soon he was among the hexagons, hundreds of them, and for the first time he wondered how he would find the right one. He knelt down and passed his hand through the film-like membrane of a

cuspid. It gave an incomplete feeling, scattered thoughts only, of the happiness of a warm day at sea. Touching another, he thought he heard good-natured laughter. He moved from cusp to cusp looking for answers. One he gave special attention to; it reeked of danger. He laid both hands against the film and pushed, not quite stepping into the moment, tuning it. As the membrane stretched till it nearly broke, he saw a seaman place a bowl of soup before him. His hunger came to him keenly, but something was very wrong. He sensed poison. Peripherally, he caught a quick glint of steel.

Balanor was deeply tempted to tune that cusp, but he knew that this would be his last chance at insight, and he wanted only to go home. If he suffered another bout of Separation Sickness, days on end of sleeping, Efferaet would likely confiscate the stone. He continued his search.

A cusp which seemed no different than the rest gave him a jolt that brought him to his knees. Feelings of wonder, success, and a melancholy homesickness rushed through him. He smiled to himself. He'd found the cusp that he'd been searching for.

Balanor stood and readied himself for the plunge into the cusp. He fell forward and broke into the insight.

Soaring above the greenest green he had ever seen, he looked beside him. A huge black-green dragon carried him in its talons. They traveled through the warm, bright blue skies. Under them was a riot of lush green vegetation. Soon the ground reached up for him as the land sloped upward. He was approaching the cone of the volcano that dominated the vast island. At the base of the rising shape there was a city. He sensed it was the city of his great-grandfather's father. This was the Loft of his ancestors.

A particular building arched high, graceful in form and shape, above the rest. Its pointed spire stretched to catch rarified air. Every breeze had to pass by it, as if for

inspection. The mammoth she-dragon, no question about the gender, landed there, and pointed with wing tip to an entrance that stood ajar. Balanor walked through cobweb-covered corridors, moving to the back of the building. It wasn't long before he came upon dozens of skeletons, all fallen Sarahan. He reached down and picked up a brethren's skull, dusty, but polished smooth by worms.

Deeper inside he went, until he guessed that he had traveled well into the mountain itself. He came to an archway over which were written, in old Sarahan script, the words, 'Fa Calamber', meaning Sight Sword. Large pipes came from valves in the walls, and led yet further back into the mountain. Unknown instruments and glassware littered black basalt tables. There were further scattering of bones. Various tubes and pipes led to a single point, the room's natural focus. One skeleton lay across a silvered box, its lid thrown aside. Skeletal fingers reached for, but never grasped, what was inside.

He looked at the bones before him, and a deep peace came to him. Silent white sound rushed at him. The periphery of his vision began to white out as he looked into the box. The rushing became a roar as he reached for the quickly blurring form of a gleaming blue sword which was a jewel and a weapon. Sight failed, sound muted, and he walked alone in a misty drift of a soft, white fog.

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"No question about it, he's finally coming around."

"You'd better get the Captain. He'll want to make sure Balanor is all right."

As the fog slowly lifted from Balanor's mind, he fought to climb out of his slumber. The rest had been so

deep that he had to remind himself, even force himself by will, to breathe. He rubbed grains of crystal sleep from his eyes. They opened to see the worried face of a Sarahan.

"Are you awake? How do you feel?"

"Hungry, but mostly thirsty." He wasn't really hungry, he was ravenous. He stretched and yawned. He brought his hands up to look for the box and the stone. They were gone, of course. "Have I..."

Captain Longstaff entered with Efferæet at his side. Balanor knew the admonition would come later. Now, they just looked concerned.

Efferæet spoke first. "To think that you made the Crossing and returned just to risk your life now. I hope it was worth it."

He knew it had been, but he didn't say so. "How long this time?"

"Seven," said the Captain. "A new world record. We were," he coughed to underscore his next word, "worried. We had to force feed and water you."

"There won't be a next time, son. You wouldn't come back. Why did you lie to me?"

"I wasn't finished with it. I needed to see one last time. Can I tell you about it over some food?"

"Of course. We were able to give you water and broth, but not much. You must be starving." Longstaff reached into the berth and helped Balanor out. His legs felt like sticks and the blood rushed from his head when he stood up. His head swam. Everything went dark and silent for a moment. Then came dizziness. Longstaff and Efferæet braced him up. He made it topside. His sea legs were gone, so he had difficulty standing upright as the ship swayed.

Many of the voyagers from Adopt crowded around. They were curious about the effect of the Starstone on Balanor. Efferæet had allowed each of the young men to try to tune a cusp, and though none had been able, all had journeyed into the array. Where Balanor had found the membrane of the cusp to be as fragile as a soap bubble, they had found it thick and impenetrable.

Balanor sat on the steps leading to the helm. Instructions had been sent to the cook to prepare a bowl of soup.

"We lost a man overboard while you slept." Longstaff looked with concern at the wobbly way Balanor moved on deck. "You be careful and stay away from the railing."

"Thank you! I will. Who was it?" He had gotten to know everyone on the ship quite well.

"Gepman. He was a fine sailor, but a bit distracted of late."

Irony sent a chill down Balanor's back. Gepman had been the sailor who had warned him about falling overboard, now he was lost at sea.

Soon the soup was ready and served. His stomach grumbled in hungry protest. Taking the spoon in hand he dipped it into the yellow broth. As he moved to sip from the spoon, his hands began to tremble. He spilled the hot liquid onto the fingers holding his bowl. He yelped in pain as his hand was scalded by hot soup.

"Stupid clumsy rat!" shouted the cook. Before any of the stunned bystanders could move, he had drawn a throwing dagger and hurled it at Balanor's back on his heart's side. Balanor froze as he remembered the warning of the cusp. The moment had come upon him and he had not even known it. With a reaction so swift that it could not possibly have been made by conscious thought, Dirk swatted at the dagger as it pierced the air, on target for

Balanor. He screamed in pain as the dagger pierced his palm. Its deadly point was stuck deeply into the table beside Balanor.

Six men leaped onto the ship's cook. With inhuman strength it tossed them off. Their weight was as nothing to him. Another wave of sailors and Sarahan brought the cook down. His face was ground into the deck of the Venture. With four men to each arm and six to each leg, more over his chest and two with fistfuls of hair, the pinned thing writhed.

The soft, brown hair on the back of Balanor's scalded hand had stained yellow. Captain Longstaff spat out, "Poison! Wash it off, quickly! You too, Dirk!" Fearing the worst, he examined the blade of the dagger. It was heavily poisoned. Longstaff yanked the blade from the table. Dirk's hand was bleeding where it had caught the edge of the dagger. "Let it bleed! Force it to bleed!" shouted Longstaff. Though Dirk had lost his color, he remained conscious.

To the horror of the men holding down the attacker, his flesh began to shift, as he changed in appearance to the likeness of the man that fell overboard.

"Hold him!" The Captain moved forward as he screamed the order. No sooner had the features of the man hardened than it began to shift again. This time the face of Onserf's Steward was pressed against the ship's deck. Men holding the thing nearly let it go in horror. The shifts and changes continued from one unknown figure to another. Twice the men nearly let it go; once, when the guise was that of a beautiful woman, and again, when it turned into a hideous witch hag. The creature had become many people, had destroyed many victims, to get to where it was.

"Get Balanor down below! Arm yourselves! Guard him well!" Longstaff's shouting woke the onlookers from their shock.

The Captain suspected the creature was going through these changes for a reason. Balanor was whisked to safety down below. The freak show continued. Finally a form was reached that had to be the original.

What the men now held was not flesh at all, but a black armor covered thing. Hands that held hair now rested on the top of a frightening looking helmet. From the side they could see smoke-colored eyes behind a thick glass-like substance. At no point was there living flesh to be seen. Longstaff ordered the thing turned over. On its black armored chest there was a large green and gold medallion. Intricately engraved, it was set into the middle of indecipherable runes. Above all this was a black oval shape within which shone a six-pointed star.

As Captain Longstaff stared down at the dark form, he knew it was the final, original form of the demon-thing.

With the suddenness of the blink of an eye, night fell on the ship. Men gasped as the sun and stars were suddenly blotted out. Looking out over the sea, the darkness cast a shadow that radiated away from the ship at a great speed. Venture was the center of a growing circle of darkness.

With a muffled voice, the figure, which had ceased its struggling, spoke a single word. "Burn". Immediately the armor was set alight, and men reeled back in anguish at their burns. It was as if the creature had covered itself in flaming oil. Unhampered by restraining hands, it stood, a blazing torch in the midst of a black, black night.

With bottomless malevolence, it spoke. "If I had my weapon, you would all be dead. No matter. I see your death! You will fail!" The last word hung in the air, echoing off the ink-like darkness to pound every ear, time and again.

It considered the number of men between it and the stairs, to Balanor, below deck.

Longstaff saw the direction of the red gaze, and shouted, "It's after Balanor!"

Every man, every Sarahan that could, moved between the flaming thing and the steps leading down to the next deck.

It moved like a shadow in slow motion to the starboard rail and leaped into the deep, blue water. As the flaming form disappeared below the waves, light began to roll back the darkness.

At once men set to putting out the fires left by the steps of the creature.

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Balanor listened with deepening concern as the Captain described what had occurred after his retreat below. Not for the first time, he wondered what the hell he had gotten himself into. Now he had a black armored demon creature trying to kill him. What had he done? Yet he didn't dwell on his own problems for long.

"How is Dirk?"

"We bled most of the poison out of him, but he's been knocked out by what remained. You are both very lucky."

"Dirk made my luck." Someone laid a second bowl of soup in front of him.

"We threw the last batch overboard, along with the pot and stir spoon. It didn't appear to be poisoned, but we took no chance. I assume the creature poisoned only your bowl."

"Creature? You mean the shape changer?"
Balanor wrinkled his nose as he remembered the monster.

"It's something one of your Sarahan called it. Appropriate! In all my days, and in all my travels, I have never seen anything like it. After it went into the water we watched to see where it surfaced. It didn't. We are fifty leagues from land. To the west is Setland. Elves live there. It couldn't possibly make it to shore."

Efferaet came to the table and sat down beside him. "Perhaps you should have stayed home, my teacher."

"No son. my definition of 'home' changed the minute you returned to Adopt."

A spoonful of soup stopped midway to Balanor's mouth as Efferaet drew the Starstone from his vest pocket. He finished the bite and pretended not to notice.

Efferaet was not going to allow that. "Tell me what you saw. I'd like to know how much seven days of your life bought."

Longstaff sat at the table with Balanor and his teacher. "I'd like to hear this too!"

Both men sat and waited for him to reveal what he had seen. "Well, as my wife would say, which do you want first, the good news or the bad news?"

"Good news first. Always!" Efferaet smiled to encourage his favorite pupil.

"The good news is that I believe I know where we can find a weapon of such power that it can be used to do battle with the likes of the creature. Do you think there may be more of those things?" Balanor hoped not but didn't believe in his own hope.

"Don't try to change the subject," Efferæet gently admonished. "Where can we find this weapon and what kind of weapon is it?"

He took a deep breath so as to pass the bad news with a single exhale. "It is a sword made from a single, huge Starstone. It was manufactured by our, excuse me, my people before they died. It is on the home island Loft, and that is where we must go now."

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

THE CITY OF D'WHILE

The Ragnall officer stood in perfect military stance, then walked down the line of troops to inspect them. He saluted. "Each one of you has been assigned an objective. That objective is to be taken regardless of cost. You will complete your mission or die trying. All city defenses have been clearly laid out, and you will enter with complete surprise. All is open to you."

He stood still. His tone grew threatening. "You will not expend any energy pillaging the city. Take only that which will be useful in the fight ahead. Those civilians who do not cooperate will be eliminated, swiftly and publicly. I am going to intercept the armies that are coming, but I hold little hope of stopping them. They must be stopped at D'While and not allowed to enter the barrier range." He moved to his skittish horse and mounted. "You have your orders." He stopped. mounted what was obviously an Invoker mount, then wheeled and galloped off.

* * * * *

"I'm getting a little tired of being treated like an infectious disease. I don't need to be isolated!"

"It's for your own protection, Dercy. You are subject to a lot of laws you've never heard of."

"Its not like I'm going to run naked through a church or something."

"You see? That's what I mean! There are no churches here!" Strifus pointed an accusing finger. "We have no churches, and no organized religion and no appointed teachers. Our teachings, which you call magic, are NOT religion!"

"Don't you have books? Books are like teachers."

"Of course we have books. We don't burn books, though I have heard of people that do. Books are the best kind of teacher. You can pick up and put down a book whenever you wish."

"So, without teachers, how do you manage to learn anything?"

"We ask questions. Lots of them. Don't fret. Despite how it feels, you are an honored guest here. Every step you take into Eue is historical. No Sarahan has ever visited us before, and certainly no army. You are being treated as a favorite sister."

Dercy bent down to gather a fistful of sand. She let it fall between her six fingers. "I don't suppose navies come here very often, either."

"Not many." Strifus chuckled to himself. "But our people are very curious about you. That strange bow you own, for example. Where did you get it?"

"It came from a brave huntsman whose life I couldn't save. There is a tree where we come from that has wood like stone." Wishing to forget the melancholy memory, she changed the subject. "Tell me about D'While. Am I saying it right?"

"That's correct. One syllable. Well, she is our oldest city. She has never been conquered. Her people are the purest of heart and mind. The land is as pristine as can be found. There is a small path, rarely trod, that leads over the mountains at her back to the valley of the city of Dran

and the river Drew. It is an unspoiled place of remarkable beauty."

"Do I detect a hint of jealousy?"

"You certainly do. The Northern Opens are beautiful. The land is a lovely jewel in its own way, but the Southland is as close to paradise as a man can experience. It is every Invoker's wish to visit D'While once in his life. Such is the city that rests in the foothills of the range that separates Eue from the rest of the world. There are mountains, trees, water and cool air. It is also the terminus of the only pass through that range to Dran. That is the pass that The Bridgeman took when he left our land."

"Then we will have to pass through the city before we can begin the climb to the summit of the pass."

"No. Only Invokers are allowed inside the walls of the city. Its isolation has been perfect since its founding. You and your friends must take a circuitous route beside but around the city to get to the barrier forest."

"I wish you were coming with us..."

The conversation halted. In a striking display of horsemanship, the long column's lead rider spun his horse around and shot towards Dercy and Lord Strifus. Judging the distance between the rider and herself, Dercy grabbed her mount's neck and braced for a meaty collision. Rider reining back, the sorrel-colored horse nearly sat down, with his feet beneath him, as he skidded to a halt.

'That was spectacular,' thought Dercy.

"Lord, there is a rider approaching. He is refusing to return the recognition signal!"

"Is he alone?"

"Yes, Lord."

"Give him pass. Draw no steel."

In a storm of dust, the Captain spun and returned to his station.

"If I could fly like your people ride, I would touch the sun."

Dercy's respectful wonder drew a smile from a grim Strifus. The smile vanished as he recognized the rider.

"It is my elder brother, Morcus, Lord of the Southern Keeps." Strifus rode to his army's lead. By his look, this was not going to be a joyful reunion.

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From the first words, Thandor knew that none of the graciousness of his escort was present in Morcus. Under different circumstances he would have drawn steel and had at it.

"How can you soil our sacred Keep with the footpaths of these barbarians? What are they but missionaries?"

Several of the Euemen gasped at the insult. Thandor turned red as the hilt of his blade, but by force of will remained silent.

"No, brother. They have conducted themselves as though they had sand in their shoes all their lives. They are the guest of our father, and it is by his will that they are here."

"Two of them ride on steeds from the holy bloodline. What favors have they done you that you have put the desert wind between their legs?"

With a mind of its own, Thandor's sword hand opened and closed in tense rhythm.

"Morcus! These are my guests also! As you insult them you provoke me!"

The stiff leather armor worn by Morcus creaked as he took two steps, with slow, measured malevolence, toward Dercy. For a horrible moment, Thandor thought him about to strike her! She stood her ground, and looked, unblinking, into the seething eyes of Morcus.

"You speak of provocation while you bring this abomination into my sacred Keep!" For an eternal second, he stared at her with all the hatred in the world. As Strifus was about to speak, Morcus turned and pointed with a steel-steady finger at the Prince of Onserf. "And the Princess of all the deserts is daily being defiled by that waste of water!"

"STOP!" Strifus' angry command was rolling thunder, and his gaze was an arcing shaft of lightning. His hand reached for his blade. "I would spill your blood if you speak thus again, my brother!"

The threat hung in the air. It was danger objectified, almost physical.

When Morcus spoke again, the sound was as sharp and crisp as the snap of a long-dead tree branch. "Do NOT bring these with you further into my Keep!" He mounted his twisting, surging horse. "The day I see them before my city is the day you all die!" He rode away, a rising line of dust trailing in his wake.

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"What now? Tell me, Strifus, what do we do now?" Dercy lamented.

The look that came from the Sheik of the Opens was full of pain and division. "You people are not what Morcus thinks you are. I can't understand his acting that way. I have never seen him so angry!"

The Prince began to entertain a new suspicion, but he didn't give it voice, not yet. "Isn't there some way around D'While? I fully understand your conflict, Strifus, so can't the city be bypassed?"

"The ancient city lies at the foot of the only trail through the barrier mountains that is passable by horse. Oh, there are other trails, a climb that a man can make, but you would be on foot from there on. Your army of three thousand would have to abandon your animals and carry all you needed on your backs."

"Meaning another impossible delay before reaching Dran," spoke the general.

"I am sorry, Thandor, but my men and I will not fight our brothers. You have no choice. I will make it my responsibility to return your horses to Onserf." He stopped and gave a weak smile. "I have always wanted to lay eyes on the sea. Water as vast as the desert. What a sight it must be."

Dercy stood with head bowed. She spoke to no one, but was heard by all. "I wish my husband was here. He could have foreseen all of this."

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"Two of my men have volunteered to lead you through the climb. All Eueans come to D'While once in their life on pilgrimage, and they have taken this route before, for recreation."

Thandor looked doubtful. "If for some reason we were attacked, we would be slaughtered on the cliff side."

"I will go to D'While and distract Morcus for a time. You should be all right. As I have expressed before, you have no choice. This is our parting, my friend. I hope all goes well with your battle."

"I fear it will not, friend. We may all have died this day."

"Not while my memory lives," he said, with his hand on Thandor's shoulder.

"Yet, as I will not pass this way again, I have something for you." Thandor dismounted and removed a pack from the back of his saddle. He went to the front of Traveler and offered him the last of the palm dates he carried. The horse took them eagerly, then pushed at Thandor with his velvet muzzle.

"Take him, Strifus, and keep him as you would a treasure."

"I will." Strifus spoke few words, for he didn't trust himself with many.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

THE BATTLE FOR D'WHILE

Strifus slowly moved his men towards the city. Many of the younger men had never made the pilgrimage to visit the ancient city, and would take this as an opportunity to do so.

Riding at the head of his army, he was the first to see one of his scouts returning in a great hurry. Without slowing, the rider stood in his stirrups and gave the recognition signal. He skidded to a halt in the grainy desert soil.

"Lord Strifus, we found a man in the desert, nearly dead was he! He has been stabbed by a poisoned blade and left to die. Lord, he was a gate guard in the city! D'While has been attacked!"

Strifus thought for a moment. An icy hand gripped his heart. "How far is this man?"

"One hour ahead, at full gallop." The length of the run through midday heat would have killed most horses, but not the scout's mount, though drenched in sweat and sucking great gulps of air through his large nostrils. Proud exhaustion lit his eyes.

Strifus quickly chose five of his best riders and left his army.

Just short of an hour later the band spotted the second scout. He was tending the wounds of the guard. Strifus leapt from his horse while it was still running and fell to his knees at the stricken man's side. A glance into the scout's eyes told the story. The guard would not recover.

"Who did this to you?" He whispered the question into the man's blistered ear. The fire of the guard's life was going out, leaving only cooling coals. He was dying.

"City attacked at night." A fluid-filled cough shook the guard's body. He was turning pale green. "Creatures. Never seen." Suddenly he gasped as the poison reached his heart. He grabbed the desert tunic of Strifus with one hand, and then the other. As he shook in a dying quiver, he expelled the last word his lungs would ever voice. "Ragnall..."

In his soul, Strifus found a well. It was not filled with water, but with rage. Now he would draw the rage up from the well and spill it on the sand. Here, all sand led to D'While.

"Return," he hissed to the scout through clenched teeth. "Return to camp. Send our fastest rider on our swiftest horse to get the sailor's army, Thandor, Dercy, all of them. Send men with their horses! Have Thandor meet us at the Holy City! Go!"

Faster than a bird could have flown, the scout was off.

* * * * *

Thandor remarked to himself how good it felt to once again sit astride Traveler. There was no mistaking the direction he had to travel to get to D'While. Smoke rose from the city. In the still desert air it looked like the huge black shaft of a mushroom that sat squat over the white city. The battle walls of D'While came into sight. Though the army of Onserf had traveled day and night, it was just now reaching the city and its foothills. Morning had come. There had been many deaths during the night.

Riders met the army of Onserf, and assigned it positions outside the parameter of the Invokers of the Northern Opens. Scattered through the Invoker ranks were the wounded from the night before. Thandor, Dercy, the Prince of Onserf, as well as Princess Destiny, were brought to the tent of Strifus.

Inside, Destiny ran to her father and buried her head in the folds of his tunic.

"I know." Strifus tried to comfort her, though he was clearly distraught himself. "We will set to work cleaning the city of them, very soon." Each moment the city was held by vile invaders was a knife in the heart of all Invokers. Each and every one of them felt violated.

"What may we do to help?" The Prince had spoken first, not waiting for Thandor to offer the army of Onserf. It was his responsibility. Destiny had been devastated by the news that the Holy City had been taken. Edwin would do anything within his means to ease her pain, which was his pain also.

"Who has done this? Who are you fighting?" Dercy's curiosity had gotten the better of her. Though Thandor knew intuitively who the enemy must be, he had not spoken of it to the others.

Strifus went to the rear of his tent and lifted both door flaps. Five strides away, a mutilated corpse was nailed to two beams that crossed in the middle. It was a Ragnall, nailed to an X of wood. Dercy looked away from the things the Invokers had done to the body, but Destiny stared at the disfigured form as though to find some answer to an important question.

"It is Ragnall," said Thandor. "And if they have gotten this far, what of Dran?"

Though he didn't say so, Dran was the last thing on the mind of Strifus. "Our losses have been ten percent so far. That's four hundred men. They have lost but a few.

The defenses of the city are strong; it was taken from within." Strifus spat out the words.

"The obvious question is, how did they breech the city in the first place?"

"From what we have learned, Edwin, the city was given to them. In a treachery so enormous that God himself must have shut his eyes, my brother Morcus intentionally left D'While wide open to attack. The entire guard was stood down, locked in their barracks." Strifus' voice dripped with irony. "When the first attack came, the gate guards thought we had done it." He pulled his dagger and buried its point deep into a table before him. He twisted the blade into the wood.

Everyone present was surprised when Destiny spoke up. "What are you going to do about it?"

Before he could answer, the distant sound of a soul-searing scream came through the canvas walls. Dercy turned to leave the tent, wishing to see where the horrible sound had come from.

"Dercy, stop!" Strifus looked as though he could hardly bring himself to his next words. "Every fifteen minutes they chain a living woman to the teeth of the battlement walls and pour burning oil over her. They have vowed to do so until we leave."

"Gods," spat Thandor, as he reached for his sword.

"We have watched as thirty two women have died this way. The first to die was my sister-in-law, the wife of Morcus, my BROTHER!" Now he beat upon the table, narrowly missing the dagger. His blow splintered the table.

"What am I going to do about it?" He returned to Destiny's question. "I am going to blow over them like a

desert storm, and the world will not know that they have been here!"

Edwin did not trust himself to speak. The screams had stopped. He looked at his betrothed, and the woman he saw was not one he had ever seen before. Her hatred had altered her.

"Pull your men back. Until you have a plan, you die for no reason." Thandor knew it was dangerous to inject reason at a time like this, but he had to try.

"Plan? What plan can there be? The walls are too high to breach with ladders. The gates are too strong to fall. Only by treachery could such a city fall."

Thandor began to think out loud. "The best way to take a reinforced gate is from the inside and outside. We must get men inside, somehow!"

"What about the people within," suggested Dercy. "Isn't there anyone inside left to fight?"

"The men are prisoners in the catacombs at the rear of the walled city. The women and children," Strifus' voice broke for a moment, then he continued, "are being held in the palace, under sword. Some have escaped by invoking 'Kasab Rolok', becoming invisible and jumping from the walls. Many have died doing this. Others live just long enough to report what is happening and die later."

"How many men are being held?" Dercy's quizzical expression hinted that she was thinking of something.

"It is thought that about half of the army of Southern Keep remain alive. That would be about two thousand men. Why do you ask?" Strifus looked doubtful.

"Forget it, Dercy. I'm sure it's been tried. We are saving you for Dran."

"I'm not yours to save, Thandor! If Destiny could make me invisible, like at Onserf, I could..."

"That wouldn't be enough." Edwin seemed to be thinking furiously. "Perhaps if the guards could be drawn to a battle for the main gate. A distraction might work."

"Again! You cannot go over the walls! Think you that we have not tried that?"

"You have tried to go OVER the walls. Have you tried to go under them?"

Surprised silence followed. It was Strifus who came up with the flaw.

"The foundations of those walls measure four strides thick, buried under five arm lengths of soft sand. Have you ever tried to dig in shifting, dry sand?"

"We will use the camp's water to firm the sand. We can do it tonight, so as not to be seen." Edwin's mind was fast producing the formula of attack. The pieces began to come together. He didn't see the risk. Thandor did.

"And," added Strifus, "below the sand is clay baked into rock hardness by years of desert heat. You are going to dig through that, too?"

"More water, to soften the clay! We will use every drop in the camp, and my marines will dig like madmen!"

Thandor was horrified. "You would leave three thousand Invokers without water, and your own two thousand men also? Are you mad?"

Strifus answered for Edwin. "We will die at the feet of this city anyway. If we do so without water, so much the better. There is a spring leading to a fountain in the city, the only water that can be gotten within a hundred

leagues, except by the pass which is guarded by the city! If we win, we will have our fill. If we lose..." The rest was left unspoken.

"And if we lose, it matters not!" Destiny injected.

Thandor's mind raced to find a way out of the impending slaughter. He could find none except to quit the fight, and that would only leave an army of Ragnall upon his flank while they climbed the mountain barrier between Eue and Dran. In that direction was but another slaughter. "It will not be enough! They will know what you are doing and stop you with flaming oil, or be waiting for you when you break through. You have but one hope, and that is to distract them with a frontal assault on the gate."

"I will lead that attack," said Strifus.

"No, my friend, we will." Two men, Thandor and Strifus, clasped each other's wrists. Sinews strained to bond mighty flesh with a brotherhood that could not be broken.

"I will lead my men under the wall," announced the Prince. "It must be at night so as to not be seen."

It only took Destiny a moment to measure the risk to Edwin. "No!"

The Prince looked into her eyes, his gaze expressing his shared pain at the risk to their future, their forever. "These are my men, Destiny, and I am their liege lord. I must lead them."

Her arms fell on his shoulders. She hugged him hard enough to make him wince. Her head tucked into his shoulder and neck, her long black hair hanging over his chest, she sobbed, "No, no, no."

Another prolonged scream came from outside the tent. "I must go," he said quietly. Going to the tent

door and looking to the walls of the city, he spoke in hushed tones. "Waiting will be the hardest part."

* * * * *

If not for the attack of the Ragnall, Dercy would have been the first non-Invoker in the city of D'While since its founding. She had memorized maps of the city and the catacombs at its rear. Getting there wouldn't be difficult, getting into the catacombs would. She knew that she would be surrounded by Ragnall, and that placed her one dark step from terror. Something about their mindless, super-efficient evil frightened her.

Perched atop a high dome, she looked down on the black entrance to the caves. Torchlight revealed four dozen guards, shoulder to shoulder and at attention in a semicircle around the opening. A large wrought iron gate barred her entrance, and her exit, should she ever get in. Each time it opened, the gate's creaking sounded a most effective alarm. To the side of the gate bubbled a small rivulet, its source hidden somewhere deep within the catacombs. She waited, knowing what was to come.

Several officers ran to the line of guards. They came to announce the attack on the main gates by the entire body of the two armies outside the walls. Dercy quickly glided, with perfect silence, to the open area between the gate and the guards. She quickly folded her wings onto her body where strong muscles held them very tight. She quietly removed a wedged-shaped rock from a pouch belted to her side. Two of the guards turned. They had heard a rustling sound. 'All right,' Dercy thought to herself, 'their hearing is very keen A Ragnall officer near the guards slapped one of the two guards for moving while at attention.'

A continuous rush of cool air pushed from the cave mouth into the heat of the evening. The night air was warm and dry, but what issued from the cave was brisk and moist.

Dercy waited for the next step in the plan to unfold. She didn't move, and breathed through her mouth with slow, fear-subduing breaths. She kept a cave wall between herself and the Ragnall's sight, just in case. Soon, one of the officers rattled the door, signaling that he wanted entrance to the cave. As Dercy had been warned, the gate's lock was on the inside. The catacombs had always been seen by the people of the city as a last bastion for retreat. Its use as a prison had never been contemplated.

As the gate opened for the officer's entrance, Dercy deftly placed the rock under its iron bottom. She didn't try to go in. The officer proceeded into the dark bowels of the cave, taking one of several torches with him. The guard pulled the gate to close it behind his superior. It moved a hand's distance and crunched to a halt. When he moved to kick the rock from where Dercy had placed it, she slipped in behind him and flattened herself against a wall. The guard froze a moment, closed the gate and waved his sword before him several times. Clearly he was expecting an escape from the inside by someone he couldn't see. He methodically searched the opening, and was coming to the wall she was immobile against, when the officer returned from his rounds. The guard abandoned his search. He had been close enough to reach out and touch her, which is exactly what Dercy feared he would do, as she would have become visible. Loud creaks from the iron door offered perfect sound cover for Dercy as she moved deeper into the cave.

Even if the Ragnall couldn't see her, she feared they would hear the pounding of her heart. She had taken but one turn from the opening, and the light from the torches at the entrance was completely gone. She had never been immersed in such blackness. Even dreams about dark nights were well lit compared to the utter darkness of the cave. She held her hand in front of her face, and while she

knew her hand was but inches away from her nose, she could see nothing of her hand. When she drew her hand closer, straining to see it, she was startled when it touched her nose. The blackness around her was so absolute that she hallucinated blotches of color. Blobs of dark purple and midnight red appeared from nowhere. Soon even this effect disappeared, and the darkness was total.

Gradually she adjusted to the darkness. Sounds came to her ears. The rivulet flowing from the cave gave her something to follow. She approached the noise through the blackness. She turned a corner, and was completely surprised at what she saw.

In the time she had followed the water to its source cave, her eyes had completed an adjustment to utter darkness. In the inky blackness of the cave, an evolutionary quirk in her sight made itself felt. For the first time, she saw in the dark in a way she couldn't explain. Faint, glowing figures were standing, though some were sitting, against the walls of the cave. There were hundreds of them. Though the seeing was hopelessly dim, she could make out one body from another. Heads and bodies appeared brighter than arms and legs. Noses and breasts were dark while cheeks and lips were bright. Incredulous, she realized that she could see the warmth of breath being expelled into the chilling cold of the cavern air.

All figures were stationary, save three. They were shorter than men, and Dercy instantly knew them to be Ragnall. Their heat signature was completely different than that of the man race.

More out of instinct than fear of being sighted, she peeked into the cavernous room while she hid her body around the corner.

Men, women, and children made muffled sounds. Their wrists were tied together. She couldn't hear chains, and that meant they were bound by rope. That was good, because rope was quiet and could be cut while chains were noisy and required keys to open.

Strange as the whole scene was, the oddest part was that the three Ragnall didn't appear handicapped by the blackness at all. They stepped over prisoners and signaled to each other as if they stood in daylight.

'Three against one, that sounds about right,' she thought to herself. Not encouraged by her own bravado, she weighed her chances with gloom.

With painfully slow deliberation, she pulled her bow from her back. Her creeping caution continued as she reached for three arrows. The shafts made tiny clicks as they bumped against each other. Total silence was impossible. The noise, however, was lost in the rustling of the people. She balanced two arrows in the hand that held the bow; the last she notched.

The shots were going to be difficult. Her night vision was getting better, but it lacked a three-dimensional quality. She would trust to a flat, fast trajectory, and for that, there was no better bow on the planet than the one she held.

She extended the bow back while still concealed behind the rock wall, took two deep open mouth breaths, took a normal breath, turned to face the opening, selected her target and loosed.

The Ragnall it hit was literally lifted off his feet by the blow of the arrow. She knew that she was now visible in normal light, the spell had been broken, but in the darkness it didn't matter. She could still see in the dark, and it was too dark to be seen. The other Ragnall froze, but too late. She had already picked her second target. The missile lodged in its chest with a satisfying thwack.

She had expected the third Ragnall to run at her, screaming in alarm. It did not. It dropped into the mass of people and was lost.

"Damn, Damn!" she whispered. She bent low and waited for a change. The volume of noise was rising

alarmingly. "Quiet!" she hissed. She returned the third arrow to its quiver and hung the bow onto her back. Pulling her dagger, she went to her knees and entered the cavern. In seconds she had gotten to the first of the men. He almost swallowed his gag in shock when she touched him. It reminded her that, while she had sight of a sort, the prisoners had none.

She went from man to silent man, cutting their hemp-rope bonds. From time to time she bobbed up, looking for the final Ragnall. With each second she improved her odds, one man at a time.

Without warning, she had a mass of Ragnall on her hands. He spat and bit at her as he tried to run her through with a short sword. A man stopped the blow by taking it himself. Dercy and the Ragnall were wrestling face to face, and for a time that seemed a fraction of forever, it was her fight and no one else's. In an instant, both fighters found the opening they had been looking for. In the darkness, the Ragnall jabbed his sword into her buttocks and she into his right side. She screamed without sound, knowing that all was lost if she was discovered. Her thrust had punctured the creature's lungs. It hissed like a teapot, but it couldn't scream.

She could feel the Ragnall getting to its feet to run. In desperation, she used her free hand to grab its rank hair and shove its face against a cave wall. Someone wrested the short sword from the creature's hand and pushed it past the leather armor to the heart of the thing. It quivered and died.

From the back of the cave, an Invoker made a dim light to hover and glow. Through a thickening veil of pain, Dercy quickly whispered her story and the instructions from Strifus, and then fainted.

* * * * *

Edwin watched as the fighters of the Northern Opens moved the battering ram past his position. Stationed behind sand dunes to the northeast of D'While's defensive walls, he couldn't be seen by the Ragnall spotters.

Two hundred men carried the great beam, cut from the foothill groves that gently rose from behind the desert basin. There weren't many trees there, but this giant oak was the biggest that could be found. It was as wide as the length of a man's arm from elbow to wrist. Horses had dragged it to a point where men with axes were waiting to chop notches into it for cross beams. The main strength of one hundred men on each side of the heavy, green oak lifted it and were carrying it to the gates of the city. They had rope shoulder harnesses around the log to lift its considerable weight. Slowly, they carried it toward the city's gate. It would hardly be a surprise attack, even in the night's moonless sky.

Dercy had already left for her mission, and Edwin was about to leave on his. As soon as the main attack commenced, he would go to the wall and dig.

It's surprising how few shovels can be found in the midst of two armies. Their scarcity now made each one worth its weight in gold. A spot for the digging had been chosen. Supposedly, there was a covered stable on the other side, one large enough to hold a thousand men. They were to be the first wave of the attack on the inside of the gate.

The prince had never participated in a siege. From the south-west of his position came the scream of thousands of men rising to the attack. Activity on the wall increased as guards were pulled to reinforce the parapet wall above the gate. About this time, the Ragnall would be pouring flaming oil, throwing rocks, bricks and firing arrows, raining all manner of things upon the heads of the attackers. The men at the head of that battering ram were as good as dead, their fate as black as the night is dark, yet there had been fights for the honor of taking that position.

Thandor, having been told of the strength of the main gate's bracing, didn't give them much chance of breaking through. Either the Invoker prisoners inside or his men would have to lift the brace holding the two halves of the gate together, or the attack would fail.

"Let's go," was Edwin's only command. A thousand marines carrying water and braces to pound into the shifting sand followed him to the wall. Edwin carried water. He did not flatter himself to be possessed of the strength of the marines at his side

The plan was set and practiced. Mallets with heads covered by leather muffled the sounds of the blows that pounded stakes into the sand. The sand itself flew from the expanding pit in a way that would have been comical if the work hadn't been so deadly serious. Precious water, giver of life in the desert, was dumped over the stakes to firm up the loose and flowing sand. It was working.

Edwin watched the dark heights of the battlement wall and knew that they were not yet safe. Men were running to the back of the camp to gather more supports and water, but no one had been seen. Edwin knew that the ease of his task was being bought and paid for by the lives of good Eue men, heroes he had come to know and respect. These men were kinsmen to his beloved Princess. These were men with families of their own. They were men most noble.

"Destiny," he whispered to himself as he worked. One flash of melancholy remembrance was all he allowed himself. He feared that thinking of her now would make him indecisive and timid. He pulled his shoulders back and spoke to himself. "If I ever see her again, it will be inside this city, not without."

Remarkably, his men had already reached the clay foundation. Now, everything rested on the work of three men. They dug furiously, possessed with their urgent mission. As men behind them splashed water on the baked clay in front of them, they attacked the mud with picks. The

work was frenetic. When one man faltered from the blistering pace of the dig, he was quickly lifted from the pit and replaced by fresh muscle and will. One marine paced in place, whispering to himself, "Me next. Me. Give it to me. Me next." All the men were impatient to get into the fight. Exhausted diggers were taken to the rear where they were treated as heroes, which they were. Buckets of heavy clay mud were dumped on the pristine white desert sand. Edwin wondered if any men had ever worked so hard, so quickly, to get into a fight that would probably kill them. He was very proud of these men from Onserf.

Soon the diggers could no longer be seen. They were under the walls. They would have to dig the distance of five strides before digging upward. Though the wall at its foundation was only four strides in width, the extra distance was needed to make room for the sand that would come cascading down on them. It would flow like the sand through the neck of an hourglass. There would be no bracing on the other side of the wall, and the dirt and sand would flow down in whatever way it wished.

Edwin tried not to think of the men that were dying to buy them this time, though the sounds of slaughter never left his ears.

Ladders were standing by to be shoved up the hole that would appear in the stable floor. Knowing the futility of praying for a warrior's success in battle, Edwin nonetheless prayed that there wouldn't be a guard on duty inside the stable when the floor fell through.

Sometimes chance says 'no', and sometimes chance says 'yes'. This time it was yes, for there were no Ragnall in the stable when the men from Onserf broke through the floor.

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Strifus knew he was going to lose a lot of men. He looked up at the ramparts, and the Ragnall that stood there waiting for the attack. The teeth of the battlements were blackened where the women of D'While had been torched. Many of their tortured, lifeless forms still hung against that wall. A thousand men waited for his word to avenge their deaths.

"E'caf E'tab!" His chosen fighting image came into being. He had invoked the image that had once frightened Dercy into a faint. Others called forth their own frightening visage, each using his personal invocation to bring it into being. Each image was different from the others in many ways, sometimes subtle, sometimes gross.

"Ready!" Twenty men stood before the battering ram. Each called forth a ball of flame and smoke into his hand.

"D'While!" Strifus screamed at the top of his lungs. The call was echoed by the thousand men around him, and by thousands more behind him. The twenty men ran to the gate to cast their fire upon it. Half of them didn't reach their mark, but the half that did set the gate to blazing when their fireballs burst against it. None of them made it back from the gate alive.

Two hundred men lifted the ram, and hundreds more moved forward without weapons, carrying only shields to cover the men hoisting the ram. Hundreds of flaming arrows arched from the walls into the mass of Invokers. Sheets of cascading flaming oil came from overhead. The Ragnall had been ready. Stones of every size rained down on the hapless attackers. Volley after volley of crossbow shafts came whistling into the men.

The ram slammed into the slit between the two doors, but with little effect. A dozen men holding the ram at its front died in the hail of spears, arrows and fire. They were immediately replaced by a dozen other men, and hundreds more waited their turn. Many men took it upon

themselves to carry or drag away their dead and dying brothers.

Thandor had seen men spent before. In the past he had given orders that had cost men's lives, but never had he seen men spent like this. He almost felt pity for the Ragnall should these men get their hands on the beasts. Almost, but not quite. Soon, just the task of carrying away the bodies of the fallen so as to allow the men a sure footing, became a major task.

Men died, and men died, and men died; always without question or expectation of life, or even help. Strifus watched for a change on the ramparts. There was none, until a figure in gleaming black armor took up a position over the point of the ram. He was too tall to be Ragnall. He towered above his minions. The attack on the gate did not abate, nor did the defense.

Thandor and the world outside the walls watched, fully intent on the apparition. The black-armored figure turned to grasp something behind it. Turning back, facing the attackers, it held at arm's length a young mother holding her child.

The threat was implicit. It needed no words. If the attack continued, the pair would be added to the cascade of rocks and stones that rained from above.

For a horrified moment, the attack hesitated. Men on the ram checked their souls for the courage and resolve to find an answer to the unspoken question. Many turned to Strifus.

Knowing that he would be changed forever, knowing that he would never again sleep quietly or rest deeply, Strifus ran forward and filled an empty spot on the ram. Flowers would never smell as sweet, and air would never be as fresh, but the attack had to continue.

Without pity or any measure of regret, the Ragnall leader in black armor let go of the woman still

grasping the child. For an instant they paused in midair, an eternal moment, then they fell onto the stone road below. Falling, the woman twisted her body so the child would fall on her soft flesh. When Invokers reached them, they were both dead. On orders from their leader, the bodies were riddled with Ragnall arrows from above.

Every man experienced those deaths, Strifus most of all. Every man continued to attack. They shed tears without pausing in their fight before the gates of the city of D'While.

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The attack from the stables came as an utter surprise to the Ragnall defending the gate. The fight was ferocious and silent. The marines of Onserf hit the guards like a brick in the back of the head. Atop the walls, the leader turned to find his minions had been flanked. Already, the marines were tearing into the small force that braced the gates against the dogged, incessant beat of the battering ram. Seeing his danger, the one in black armor stepped to the back edge of the walls and leaped off. The distance he fell would have broken the back and both legs of any man, but he took the enormous fall in stride, bent his knees upon landing and then waded into the fight. The blade he wielded was as black as his armor, and it cut through men like a sickle cuts the stalks of dry wheat.

More out of accident than intent, Edwin found himself blade to blade with the Ragnall general. The black apparition did not pause, but continued to send souls wholesale to their maker.

Attack soon turned to parry as Edwin engaged. Years of schooling in the best swordsmanship that royal money could buy saved his life, but no training could defend him from the this thing. For the span for four

lifetimes, the creature had practiced the art of the blade, forsaking other arts he had known before. He calculated the weakness of his opponent and twisted into a devastating attack. Had he known he was facing a Prince of Onserf and a leader of an army, the shadow-black leader would have killed the man facing him. Instead, for the joy of it, he severed Edwin's left arm between the elbow and the wrist.

The Prince dropped his sword and hit the cobblestones on his knees. The black one moved to more pressing matters. Several marines came to Edwin's aid. The hand was gone, trampled in the fighting, and there was no healing art anywhere in the world to bring it back. They quickly put a leather strap tourniquet on his arm to staunch the royal blood from its rush to mingle with the blood of so many others.

The sacrifice had not been in vain, for the braces against the gate had been removed, and the timber that secured it was lifted and dropped. The very next smash of the oak ram splintered all remaining closure mechanisms. The gates to D'While were open! Maddened Invokers rushed in, screaming.

Just as Invokers flooded through broken gates, a second flood came from the rear. The prisoners that Dercy had released, and the hundreds more that they had released, had arrived. The Ragnall were quickly, but not cheaply, overcome.

Yet, amidst their victory, men continued to die, for the dark one was not stopped. At odds of a hundred to one, he was claiming victory after victory. Soon, a circle, prickling with the points of a thousand swords, grew around him. The fight was over, except for this one creature.

That is when Thandor entered the ring. He drew the blue metal blade from its red scabbard.

This was not going to be a fight between enemies that respected each other. This would be ugly.

"I know who you are, and my blade will feed on you," spoke the thing in black armor. His voice was more of an object than a sound, and that object was the dark of night.

"Come then. Let's dance," Thandor said with quiet resolve.

Black blade sprang into life, and blue blade countered. When they met, the steels sparked and rang. The tumult of battle subsided around the circle, and only the effort of the two titans could be heard.

Keen edges had a magic of their own. Those that witnessed the fight never forgot it.

Hundreds of years of swordsmanship was put to the ultimate test. Blows that would have been the death of ten men were turned back, again and again. The morning sun should have come, but it did not. On they fought, until Thandor offered an opening to the dark thing. It took it.

It was a trap, and Thandor closed it so quickly that for years there were different stories as to what happened. Lightning fast, Thandor's blade found its way to the thing's thigh, half way to the blade's hilt. It screamed, and dropped its blade.

"Here, let me get that." Thandor pulled the blade from the bloody wound. He rested his sword's point over the thing's dark heart, if it had a heart, if it was where a heart should be. He forced it in with both hands. The black thing stood, black sword in hand. Thandor stood, blue blade deep in the black armored chest.

The Astori, for that is what it was, spoke but one word. "Burn." Fire leaped from its body and the armor that covered it. Thandor pulled and twisted, and his sword sang as it withdrew from the creature. The Astori folded and fell.

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Morning came at last, but the body of the creature of the night burned another evening. Dark black smoke rose into brilliant blue sky.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

THE DRAGONS

They had been at sea a long time, a lifetime, it seemed. Sailors were restless, and for good reason. Most of the fresh water was gone, and all of the fruit and vegetables were just a memory. The salted meats and rock-hard biscuits were all that was left. Fresh fish was not a problem, except that no one would eat it. The shortages were all too common. There were no fat sailors on this ship.

There was plenty of danger in these waters. Dirk had told Balanor of the giant sea turtles. Balanor thought the stories fanciful, until he saw one. When the monster came to the surface it looked like an island had suddenly risen from the deep. The island turtles were peaceful creatures. They never attacked. If one's ship happened to be under an island turtle when it rose from the deep, everyone aboard was going swimming.

One could be indifferent to island turtles. One could never be indifferent to dragons. A hungry dragon was a sailor's nightmare. A nest of dragons could strip a ship of every man aboard. A dragon's hunger was slow to fire but hard to quench.

"Land!" came the cry from the crow's nest. High above the deck the sailor pointed east. So many men rushed to the ship's beam that Balanor feared it would imbalance the merchant warship. It was a Sarahan that first made out the form of the island.

Efferet came to stand by Balanor's side. "I have waited a lifetime for this! I wish I could trust myself to fly the distance!" The old Sarahan stood on the tips of his toes to get a better look at the distant island.

Balanor was too polite to smile. His old professor's relative comfort had not been kind to his waistline. The cold air of Adopt was a poor flight instructor. Efferet's physical condition was similar to that of many Sarahan. The cold discouraged flight. Muscles required for flying went atrophied. Efferet's flying days were over

"What is that? Is that a sea bird?" One of the young Sarahan pointed to a spot above the horizon. It took many moments to answer the question, and no one was happy with the answer.

"Dragons!!" screamed Balanor.

Captain Longstaff immediately ordered the ship about, but compared to the horrifying speed of a dragon on the wing, the Venture was nightmare slow. The ship crawled into a turn.

Balanor rushed to the Captain's side. "Please, sir! You can't turn around now! I have to get to that island!"

"Child, starstone or no, I am not risking my crew with a horde of carrion dragons! If that dragon attacks you are likely to reach your precious island in the belly of a beast! I'd hoped we would find the dragons absent, but there they are! We are getting the hell out of here!"

Balanor thought about jumping overboard. He thought about climbing the riggings of the ship and leaping into the air. He might be able to soar to the island. Both actions would have been suicide. The image of a dragon picking him out of the air came to mind. He would have been a moth to a bat. A dragon would have eaten him like a snack.

There came a buzzing in his ears. Considering the situation, the sound was a stupid annoyance. The buzz grew from a faint background noise to a persistent whisper.

Balanor held his nose closed, shut his mouth and tried to clear his ears by blowing. It didn't work. As he looked around it was clear that several other Sarahan were having the same problem. Quickly other matters grabbed his attention. The dragons had arrived.

They seemed smaller than he had envisioned them to be. In the starstone-induced dream the dragons seemed quiet large. Reality gave the dragons a quality Balanor's vision had not. They were fearsome. Fear of a dragon in a dream can make a man moan. Fear of a dragon plunging out of the blue sky can stop a man's heart.

Most of the dragons had wingspans half the length of Venture. Some of the dragons were slightly smaller than the majority. Size is a gender indicator in dragons.

The upper side of a dragon's scaly flesh was black, shading to dark green at the joints. The glossy underside of the dragons was black-green blending to an iridescent purple at the upper chest. A dragon's eyes could be emerald-sea green or orange. This is what was most common. Several had golden yellow eyes. This was rare.

Balanor knew the color of dragon eyes all too well. He knew this because each of the visiting dragons looked right at him. No other person aboard Venture attracted so much attention. Not that many of the crew were above decks to be seen by the dragons. Most of the men and several sarahan were hiding below decks. They huddled in the bowels of the ship, the place where rats lived and bilge water gathered. The dragons were giving Balanor special attention. As each dragon swept past the ship they would crane their neck to give Balanor a long look. Several dragons screamed a trumpet's note as they flew past Balanor.

The dragons weaved back and forth around the Venture. Men's two most common thoughts were, "What magnificent creatures!" and "I hope I don't get eaten!" Dragons are all about fear and fascination. One dragon

actually reached for a man cowering under the ship's wheel. A second dragon stopped this by slamming into the first dragon mid-air. Both dragons fell into the sea. Their splash-landing washed the deck of the Venture with sea water. The second dragon, the defender, screamed annoyance at the dragon who wanted to feed. Both dragons, having lost all air momentum, struggled mightily to get back into the air. Both of these dragons flew home.

The dragons were majestic. Their hides gleamed with the reflection of the tropical sun. A dragon hide would have made exquisite leather. The trouble would come in persuading a dragon to part with its skin. Hunting a dragon for its hide is deemed by the gods as an act of suicide. Dragons were real acrobatics. Men and Sarahan aboard Venture watched the flight of the dragons with dread and fascination. Dragons could fly just above the sea or power themselves to great altitudes. Their long, supportive wings allowed them to pivot in the air. Dragons could fly in one direction while looking back in the other direction. They could lay their long, slender heads and neck along their back or under their wing as they flew. Their tail, tipped in the shape of arrow, acted as a rudder. The body of a dragon was thin, but not snake thin. It takes more muscles than can fit into the shape of a snake to lift a dragon on wing.

Their beauty was undeniable. Their necks were long and handsome, not awkward. Their heads were elongated and rectangular, not triangular like that of a snake. Their mouth were filled with long rows of fierce-looking teeth. Their ears were large. A dragon's ears lay flat against their head when they fly.

Balanor realized that he and his Sarahan brothers were the only ones left on deck. The entire crew, save Longstaff and Dirk, had gone below. Even those two men kept an eye on the steps to below deck.

"Get down, you idiot!"

Balanor was surprised that Captain Longstaff was speaking to him! It occurred to Balanor that he should

be frightened. He looked at the horde of dragons. He looked at the cowering Captain.

"What are you frightened of?" Balanor was oblivious to how absurd the question was.

Efferæet overheard Balanor and added, "Don't be frightened! They're just playing!" It was true. The many dragons were looping, falling in spins and pulling up, twisting and turning in ecstatic joy.

"What in the hell is going on here?" The Captain's question was reflected in the eyes of every brave soul that stuck his head up from below decks. Foolish or courageous, men were appearing to see the spectacle.

The beating wings of the dragons were very close to the sails, disrupting the currents that filled them. Venture lost headway and slowed to a halt.

Until now the dragons had not communicated. There was no reason to believe that they communicated with others or between themselves. Their trumpets and screams seemed more shout than speech. Though Balanor's ears buzzed madly, he had heard no words from the dragons. Suddenly, a complex scale of high and piercing notes was heard. The playful dragons quickly moved away from the ship. Without warning, a once-distant dragon moved closer, much closer. With sudden alarm, Balanor realized that this dragon was roughly twice the size of the others, and it was NOT playing! Quick as lightning, and deft as an eagle plucking a fish from a clear mountain lake, the dragon reached down and wrapped its scaly talons around Balanor. He was lifted from the ship and was at once carried over the ocean.

Balanor was not going to fall. The dragon had him in an iron grip. He wasn't being squeezed but he was locked into the talons of the dragon. Nonetheless, being held by a dragon was not like being held by your mother.

In a remote part of Balanor's mind he noticed his speed as he was flown over the water. His detachment surprised him. He was traveling many times faster than he'd ever experienced. Speed is relative. Balanor had every right to be terrified by his speed, his altitude and his situation. He was not. His overriding emotion was curiosity. He smiled to himself when, for a moment, he thought of his wife. Considering how Dercy felt about travel on a horse, Balanor wonder how she would feel about flight in the talons of a dragon.

Balanor knew at once that the dragon that had taken him off venture was the she-dragon of his vision. She beat mighty wings to push herself through the thick, warm air. Though female dragons were generally smaller than male dragons, this dragon was the exception. Flight under her was exhilarating. Nonetheless, Balanor had concerns about the eating habits of dragons. Was he going to be her snack?

Wind rushed through Balanor's hair. The warm, tropical sea passed beneath him at a wondrous speed. Many times he had listened to men talk of their envy at his ability to fly. For the first time, Balanor understood that envy. "To fly like this," he thought aloud. Dragons don't glide. They are not held passively aloft on breezes. Dragons do not drop or fall. Dragons flew! This dragon was the master of the wind, not just its guest. She forced the air aside with easy strength.

No longer worried, he allowed himself to be carried to the island. Lifted and held aloft by the she-dragon, Balanor's mind flew as his body never could.

Beach then land passed beneath the Dragon. Balanor's eyes were tearing because of the wing. To his moist eyes came sentimental tears. He knew where he was. He had never been here before but this was home. The moment overcame his reserve and Balanor shed tears of joy. This was his ancestral home. He was home! At last! His heart was in his throat.

The dragon and the sarahan continued inland. Balanor drank in the green of the land. There was a continuous carpet of forest and ferns as far as the eye could see. In the distant center of the island rose the perfect cone of a mighty volcano. A few clouds crowned the mighty mountain top with a halo of softness. The white and gray of the clouds was an elegant contrast to the green of the forest canopy. The azure blue sky was a jewel in this geographical crown of colors. Balanor had never seen the sky so deep, so high, so perfect. Above the triple canopy jungle-forest he saw colorful flocks of birds rise into the air, panicked into flight by his enormous dragon. The bird's plumage was a riot of colors in blues, greens, yellows and reds. Once Balanor thought he saw a great cat-like beast running beneath him. It wasn't until they approached the center of the island that his winged carrier slowed and intentionally stalled into a one legged landing.

The land here was much less lush. His proximity to the volcano meant the terrain was rough, even hilly. Many of the hills were bare of trees. Bushes punctuated foothills covered with brown grasses. From this point of view the clouds crowning the volcano were overhead. The patchy clouds were yellow and white puffs overhead. Many of the clouds caught the rays of the sun in such a way as to color them the shade of light toast. It was remarkable how at home the place felt, this thought Balanor had never stepped foot on these lands before this.

The flight ended with them near an outcropping of rocks in an upward-tilted valley. Low, brown grass covered the ground.

The she-dragon stalled the landing on a small clearing. She hopped on her one free leg. That leg, talons flattened, bore the dragons entire weight. Balanor, clenched in the other talon, was carefully suspended. She reached out and sat Balanor down. She did it gently, as though Balanor were a fine piece of family porcelain. She backed away several strides, stopped, folded her wings and sat on her haunches.

Balanor checked himself. Nothing broken, bruised or torn.

"Hello, little brother. Welcome home. We have missed you."

Balanor heard her, but she hadn't spoken! The voice hadn't come from her, it came from his mind!

"Hello?" Balanor said. He was hesitant to continue. "Thank you." His mind boggled. He was talking to a dragon!

"Please relax, Balanor. Be seated."

"This is going to take some getting used to!" Balanor said aloud. "How is it you know my name? How are you speaking with me?"

"You told me your name seven times on the way here. You should know how I speak to you. It was you that placed me in your cusp dream. That is where we first met. By the way, little brother, reaching for me within a cusp was a bit impudent. I knew you were in my moment. You came without permission!"

For an uncomfortable moment he wasn't sure if he had done something wrong. A dragon's smile, showing row after row of dagger-length teeth, bore precious little resemblance to a Sarahan smile. "Ah... Sorry?" Balanor's apology also came out as a question. "Who are you?" Balanor thought to calm himself. "Excuse me. Are there rules of etiquette I should observe when speaking to a dragon?"

She laughed. "Yes and no. Your people called me Mildramar. I have other names, none you could pronounce. You may hear the other dragons address me as mother. Certainly there is no need for you to do that." She raised her head and blasted a horn-like sound into the air. It resonated up the rocky slopes and echoed back to Balanor. "That sound is my name on Cone, the archipelago island

closest to the continent. Beyond Cone many men live. They do not come as far as Cone and we do not go as far as their continent. As I have said, I have many names."

"Why have you selected me to come here?" Balanor brushed himself off. He sat against a nearby boulder. "There were other sarahan on the Venture. I am the only one that was taken off the ship." Balanor paused. "I am the only one taken of the ship, aren't I?"

"Yes, you are, Balanor. As to why you have been chosen, while your brothers are lights in the night, you stand brighter and more luminous than all the rest. You are lightning personified. You must have a very great soul, Balanor, to seem so brilliant. Tell me, child, are you part dragon?"

Balanor shook his head in the negative. He shook it vigorously.

"No? Well, you seem to be. You're not aware of your powers, are you? I suspect that you stand high in that other place. You may stand among the greatest array technicians that your race has ever produced. Your genius is natural and complete."

Modesty rose to Balanor's cheeks in a ruby blush.

"We are so different," she said, kindly. "A dragon would never shy away from praise. I've known many Sarahan in the past. It has been a great while though. Your kind have been absent. I had forgotten how charming your people can be." She pointed with her snout in the direction of the volcano. "I have brought you here for a reason. There is something you need to collect. Can you see up the mountain? That is the great city of your ancestors. That is where you will find the weapon of your Starstone dream."

"The Fa Calamber? The Starstone sword? Will it help me against the Ragnall?"

"It may," said Mildramar. "You should know that Fa Calamber means 'Sight sword' in Dragonish. The Sarahan adopted the word long ago. The sword was a myth before it was real. It has been a priority project of your species for many years. Some insight brought them to their need. They dedicated themselves to making the Sight sword. Maybe you can discover why the weapon was made."

"Why would you want to help me against the Ragnall, against anyone?"

"Once upon a time your people and mine were great friends," she said. She paused for quite some time. "I don't know the Ragnall. I don't know what harm they have done. The sword will help you in whatever righteous cause you choose. How it will do this I do not know. Balanor," said the she-dragon "I do know this. Your enemy is not a race. Your enemy is not a people. Your enemy is but one person and his seven followers." Mildramar held up her head and sniffed the air. "There are only five of them now! Two of them have been destroyed! It is a good beginning!"

Balanor stood up and moved closer. He found another boulder to lean against. The rock he chose was within reach of the great dragon. He could have leaned forward and put his hand on her. "I thought the fight was with the Ragnall?" he said.

She thought for a moment. This was a cusp moment. The instant was painted in her mind. It was that important. She decided the best way to approach the subject was the long way around. "I'll tell you again, Balanor. We are so very different. Dragons come to their powers naturally, without tools like starstones. We ARE Starstones! We are slow to learn but long to remember. There is an eternal door that we live beyond but not behind. Perhaps the most important difference between us of all is that we do not change when we have reached the fullness of our understanding. Your people do. We go on. You go away."

Balanor was the perfect student. He listened quietly, intently, to her every word.

"It is the degree of change that your kind goes through that makes your understanding so dangerous. There will come a point when you will change." She paused to bend down, very close, staring at him with great, green eyes. "You will evolve."

Balanor wondered to himself if a dragon could smile! This one appeared to smile!"

"Having done so, your kind may move beyond a dragon's understanding. Interesting! Exciting! However, with this change comes your real death. He, the one I've been speaking of, used your promise to destroy your race. He gave your people, almost all of them, what they sought. With his tools he moved your race into a perfect understanding. In a single moment he used your search for your soul against you. He moved your people into eternity. The Sarahan are gone now because they have moved on."

Balanor wasn't sure he understood, but understanding was approaching. His own experience had open up eternity to him. He had come to know that forever can be a trap.

"The one you are seeking," continued Mildramar "has cheated death. In that way he is like a dragon, but his power is still like yours. He came to this world a century ago. He used his technology to destroy your people. Nearly all of them died. We, your dragon friends, thought that the Sarahan had died. It is nearly as great a shock that the Sarahan exist as when they ceased to exist. We thought you were lost forever. Close at hand, in the nearby city, many hundreds of thousands of Sarahan died. A complete accounting was never done. The total number of your people that were lost is staggering. It was genocide, an atrocity global proportions. Only the gods of myth and legend have such disregard for loss of life. It is a miracle that you are here. I don't know why you were saved, but you were."

Mildramar stood and stretched her wings wide. It was a gesture that symbolized the entire island. "I have, with the help of my kind, kept this place free of others. We have held it for your return. If hope is a seed you remaining Sarahan are a tree we planted. In our dreams we had visions that he hadn't gotten you all. Why this is so we do not know." She paused a long while.

"I do not know his name, this creature. I don't know where he came from or where he is now, but I know that you must kill him. You must destroy him or he will kill you all. His hatred of your kind is insane, and it is awesome. He has incredible power, but he is not rational. Because this is so, he is insane, deeply insane."

"Were you here when my people died?" Balanor looked into the green eyes of the she-dragon. There was much he would know of her. He knew there wouldn't be time.

"Yes, I was, and until that night, dragons didn't have nightmares." She rolled her eyes. It was an odd thing to do. The gesture seemed her way to purge some horrid sight from her eyes. "Husbands and wives, children and adults, all died in an instant. They fell from the sky. They died in their beds, they died, all of them, in a single moment. The dead were everywhere. It is your innate powers of the mind that made you vulnerable to him. Your greatness was your flaw."

Mildramar extended her wings for flight. "On my back with you, young one! You are about to receive a singular honor. The mother of dragons is about to take you aloft!" The dragon craned her neck so that her head was whisper-close. "I must not continue to carry you like a fish caught from a lake. It lacks dignity." She spoke very softly. There was a note of humor in her voice. "Child, we must leave for the city! You have a task to complete! It is my intention to return you to your ship while it is still light! You have a long way to go and very little time to get to where you are going! I will tell you the rest of this sad story on the way to the mount!"

Balanor climbed a tall rock to get to the spine of the she-dragon. He gingerly struggled up her spine. Her scales of her spine were sharper than they appeared to be. He sat astride her great neck. When he had settled, he patted her neck three times. Mildramar exploded into the air! Being carried in a dragon's talons was exciting. Riding atop a dragon was exhilarating!

They rose over the island and flew towards the city. Vegetation grew less abundant as they approached the city. The Balanor could just make out plots of land where orchards and vineyards had once been. The green of vegetation was replaced with a palette of darker colors. There was the black of volcanic rock, the brown of soil and the tan of dried grass. The slant of the land increased. Orchards were planted in orderly rows. The fruit farms were now fallow and overrun. Chaos had overtaken order. The city was suddenly under wing.

Mildramar circled the center of the city. An obelisk was the pivot of her flight. She descended in a gentle circle. The obelisk marked the center of a great courtyard. The spot was remarkable for its flatness. Everything else had a remarkable tilt. Even the roads leaned into the mountains slope.

The homes, shops and buildings of the city appeared flat and square to the roads. This was an illusion. Descending and near to the courtyard, Balanor could see that no structure was flat to the land. Each had a down slope basement that supported an upper floor. No building had more than these two levels.

Most of the buildings were structurally undisturbed and sound. The exterior walls of the structures had a yellow-orange look. Before this Balanor had never seen walls covered with adobe and straw. The adobe buildings suffered many cracks in their walls. There was no one to maintain these homes, these businesses.

The architecture of the city was not like that of men. Many doors were oval at their crown. Double doors

were often build in heart shapes. as the buildings never supported more than a single floor, there was no need for balconies. Many of the buildings, however, had landing perches. They were there as an invitation dragons, a selfish courtesy. Speaking with a dragon is a rare, rich pleasure.

These places had once been populated. The population was a race of people who could fly. It had been considered rude to land directly on the roof of a building. A building's roof is the other side of a building's ceiling. An abrupt, hard landing over one's head makes for a nasty surprise. A hard landing on a roof had been considered a good reason to give the intruder a vicious welcome.

Mildramar stalled into a landing. The warm, dry air at his altitude on the slope of this volcanic mountain supported her air-weight well. The dragons talons sounded an odd clatter on the cobblestones of the circular plaza. Balanor descended the dragon's neck as gingerly as he had climbed up.

This was a city born of a technology. That technology was the manufacture of artificial starstones. The development of artificial starstones concurrent with the study of the effects that could be drawn from the stones. Here, starstones were treated as science. their use and effects were technology. This was not a place of mysticism. To the sarahan starstone technology was first a theory. Evidence and observation was gathered to test the theory. Conclusions were drawn based on tests. Conclusions were then tested. Nothing was left to chance. Better facts, not stronger faith, was sought by starstone technicians. This city and much of its population was focused on one thing, the power accessible through starstones.

The city was, as cities go, new. It looked habitable from a distance. Despite the appearance there were no souls here. The exception was Balanor and the great, deep soul of the Mother of Dragons, Mildramar. Having landed, Balanor saw that the wilderness had taken over. Vines grew everywhere. There was a riot of weeds where once had been small, ornamental lawns.

Mildramar used for fore-talon to point. "Up this road there is a while building. It is the only one made of stone. You will find what you are looking for inside. I will wait for you here. Balanor. Moments fall like rain. Time pools and pounds. If you do not hurry, tomorrow will be a lake in which many may drown. It may already be too late. You know what you seek. You have already seen it. Your destiny is down that road. Hurry!"

Balanor retraced the steps of his Starstone memory. He left Mildramar the marbled entrance of the Island Science Institute. He knew that was the name of the structure because the words were carved into the entrance over the building's great green copper doors. This building had once sheltered the most advanced scientists on this world. The sciences studied and applied here was so far in advance of the planet's norm that rules had been in place to forbid its dissemination to others.

Balanor passed rooms full of books. Some books were open, the skeleton of its reader poised over its pages., Was ever a page so nobly marked? Tubes of glass and huge metal wheels filled one room. Long metal pipes were everywhere. In another room, lengths of thin metal rope, some covered with a strange wrap, reached from black boxes to complex contraptions whose purpose was too fantastic to be guessed. Balanor moved on.

Finally, he reached the arched entrance above which were the dragon's words, "Fa Calamber." He saw it! The 'Sight Sword' lay before him! In that wondrous moment, as he reached for the sword that was a jewel, Balanor expected dizziness like he had suffered when he had previously lived a cusp-moment. This time it was very different.

As a tidal wave of dizziness was about to crash over him, he reached blindly for the golden hilt of the sword. In an instant, the looming dizziness exploded in a fire of burning clarity that lit his very soul. Every cell of his body, every thought of his mind, screamed with awareness of life.

Balanor knew that he held in his hand the perfect conductor of power. All his life he had poured his energies into his body, which was hardly a conductor at all. Now, all resistance to his will was gone. He felt as if he had been struck by lightning, but rather than be destroyed by it, he had been empowered by it. Instinctively he knew that he was feeling just a fraction, a shadow's mirror reflection, of the real power of this jewel. He had but to enter it, as he had done with his tiny Starstone, to grasp its unlimited power.

Amidst all the force of the sword, Balanor had the eerie feeling he was being watched. Darkness incarnate was just over the horizon. It wanted his life, and it had tasted Sarahan blood before. Balanor gathered himself to destroy it.

In that terrible moment, raw, uncontrolled power could have been loosed upon all, but he was saved. A trumpeting sounded in his mind. Mildramar called to him as a dragon would to another dragon. The mother of her kind understood the danger Balanor was in. He was about to lose himself, forever. Eternity was one mistake away. Balanor's existence sat on a sword's edge, and Mildramar reached out to pull him back.

Balanor put the sword down, sat, and rested. He did not rest long though, because, as he had brushed against eternity, he saw what he needed to do.

He began by looking for some way to carry the sword without touching it. Being in physical contact with the Sight Sword was far too dangerous.

On a nearby bench was a scabbard of a black substance that he had never seen before. It looked as if it was constructed specifically for the sword. It was made to be worn across the chest, not at his side. It was an awkward way to carry a sword, but its makers must have had their reasons. He pushed the scabbard onto the sword without touching the powerful jewel. The Sight Sword was

obviously a Starstone, a single, massive jewel, but Balanor knew it was so much more.

When the sword rested entirely in the black material, Balanor had an uneasy moment. He thought he recognized the material the sheath was made of. It looked very much like the armor of the creature, the Astori. "Coincidence," he said aloud, and put it out of his mind. He strapped the sword on. The effect of being so close to the Sight sword, though its power was greatly dampened by the black sheath, was remarkable. He returned to Mildramar.

Dozens of smaller dragons filled the air above. The curious buzzing filled Balanor's ears again.

"I have instructed my sons and daughters to take food and water to your ship. You must leave immediately! You have revealed yourself to him! You have awoken him from his sleep, and he is very angry! The creature, the evil thing that slaughtered your people, is now aware of you. I sense that he is about to set plans in motion that will destroy us all, dragon, Sarahan, everything! Hurry now! You must hurry!"

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

THE MEETING

It was the least celebrated victory that he had ever seen. After the kinds of losses and injuries they had suffered, Thandor would have liked to have taken a month or more to heal, but there was no time. If the Ragnall could support an assault like this against the Invokers, he could imagine the kind of hell Dran was experiencing.

"General, you're wanted at a meeting with Strifus and the Prince." Thandor gave a nod. He walked through the charred and shattered gates into the city. To his left, the corpse of the Astori continued to burn. Dercy had given the creature its name. 'It just came to me. I heard it in my head,' she had said. The name stuck. Neither water nor sand had been able to put out the acrid fire.

He came to the palace of Morcus, the southern Sheik, whose body had not been found.

It was all so odd. In a city where torture and murder had taken place on a scale never seen before, there hadn't been a single case of wanton destruction or pillage in the entire city. The palace was as pristine as the day it was built. This was NOT like the Ragnall of old.

Metal taps on the bottom of his boots clicked against marble floor as Thandor was escorted to the Hall of Meetings.

They were all there. Dercy stood; her injury on her behind kept her on her feet. The rest of the gathering sat in padded chairs. Edwin's face was colorless, but he looked strong of will. His forearm was heavily bandaged where it had been severed. Destiny wore a look of concern, but she also smoldered in a quiet rage. Somehow the emotions reflected in her face didn't diminish her beauty, they

matured it. Strifus look haunted and worn. Edwin spoke first.

"I have issued orders to break camp and leave for Dran tomorrow. I am, of course, coming with you."

Thandor considered protesting, but did not. The boy Prince had earned a man's right to continue the fight.

Strifus didn't speak, but Destiny did. "The remainder of the forces of our holy city and the army of the Northern Opens will be coming with you. It is our fight now."

As much as their help would have lifted Thandor's dread, he wondered if the decision was the right one. "Strifus, shouldn't your men stay to help in the healing of this city?"

"To heal from illness, one must first kill the disease." Strifus' wisdom was as profound as always, but something was missing. His soul seemed bruised. "We are coming with you, like it or not," he continued.

"Of course. Then we leave for Dran at day's first light." Little else was spoken, as all went to make preparation.

* * * * *

Their numbers had been cut in half, and there hadn't been nearly enough of them to begin with. Regardless, the combined armies roused themselves in the morning and entered the mountain pass behind the city. The going was too steep for riding, so even Thandor led his horse up the trail. Soon, they were high enough to feel a difference in temperature.

Dercy was glad to walk beside her horse, rather than upon it. An injury in the rear made riding torture.

Destiny spent most of her time near Edwin. She watched him closely for changes in his bearing. Other than beads of sweat on his brow, there were none. Her pride in him swelled.

"Are you sure you don't want me to lead your horse?"

"No, love. He's my responsibility and I'll lead him. I've come this far on his back, I suppose I can lead for awhile."

She broached the topic of his injury with some trepidation. "How is your arm today?"

"It hurts like mad, clear down to the fingers that aren't there anymore." He looked at the stub like he was looking at a bent fork or a broken spoon. "The bleeding has stopped. I suppose I should be grateful that it hurts. That tells me it's healing. It's a funny thing, though. I feel as if I could scratch my head with the hand that's gone. In fact I've tried to do just that, several times."

A small cascade of rocks and gravel went by on the left hand side of the trail. Suddenly, a boulder the size of a wagon came crashing through the line of men above them. Several marines at the lead of the armies were injured, though none seriously.

Edwin handed his mount's reins to Destiny. Briefly, he squeezed her hand, then moved quickly to the front of the line. Thandor was already there, examining an outcropping of rocks. "Sit down," he pulled at Edwin. "It's still too early for you to be running."

"I'm..." he paused for three deep breaths, "all right." His collar was soaked from his sweat. Clearly he wasn't all right. "What..." another pause for air, "happened?"

Thandor pointed to the moist earth where the boulder had once rested. Exposed insects were still scrambling for cover. He pointed to an empty depression where the boulder had sat. "See here, and here? That boulder was wedged out and shoved onto us intentionally. Was anyone hurt down the trail?"

"Hurt, but not badly. Any idea who did this?"

"It had to be Ragnall trying to delay us. They must have stationed scouts outside the city, because no Ragnall were left alive inside the city. Something is ahead of us." Thandor looked up, concerned.

"So what's next? A forest fire?" Edwin sounded frustrated. "Nothing about this adventure has gone the way it was supposed to!"

Thandor patted the shoulder on which Edwin's arm sling rested. "I know, my friend, but I'm afraid that we haven't seen the worst of it. Dran will be..." Thandor paused a very long while, "bad." He stood and looked up the trail. "We are going to have to send scouts ahead to protect the main body." He smiled. "It's funny when you think about it. Here we are, an army of seamen, desert warriors with not a ranger or mountain man among us. We're about to pass over one hell of a mountainous ridge that none amongst us has ever passed before. Whoever planned this expedition should have his butt kicked."

Edwin laughed. "That would be you, Thandor!"

Strifus reached the scene. Together they explained to him that further attacks on the front of the climbing armies should be expected.

* * * * *

The next morning, Strifus came to Thandor with news. "There are about one hundred of them, or rather, there were about a hundred. Ten of them didn't wake up this morning."

"So that's where you and your men were last night! Don't you think you need to be resting? Let the young men do that sort of work."

"I feel better than I have for days. It was just what I needed." The peculiar gleam in his eye lent credence to his words. "I have never traveled this trail before; few of our people have, and The Bridgeman was the most famous of those. We must be careful."

Three days later they had nearly reached the summit of the ridge. The going had become very hard for the animals. The incline of the trail required countless switchbacks to make any progress. Five or six strides to the side were required to make the equivalent of one stride forward.

It didn't help that Ragnall snipers were stinging the formations almost constantly. Arrows or rocks came from behind trees. Boulders were set loose to roll down on men and animals alike. Trip ropes were hidden. Sweet water mountain pools were poisoned and traps were set. The Ragnall required payment in suffering and delay for every step taken.

The seventh day of the mountainous climb was nearly impossible for the four-legged animals. Except for a small, rocky gorge and the wildlife-worn path therein, there was nowhere to go. Through some geological oddity, nature had set up the perfect site for an ambush and defense. It marked precisely the summit of the range.

"I am not about to abandon several thousand horses and most of our provisions so we can go around fewer than one hundred Ragnall."

Edwin nodded. "I agree with Strifus. We can't just abandon our mounts and pack animals. Can we send a few hundred men around them and take them from the rear?"

"We can do that, but it'll take three days." Thandor looked troubled. "What if they don't intend to hurt us? What if they just mean to delay us? They could hole themselves up in those rocks and let us attack from both sides for days. It could turn into a siege! Time is not on our side!"

"They've left us no choice. We'll line up and rush them."

"Costly, Strifus, and very risky. With their defensive advantage, our casualties could be...considerable. Ten to one minimum." Thandor stopped to smile as Dercy stood and raised her hand. "Yes, Dercy?"

"Why don't you attack them at night? Some of the Invokers could call up an invisibility spell and get into their camp. At night we would be harder to hit, right? And I could help. Destiny has been teaching me some invocations, and..."

"WHAT?" shouted Thandor.

"WHAT?" screamed Strifus.

"She did?" questioned Edwin. "She wouldn't teach her secrets to me! What makes you so special?"

"You're not Sarahan!" Dercy pulled her shoulders back, stuck her chest out and looked triumphant. "Wanna see me disappear?"

"No!" Strifus stomped up to Edwin, stopping only when they were nose to nose. "Where is she?"

Edwin tried not to smile, but failed. "Down the trail about fifty strides and to the left."

Strifus started to leave, stopped, pointed and shouted, "I'm with her plan!" He proceeded down the trail in a big hurry.

"Someone is going to catch unholy hell."

It took Edwin and Dercy a moment to realize that Thandor had let loose a joke. The surprise almost knocked them over.

* * * * *

All was at the ready; the positions had been spotted while still light. Invokers that would be going up familiarized themselves with the path. With luck there would be enough confusion in the ranks of the Ragnall that the full attack wouldn't suffer the kind of one-sided casualties it would have otherwise.

There was little chance that any prisoners would be taken. Ragnall would not be allowed to surrender. The atrocities committed at D'While would be avenged.

Camp fires were built and allowed to go out, and when it was closer to the new dawn than the previous dusk, the word was given.

The lead Invoker thought he was ready for anything. He was wrong.

Shouts and tumult came to everyone's ears. Ringing steel, meaty blows, howls and screams were heard all along the line. It was a fight, one hell of a fight, and the battle was washing down the mountainside. The Invokers, poised for their surprise attack, were surprised instead.

Without warning, Ragnall were among the desert warriors, but the hated Ragnall weren't fighting, they were fleeing! Short, stout figures in heavy studded leather

armor were cutting and bashing their way through the enemy's ranks. Like black ants over-running a nest of red ants, helmeted Dwarves were slaughtering Ragnall! As they watched, the Invokers saw the number of the hated defilers of D'While cut in half, then halved again! With a mixture of joy and horror, all realized the battle would soon be over, and they hadn't killed a single enemy!

"D'While!" was shouted, and Invokers ran headlong into the melee.

It lasted only a few minutes. Having killed every Ragnall in sight, Dwarf and Invoker looked around for more. Ragnall were still dying of numerous wounds when a female warrior, an oddity seldom seen by an Invoker, stepped up to the men coming up the hill. She placed her war hammer on her shoulder and removed her helmet. Ringlets of dark red hair spilled out onto rings of iron banded to her leather armor.

"Anybody here seen a dragon spawn called Thandor? Gods, he's hot!"

* * * * *

"Rosie! By the fire below, what are you doing here!" Thandor was obviously delighted.

"You mean besides pulling your buns out of the fire? My friends and I were just looking for a few laughs. Seems we found some. That's a pretty rag-tag group you're leading!"

"You should see the other guys!" Thandor laughed out loud. He picked her up and bear-hugged her into breathlessness. She didn't seem to mind. "You're an endless surprise! Just how did you manage to obtain a Dwarves army?"

"Put me down, Giant! When are you going to start treating me like a lady?" She looked over her shoulder at the hundreds of Dwarves descending the slope from the ridge. "My army. Like it? They are four thousand five hundred of the toughest warriors on this planet. The King of Clanggedin owed me a favor, so I cashed it in."

"Why would the king of Clanggedin owe you a favor?"

"He wasn't always King! He deposed my younger brother to get the job! On top of that, he banished me to Onserf. I was just a young girl, still am actually, and had to work for a living. Didn't know I was a princess, did 'ya?" She paused for a sad smile. "I've had to forswear my claim to the throne to get this help, to get this army, but at least I'm free to return to Clanggedin as I wish. Besides, the deal has made me rich. Pretty good, ea?"

Thandor was touched to the deepest recesses of his soul. "Rosie, this is the most generous act by a race I have ever seen. And you!" A rare smile broke out on Thandor's face, unexpected, like dawn at midnight. "You're the best, Rosie. You were always the best."

The orange-red light of morning touched the horizon. "Ha! Looks like a 'Rosie' morning all around. I vote we party all night! I've got everything we need. So! How's my boy and how's his girl?"

"Edwin was hurt. We have a lot to talk about."

"Let's go see him! We'll have a morning grog. It will be morning soon, I'm guessing. No need to wait."

"No drinking here, Rosie. Not allowed. This is Eue land."

"Not allowed! No drinking? What kind of place is this?" Together they walked down the trail and into the new day.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

THE RIVER DREW

The dragons kept their word, as dragons always do. Venture was supplied in abundance with every imaginable provision. Whole fruit trees had been uprooted and dumped on the deck. Mushrooms as big as a man's fist, incredible vegetables, and fish the size of a long arm were laid on deck. One overzealous dragon left a beehive full of honey ... including the bees. Various birds and beasts of the forest were also left, though often badly mauled. Dragons are hard on their catch. Flasks were gathered from the dead cities of the island, filled with fresh water, at least it looked like fresh water, and carried to the men at sea. The dragons dropped the flasks like water bombs on the heads of them all. Can dragons laugh? Everybody on board the Venture would say yes.

The sailors of Onserf were surprised when Balanor was returned to the ship. Efferæet was not surprised. By then, he had been in communication with several of the older dragons. The younger dragons were too busy playing to converse. However, dragons do not measure 'younger' and 'older' as others do.

Balanor was the unquestioned hero of the voyage. His return with the Sight Sword generated long and enthusiastic cheers. Everyone wanted to see the blade, but he refused to take it from its scabbard. "It's a bit like holding lightning. It would be best if I kept it sheathed," he explained.

"What is that made of?" Efferæet was curious about the material that surrounded the blade, the sheath. "I don't think I have ever seen anything like it before."

"I have." Captain Longstaff sounded grave. "See how the black shine is so deep it seems to have a depth of

its own, beyond sight? Balanor, you were down below when it happened, but when the creature turned into its final form, it was wearing black armor that gleamed just like that sword's sheath does."

"It's a coincidence, I'm sure. How could the two have anything to do with each other? Besides, the black dragons tell me we are the first ship to approach Loft in a hundred years." The old teacher touched the black sheath. "It feels like wood."

"It doesn't matter." Balanor spoke firmly. "The force of the sword is too great outside the sheath. This scabbard was made for this weapon. The sword sleeps when inside the scabbard."

"So be it! I don't pretend to understand any of this. I'm just a Captain sailing into war, and it's way past time to get serious about getting to where we are going."

Balanor felt as though the force of the sword was greatly subdued while sheathed. However, some of the urgency of its power escaped. It was as if something was shouting at him from afar, pulling him to hurry.

During each of the short summer nights, the pull grew worse. Some nights he would sight the Swiftstar, the orphan that moved against the background stars, the one Dirk called 'the Evil Eye'. The pull of the Sight Sword became all but unbearable. One night, Venture was becalmed in a portion of the ocean called 'the doldrums'. The winds of the world were gone.

"Balanor, I've never seen you so impatient." Efferaet placed his hand on his one-time student. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"It isn't a question of patience, it is a matter of instinct. Don't you see? I know, not believe mind you, but know that if we don't reach the river and Dran, and soon, that Thandor will die, and the Prince, and Destiny, and my wife! The free lands will be scorched, burned to nubs.

Stone buildings will fall, everything will fail. Death will become us!" He looked into the future. "No! Not again!" Balanor shouted at something unseen.

For the first time in hours, Balanor stopped pacing the deck. He faced the multiple evils ahead with certain intent.

"'No' what, Balanor?" whispered Efferæet, genuinely concerned. He had never seen his student like this.

"No, he cannot have my life, nor the blood of my wife, and he cannot have my friends, and he cannot have my PEOPLE!" Balanor virtually screamed the last word.

Dirk decided it was time to get help. "Captain!" He raised his voice from a shout to a yell. "CAPTAIN!"

By the time Captain Longstaff had come from below, Balanor had made his decision. With a flourish he drew the Sight Sword from its scabbard. The beauty of the jewel was riveting.

To Captain Longstaff, and every man aboard the ship, the weapon was elegant, unbelievably beautiful, and utterly useless. The edges were brilliant and bright, but its edge was as dull as a spoon. The point was blunt! Yet, even in the evening's darkness, the interior depth of the polished blade gleamed, catching and reflecting the light of a thousand stars. Though radiant, the Sight Sword looked as though it would break into a thousand shards if used to strike a blow.

To every Sarahan on the ship, whether he was in sight of the sword or not, the power radiated by the weapon was riveting. Each felt it subjectively. Efferæet felt it very deeply, but none felt the depth of the power as did Balanor.

Had he reached out and taken full control of the force, as he could have easily done, all would have been

lost. Instead, Balanor let the power reach for him. Once again, he had stood at the precipice of omniscience, and stepped back.

"Wind," he said gently. It was the first time the Sight Sword had been tapped. Reality rippled and shimmered like the waters of a mirror lake when disturbed by a pebble.

It began as a faint breeze against the cheeks of men and Sarahan. Some brushed at their faces as though to shoo away an insect that had happened there. The feeling was eerie, and the hair rose on more heads than one.

Efferet and the Captain feared for Balanor's safety, but they didn't interfere. Soon the sails began to fill, and the timbers of the masts began to take up the force of the growing wind upon the sails. In minutes, ropes strained with the pull of canvas, and Venture gained speed as she was carried through the glassy-calm sea by a made wind.

Frightened seamen mouthed calls for divine protection. Some pulled charms or beads from their pockets. Efferet and the Sarahan simply watched in awe, feeling the power in their minds and through the ribs of their chests. Balanor had constructed a channel of sheer will.

Dirk, at the ship's wheel, spoke aloud, "It is the breath of God."

"I can hold this!" Balanor sounded exhilarated. "Captain! Put up more sail! Put up all you can! I have found my strength, and we must hurry!"

Longstaff was profoundly reluctant to put up more sail. The magical wind had, for a moment, unnerved him. Yet Balanor's urgent pleadings swayed him. No matter how much canvas the crew put up, there was wind for more. Regardless of what direction the Captain steered, the wind was always at their back. Even when the world's real wind reached them, Balanor's made wind pushed it

back and filled the sails taut in the direction that he wished to go.

The hour grew very late, and Efferact began to be concerned about how much of this Balanor could take. There seemed no physical effort involved, but the level of concentration must have been enormous. Only once did he risk breaking that concentration with a question.

"Balanor, how do you make this much wind? It must be an awful strain!"

"Strain? Ha! Watch! It will stop, and begin again!" Balanor let the sword drop for a moment. The small lines in his face smoothed as tension was relaxed.

With a sudden re-focus, there was a sharp increase in the wind. Gusts of gale force lashed at the masts, and whistled through the ropes and pulleys. The ship creaked and strained under the push of a giant hand of wind. The tip of the flag of Onserf, flying at the ship's highest point, snapped and popped like a whip. Once more, Balanor had taken up the sword. His face froze into a distorted frown of effort. The angry wind would not abate.

Much later, men's fatigue overcame their wonder and all hands, except those assigned a night watch, went below and fell into exhausted sleep.

When morning came, it found Balanor at the ship's bow, looking over the water. He searched the distant horizon for something that he couldn't name. He wouldn't take time for food, only some warm soup. A gentle real wind reigned during quick gulps of food. Two men lost their footing and nearly fell overboard at the abrupt change of ship's speed. One sail came loose at the corner and flapped like the wing of a lame duck. It took four men to tie it back down.

Longstaff took knotted-rope readings on Venture's speed, and promptly dismissed the results. No

ship could survive traveling the world's water so fast! Balanor began again, strength upon strength.

For days it was thus. The men, and his Sarahan brothers, began to see a change in Balanor. Each passing moment seemed to draw him away to a different place. What he was doing made him seem less real. In fact, Balanor was somewhere else.

Efferact thought to grab the sword from Balanor's hands and throw it into the deep sea, but he did not, nor would he allow others to do it. Though he could only sense a fraction of the will controlling the sword's power, the absolute urgency behind it was clear.

Not for the first time, he regretted that he had involved this special boy in this adventure. Dercy was right. He had tossed the boy into the white waters of a river full of trouble. That act had set in motion forces that now played them all like puppets.

League after league passed beneath Venture. They raced at a madman's pace over the waves. On the seventh day, Balanor asked for the sheath of the Sight Sword. When he pushed the blade into it, the storm of wind blew itself out. The world's real wind returned to the ship's sails. Balanor fell asleep on the spot. Dirk picked him up and carried him to the Captain's cabin to rest. Around his own tiny cot men and Sarahan stood and whispered about the wondrous things he had done. Outside the Captain's door everyone waited. None would have roused the boy even if they could.

Balanor slept for fourteen hours. His first request when he awoke was for food, and lots of it.

"Don't eat so fast! You'll give yourself cramps."

"Efferact, quit brooding over me. I need to get topside and get back to work."

"You're going to do that again?"

"Of course I am, but it will be different this time. Lives are at stake. If I could have pushed through, we would have caught the battle hours before it was joined. As it is, thousands will die so that I could rest!" Balanor sounded disappointed with himself. The great things that he had already done hadn't occurred to him.

"How do you know all this? Have you tuned a cusp with that sword?"

Balanor spoke between wolfs of food. Red wine dribbled down his chin. "I don't need a Starstone to tune a cusp. Haven't you ever answered a puzzlement without knowing where the answer came from? I have found that lost source! That sword breaks down the wall between knowing fact and intuition! They are the same thing! I haven't time to explain; beings are dying!"

Speaking with his teacher had exposed the urgency. He stood up from his bunk, sending the food and drink flying. He rushed topside, and screamed, "Grab on to something! Now!" He ran to Venture's bow and drew the sword. Soundless lightning flashed, forming a bright circle of pure, white light around the ship. The ball of brilliance shifted and rippled, as though the forces of nature were trying to give birth. Once again he spoke a simple word, "WIND!" This time he spoke in a shout.

"Oh gods, not again," muttered one of the ship's crew.

A blast of warm air slammed into the sails. Within minutes, the warship fairly leapt over the water. Suddenly, the entire ship, from stem to stern, from highest mast to deepest beam, was surrounded by a bubble of iridescent force the likes of which none had ever seen or imagined before. Venture was a ship in a bottle as it raced through the water. It was the fastest thing on the planet.

"I'm going to have to ask him how he does that," muttered Efferact.

The black carrion dragons hadn't been seen since Balanor had evoked the made wind. At the speed they were traveling, provisions would be in abundance. No one knew where Balanor's will to control the Sight Sword came from, but in the few instances when his concentration was broken, they were glad for his strength. On one terrible night, three days into the renewed rush, he'd lost control completely.

Without warning, Balanor fell to the deck of the ship and covered his head. Dirk was the first one to his side.

"What's wrong? What is it?"

"He's found me, and he's watching!"

A made wind of another kind tore at the sails, ripping several their entire length. The top of the main mast snapped like a twig, losing the ship's top sail and crow's nest. Men and Sarahan grabbed anything they could to keep from being swept overboard. Wind that, when controlled, had carried Venture like a ship with wings, now lashed at her from all directions. A perfect cacophony of storm and raw, wrenching power battered all. Their protective bubble was gone, as broken as a distracted thought.

The wind was so strong it sucked breath from lungs. The force screamed, and the shouts of the crew could not be heard. Balanor lifted himself to his knees. Holding the Sight Sword with both hands, he raised it in front of him.

The air screamed and howled like a beast. Once free, it was determined never to be captured again. Sea water washed over the deck. One wave carried a man, and the Sarahan that was clinging to his shoulders, into the black night. Their screams were like whispers against the raging sound of the storm. Lightning flashed in every direction. Clouds swirled everywhere. There was a hole in the sky and a pit in the sea.

Venture began to push through. He secured another bubble of force. Should it disappear again, for even a moment, all would have been lost. The ship skipped over the water. Balanor began to best the power that had beat about them.

Efferet crawled to his side, holding the sword's sheath. "Balanor, put the sword in its scabbard!" He screamed at the top of his lungs to be heard over the storm.

"I can't! We would all be dead instantly! Now that he's found us, he'd kill us all, like he did our fathers! Look!"

Balanor used the Sight Sword to point into the hole in the night sky. Far, far overhead raced the Swiftstar. "Dirk called it the Evil Eye, and that's what it is! It's his sight that's upon us!"

The wind-storm abated. Balanor had grasped the power once more. Repairs to Venture were made as swiftly as possible, but the ship was beginning to look well used. A head count was taken; two were lost.

In the following days, Balanor held back the power, binding it into a manageable blast. League upon league of sea passed under their bow. On the third day, Dirk noticed a change in the color of the sea. He immediately informed the Captain and Efferet.

"We have entered the yellow waters of the River Drew!"

"That's impossible," protested Efferet.
"Captain, there is no land in sight!"

"The Drew drains most of the continent. Its delta is huge! Where it spills fresh water into the sea, it is a league from bank to bank. From the mouth of its muddy waters, the Drew pushes salt water back over the horizon. Along its entire length, it is as deep as a man can swim in one breath. From one side of the Drew, a man cannot see

the other side." Longstaff smiled. "It is possible, all right. We have reached the river, and upriver is Dran, capitol of freedom."

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

THE FIELDS OF DRAN

More than ten thousand soldiers, marines from Onserf, invaders from Eue and dwarves from Clanggedin moved into the valley that lay between the upper portion of the river Drew and the mountains. That range of snow capped mountains was the natural boundary between the Ragnall nation and the rest of the world. That river was the artery of life for the city of Dran.

Thandor led. He sat astride Traveler, his invoker stallion. Rank after rank of defenders followed. Rosie led four thousand fierce Dwarves warriors. Many carried banners from their faraway nation. Strifus led his magnificent invoker cavalry. He led four thousand men, consisting of equal numbers from the Northern Opens and survivors of the battle for D'While. They all rode forward sharing the same grim look. The Prince of Onserf led two thousand soldiers and marines of several races from his city by the sea. Scouts reported contact with scattered bands of Ragnall. The Ragnall invaders retreated quickly as the three armies behind Thandor bore down on them. Dwarves with axes hacked their way through subtropical forests that lay in the way. When swamps were encountered, the dwarves cut down leagues of forest to make corduroy roads. Invokers hunted the forest for game while marines gathered fish, fowl and plant-food from the banks of the mighty river Drew. Dercy, with her amazing bow, hunted with the invaders and brought down every forest buck she wished. Still, the armies made six leagues a day. They fancied themselves the swiftest force on the planet. It was almost true. Weeks passed before the armies met anyone from the city of Dran. People that had once lived in the valley at the foot of the great city had become refugees. A fisherman from the eastern bank of the river was the first friendly soul Thandor's scouts met. The man was found hiding in the

swamp forest. He had thought the combined army of defenders to be the main body of the Ragnall army. Thandor questioned the man. The fisherman gave his entire catch to the armies. He joined the ranks as a provider. From the fisherman Thandor learned that the battle for the fields of Dran had been going on for a month. Thandor also learned that the main force of the enemy was expected soon. Thandor's armies were eight days from the Fields of Dran. Ten invoker riders, the best available, were sent ahead to inform the forces of Dran of the imminent arrival of help. On the sixth day, the lieutenant of that scout force returned. Strifus and Thandor were there when he rode up.

"We were ambushed yesterday, at the point where the valley narrows between the river and the mountains." Though he was wounded, the invoker officer refused care until after he had reported. "When I left the fields, the ones in front of the Ragnall Pass, the defending forces there feared being overrun at any moment. Hundreds of Ragnall scouts are coming through the forested part of the mountain range. Every night Ragnall roam from one side of the pass to another. They seem to be searching for something. Every night, vast ranks of Ragnall try to get into the fight. They move to flank the defenders at Ragnall Pass. The city has gathered forces numbering fifteen thousand men. They have many northern Giants with them. The defenders of Dran are facing an estimated force of one hundred fifty thousand Ragnall."

"What!?" screamed Thandor. "That's impossible! Ragnall have never attacked in anything like those numbers!"

The invoker scout continued, "All agree, this is like nothing anyone has ever seen before. It is as if the filthy Ragnall nation has been lifted like a rug, spilling the entire Ragnall population onto your doorstep, onto the Fields of Dran." He paused to swallow and to recover the courage his report had lost to him.

"These Ragnall are different!" The rider shouted to make his point. "There is an Astori leading them! He is

said to be like the one at D'While, but of the utmost high rank! Thandor, your Fieldguard are among the defenders plugging up the Ragnall Pass! I am sorry, sir, but they WILL be forced back! I have seen the fighting! It doesn't cease! The Ragnall attack at night, all night, and all the next day! They attack over the piled bodies of their own dead and dying! They attack and attack and attack!" The officer fell from his saddle, exhausted. Strifus grabbed a fistful of the man's tunic before the exhausted man hit the ground.

"Brother fighter!" Strifus hissed. Strifus dismounted. He gently lowered the unconscious rider to the grass.

Strifus spoke up toward Thandor, who was still mounted upon the white stallion Traveler. Strifus spoke through clenched teeth. "We'll be too late! After all that's been done are we going to get there too late?" He shook his head in a slow denial of his own dark question. "No! They will not have my city! They have defiled enough! We will march through the night and fight without sleep, but we'll not quit!"

Thandor's fist shook with fierce intent. Thandor's words reached into the bruised soul of Strifus. With a strength that had been lost, the invoker regained his battle fever. "My men will lead us through the swamps with made light!" Strifus pledged, "The others will follow with torches! You're right, Thandor! We cannot let happen to Dran what happened to D'While! I care not that another king of Hell is waiting for us. We will not let it happen again!" What happened that night was a form of heroism not often sung of in songs. Man and Dwarf, hard pushed already, reached inside themselves and found more. Every well, however, has a bottom. They worked until they fell into the muck, where their fellows picked them up and carried them on their backs. All night they fought the land, knowing that they were hacking their way to certain death. Moving faster than a sane man would move on sunlit day on dry land, they passed through darkness, through snake-infested swamp, at night.

By the next morning, all were exhausted. Strifus was afoot beside Thandor. The men's mounts didn't wander. Those animals were war horses and stayed nearby. Strifus spoke the morning's first words. "It is a hard thing to ask a man to fight and die after working like this."

Strifus frowned. There was pain behind his eyes. The invoker looked at Thandor. "It won't get any easier, will it Thandor? It never seems to."

"No, my friend. The longer you live, the more you realize the value of life. It is never easy to ask a man to forfeit his life. Thank the gods that it is not easy, for the world would be a horrible place indeed if

death was a small thing. Strifus, it is the struggle, not the victory, that counts."

Upon the newly laid corduroy road, a rider in red surrounded by a scout guard of invokers rode into sight. "Thandor!" said the man in red, "I can hardly believe that it's you! We had heard you were coming, but few believed it! All hope for help had long since died!"

The lieutenant was the same man that Thandor had left in the Castle Dran so many days ago. Thandor smiled despite his urgent concern, despite his immediate need of news. The smile went away.

"Report!" Thandor said.

"Sir, we have begun a retreat from Ragnall Pass! We are being pushed back to the banks of the river Drew! Tens of thousands of the enemy move boats toward the water! There is something else being moved onto the fields, some huge device of war. The enemy fight and die as if their deaths were a feather. The Landguard have drawn a final line at the river. The Ragnall will have to cross over us to get to Dran!" "Damn it! I hoped that by the full of morning we would have been on the field ourselves!" Thandor stared into the distance as if it was the enemy too.

"You are there, sir! It is mid-morning now! Day has yet to come! The Ragnall Astori-General has blotted out the light of day! Your forward scouts stand on the fields before the Ragnall Pass! If you could attack the enemy's flank and stem their flow into the fields..." He ended his report with this pause. "There are so many of them, sir."

"Rosie!" Thandor called to the woman that led the Dwarves army. She had been nearby. "Close the distance to the Ragnall Pass! Take Strifus and the invoker cavalry with you. They will shock the Ragnall line and you will pass through the break! Strifus! Charge! I ride to the defense of

the river and city. My men await me!"

"Go, Thandor," said Rosie. "After death, be us in heaven or hell, we will rule there together, you and I!"

"Strifus! Fight the good fight! I go now, blood brother!" Traveler leapt forward. Thandor leaned into the ride. Horse and rider blistered the dark morning day with their speed.

* * * * *

All the armies had moved into the field. They fought a bloody fight at the mouth of the Ragnall Pass. Strifus held good ground, up slope from the pass. Rosie was at his side. She looked into the valley and saw thousands of glimmering torches in the hands of Ragnall. Edwin, Destiny and Dercy stayed on the heights above the fields with a hundred

invokers. Their high ground, a mere foothill, sloped down to dip a toe into the

waters of the river Drew.

An angry, red sun shone through the blackened sky. Smoke from a thousand fires, billowing and thick, blocked the warmth from above. Light was being blotted out. Darkness and death combined to make the Fields of Dran an unspeakably offensive sight.

The invoker cavalry, having evoked their fighting forms, sliced into the flank of the Ragnall. Marines of Onserf and Dwarves of Clanggedin fought their way across the enemy horde. They split the Ragnall mass like a wedge splits firewood. The defenders turned and hammered at the Ragnall's opposite flank. The bottleneck of Ragnall Pass was squeezed in a pincer movement. Nonetheless, countless tens of thousands of the enemy had already moved onto the field and were advancing toward the river.

The Ragnall were hopelessly outclassed in martial skills. The human and Dwarves armies were hopelessly outnumbered. The result was a bloodbath.

As a killing madness overcame both sides, each took their savage toll in its own way. No matter how many Ragnall died, and thousands died, the enemy showed no fear. They attacked, and attacked, and attacked. When five Ragnall fell, ten more marched over the dead to replace them.

Invokers cast fire into the Ragnall ranks. Invokers scythed the enemy down with their scimitars, or simply led their mounts to stomp the enemy underfoot. Ragnall died in dozens, hundreds and thousands, and still their ranks swelled.

This was the Ragnall Pass. Somewhere under the still warm and twitching bodies of the newly dead lay the cold, lifeless dead of the previous night's fight.

Defenders failed to staunch the bleeding into the open fields. To this swelling dirge of death, a song for the dying was added. The death of countless Landguard, northern Giants, common soldiers and citizens of the city

added a melancholy refrain to the dirge. The casualties among the ranks of invokers, dwarves and Onserf's marines mounted.

Caring not of the force that made to divide the Ragnall horde, that enemy did not turn to fight the new threat. Ragnall seemed not to care that their numbers were being divided. With myopic intent, the isolated Ragnall marched for the river Drew. The Ragnall only cared for what was

ahead.

Invokers on horseback, used to the open field battles of the deserts of Eue, found themselves in an ocean of Ragnall. They cut through the enemy like a knife through summer melon. Yet no sooner had they cut that line than their own line was bowed back by the pressure of the enemy forces trying to get into the valley and onto the river.

Dwarves charged into the hole cut open by invoker cavalry. Dwarves hammers beat against the pressing Ragnall. Crossbows on both sides, meant to be fired across a great distance, were discharged at point-blank range. Fierce dwarves were hit numerous times by the black bolts of Ragnall weapons. Several dwarfs sprouted an absurd numbers of the bolts, but they fought on. In one bloody example of the fighting, a marine died after taking five Ragnall to the ground with him. In another, a Dwarf died when a Ragnall ran a sword into the dwarf's chest. The dwarf denied the Ragnall the return of its sword when the dwarf gripped the hilt of the blade as he died. Even in death he would not let go. Such as this went on until there were no more marines, and no more dwarves. There were only countless legions of Ragnall. The enemy pushed stubbornly forward through the pass.

Finally, the pincer attack divided the Ragnall. The dwarves, the marines of Onserf and the invoker cavalry pinched in from one flank. The defenders of the city, the northern giants and the Landguard pinched in from

the other flank. Together they had stopped the enemy army from going through Ragnall Pass and into the valley, the Fields of Dran. Those Ragnall already on the field were fully divided from those trying to attain the field.

No time for glory. All defenders turned to face the tidal wave of Ragnall boiling over in front of them. The city's hope was a thin line, perhaps three fighters deep. The bleeding of attackers into the valley

had been stopped. The defender's line bent in. It thinned. Ragnall pushed and fought with a maddening calm, caring not if they died. They moved forward, always forward. Ragnall reserves were thrown in. There was a power behind the Ragnall, but no one knew what that power was.

Invokers fought until their magic was gone. Marines fought until their strength was gone. Dwarves fought until their hope was gone. When the magic, and the strength, and the hope was gone, the line was destroyed,

Ragnall once again poured onto the Fields of Dran.

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In his dash for the river Drew, Thandor left his lieutenant to follow as best he could. Traveler sensed that the battle was on, and gave a full measure of his speed. Soon he began to come upon scattered Ragnall, which Thandor dispatched without slowing.

The field ahead of him seemed a living thing, a singular mass of living flesh that slowly lifted itself and moved inexorably forward. Inside the mass he saw hundreds, if not thousands, of boats. Ragnall intended to cross over to Dran.

At the river's edge, a new color came to his eyes, the bright uniforms of the officers and men of the Landguard. The entire army was there. Red uniforms were torn and cut, blood red blotches on rust red coats. No Ragnall had yet touched the wide and muddy waters of the Drew, but it was a near thing. From the other side of the river, every manner of pleasure craft, fishing boat, water taxi, or transportation vessel had been pressed into service, moving the men of the city into battle. All knew full well that the fate of the defenders was their fate also, and the fate of their loved ones too.

Just before Thandor slammed into the Ragnall left flank, a sight from the river astonished him. On the river water in a hundred boats were more than a thousand men dressed in vivid white robes. The entire fellowship of the Bridgeman were coming to battle. Thandor wondered what the role of the men of the cloth would be in this blood-letting.

For a soul-frozen moment, Thandor caught the eyes of something deep within the morass of Ragnall. Seated on a huge mechanism, a behemoth of a war machine, was his Ragnall counterpart. The general of the invading army stood, and pointed a black gauntlet at Thandor. The village-sized platform he stood upon turned slowly. One hundred thousand Ragnall, as if with one mind, now focused their will, their chance for eternal life, on Thandor. He had killed one of the dark lords, and now he had to pay. A tight beam of evil intent, a great black light, had been focused on the leader of the Landguard.

Unaware that he had become the target of the vast army, Thandor urged Traveler into the fray. Leaping as though over a country fence, Traveler passed over the outermost ranks of the siege-force. Again and again Traveler crashed down upon the screaming Ragnall. With strength, Thandor lashed out to his right, to his left, with blue blade from crimson scabbard.

A strange noise came to his ears, unrecognized. Louder, still louder, the noise began to mean something.

His men were shouting his name. He had pierced his way to the main body of defenders, the shattered remnants of his beloved Landguard. Should he live to be a million years old, he would not forget that moment. They shouted his name. Tears of joy ran down their cheeks, and they reached out and touched him and Traveler.

Putting aside the moment, Thandor stood in his stirrups and bellowed hope.

"I have returned with the Sarahan! Now....
DEATH! DEATH!"

His men took up the cry, and it rang from side to side. Death, they shouted. To whom they invited death didn't matter. Like acolytes of death itself, they hurtled themselves to deliver death's bite, or to receive it. It did not matter which. They knew in the vastness of their souls that they would never forget this frenzy into blackness. It would haunt them forever.

When the fighting was as fierce as the world had ever seen, the defenders stopped the flood of Ragnall, stopped it and drove it back. Fighting while covered with blood, the blood of others mingling with their own, they moved the Ragnall until they stood on the grassy high water mark of the riverbank.

Behind them flowed the slow waters of the Drew. In front of them lay the great valley of land that was the Fields of Dran.

Then they saw a sight that extinguished their last glimmer of hope. They could see that their heroism had gained them the bodies of a few Ragnall, but ahead of them was the vast main body, the great engine of war, and the Astori. Black death sat calmly upon his golden throne. All of this, and more, was bearing down on them.

Soon, minds numb at what they had seen, the Landguard was driven back a stride, then two, then four. Back they went until their feet were wet in the waters of the

river Drew, until the water was waist high. Ragnall began putting boats into the water. Ten boats, then a hundred, each filled with invaders. Boats floated through holes in the fighting.

As one boat floated by, a Ragnall officer swung his mace at Thandor's head. Fighting with a dozen warriors in the water, the general didn't see the blow coming.

Thandor fell headlong into the Ragnall he had been slaughtering. They let him fall head first into the water.

For a moment he raised his head from the blood-stained waters. Through fuzzy sight, he thought he saw the form of a great, black ship coming upon him. 'So, this is death,' he thought, and fell face first into the waters, and lay motionless.

* * * * *

"I should be down there, you know. All this is about me."

"Dercy, how do you imagine that? You come from an island half a world away from here. How is this your fault?" Edwin was sincerely curious.

"You forget the prophecy, that Bridgeman thing! If I don't get down there, Thandor may lose this fight."

Edwin didn't dispel her illusion. With or without her, this fight was lost. "I don't recall the prophecy saying that you had to participate in the battle. What do you think you can add?"

"I've got the best damn bow on the planet! I've even gotten pretty good on a horseback! They need me! I

have this feeling that I should be down there! Never mind! I will not debate this!" Without warning Dercy kicked her horse into a gallop. So great was their shock that it was several seconds before anyone spoke.

"I can't let her go into that alone." Edwin melted into the eyes of Destiny.

"We are joined! I ask you not to leave me again!" She dropped her reins, knotted at the end, and leaned over to wrap her arms around his neck. After a tender kiss, she straightened in her saddle. "For the city of Dran, and for our child's future! Come on!" To the last man, her war-fevered guard of a hundred followed her down the rise and into the fields. Edwin rode by her side, aglow with love for Destiny and the child that she bore for him. Until that moment, he hadn't known.

"There is the last defense! See it?" Edwin pointed to a speck of red in a sea of green and brown Ragnall uniforms. "Dercy has keen eyes. She sees that she will never reach them by land. She's headed for the river!"

"Gods save us," wished Destiny out loud. "That is an awful lot of water!"

"I don't suppose you can swim?"

"In water? Swim in water? You're joking, right?"

"Then we're just going to have to get a boat!" Holding his reins in his right hand, Edwin pointed to the spot where the Ragnall horde met the river Drew. Several boats were being put into the water. He reached across to Destiny and kissed her as warmly as could be done on this night of nightmares.

With flashing steel and flaming fireball, the Invokers made short work of the unprotected flank of the Ragnall. Edwin had leaped off his horse and dived into the fray. His missing hand bothered him not at all, and he

fought like the whole man he knew he was. Destiny loosed some particularly vicious sheets of flame toward Ragnall bracing for a counter-attack directed toward the Prince. Soon, they had more than enough boats to carry the whole of them.

Edwin saw right away that Invokers were almost useless as boatmen. He wished he'd brought some of his marines with him. Dercy was already out of shouting range. The bodies of a half dozen Ragnall, shot through by her incredible bow, hung over the side of the boat she had captured. Her mount, and those of the Invokers, were running to safety along the unoccupied left flank of the attack.

"Sit down! Quit rocking the boat! Take an oar and do like this." Edwin wasn't letting the loss of his hand affect him. He rowed with gusto, so much so that the boat began to circle. He took time out to use his stump to bash the skull of a drowning Ragnall trying to reach into the boat. "Stay out of my boat!" he shouted.

Ecstatic to be in his own element again, Edwin shouted at the fumbling Invokers as they tried to battle and row at the same time. "Row, you dusty riders! Horses be damned, we have a boat!" He gave the bottom of his boot to another Ragnall. "Can't you riders row? Rudder to port!" He bit the hand of a Ragnall that grabbed his arm. It screamed and let go. "Left! Left! No, YOUR left! Go that way!"

Soon they had halved the distance between themselves and Dercy. Destiny watched as Dercy stood in her boat and shouted.

"Thandor! Look out!" Dercy saw the Ragnall's mace bounce off Thandor's head.

Edwin could not see who Dercy was shouting to, but he saw her scream and hold her hand to her mouth in horror.

"Erie Do!" Dercy shouted her curse, her invocation, at a boat full of Ragnall led by the particularly vicious-looking officer that had bashed Thandor. The boat and its Ragnall load burst into green-orange flame.

"She's an extraordinary student!" spoke Destiny, who had seen Dercy's invocation. She was very proud of her pupil.

Dercy changed her direction and headed for shore. She passed dozens of boats. In fact, the entire river was filling with Ragnall boats. Edwin watched her, frantically trying to row in her direction. Inexplicably, she leaped from her boat into the water with a perfect dive. She swam to a figure floating in the filth and gore filling the river and lifted him.

It was then that Edwin saw the black ship before him, and its sight turned the marrow of his bones to rock hard ice. A huge, black ship surrounded by an iridescent bubble of force, like some monster child's toy, came from the down river darkness to loom over them. It stopped in an impossibly short distance.

* * * * *

In a line that stretched back in time for one hundred forty years, there had been a Bridgeman. The first Bridgeman had died with his Sarahan teachers that he cherished so much. The Bridgeman had written his prophecy the night before he died. Now the current Bridgeman was living the prophecy.

The battle between good and evil, between light and darkness, between freedom and slavery, was underway. The clerics were here, just as that first Bridgeman had instructed them to be so long ago. Theirs was a peaceful

religion, a spiritual one, but they had been called to war by their founder.

Now they stood in a hundred boats, ten white-robed men to a boat, as they moved in on the carnage before them. The Ragnall had entered the water, having driven back the defenders of Dran. Boats filled with armed Ragnall warriors were coming their way. Knowing little else to do, the Ragnall fired upon the Bridgeman, even before their crossbows were within range. The bolts struck the water in front of Bridgeman's boat.

"Get ready," he calmly asked of the men behind him. Each of them, on the two sides of the boat, placed his right hand on the left shoulder of the man in front of him. They then each rested their head on their outstretched arm. In a strange form of meditation, they all began to mummer, voicing some intoned prayer in a low hum.

The Bridgeman, being foremost in the boat, stood with his own hand outstretched, touching no one. The years of spiritual discipline allowed him to reach, without holding, what he wanted.

The Bridgeman entered a place, the spiritual source of thought, the well of knowing, the essence of being. Here was a place for the spirit, an object for something that wasn't corporeal. Here was the great contradiction, the irony, the puzzle, the great paradox of life and death.

The first Bridgeman had been here; perhaps he was still in this place, but no one had ever found him.

Even from this place looking out, he could sense the power accumulating. His brethren added their strength to his; the power grew. In an instant, he reached out and tapped the smallest fraction of the power, the merest static charge of a huge dynamo. He opened his eyes and cast the charge at the nearest Ragnall boat.

A blistering bolt of blue-white lightning arced from his open palm to the war boat. The force of the attack threw the Bridgeman and his followers onto the floor of their boat. The Ragnall craft exploded in a mass of splintered wood and seared flesh. Pieces of the boat, afire, floated beside smoking lumps of Ragnall. No screams were voiced. There had been no time. The water under which the boat had been afloat hissed, bubbled and steamed.

The Bridgeman looked down at his once-pristine white robe. It was charred and blackened in many places. His hand and arm looked as though they had been dipped in acid, and they were bloody and raw. The pain reached him and he screamed. He tried to speak, but agony took his words. Spent, he motioned for his boat to be turned around and returned to the Dran's side of the river. He was of no further use here. He stood, and motioned for the others to continue their attack. Other concussions followed. The Ragnall paused in horror as the brilliant light of the bolts gave strobe-like evidence of the carnage.

Forces expended, the Bridgeman saw the form of a great seagoing vessel, a warship, appear out of the blackness. Her great sails were completely filled, yet there was no breeze on this blackest of mornings. Her bow wave reached their small boats. Bridgeman were flung to the floor of their craft.

The Bridgeman turned, stood, and looked for the ship that had passed, but its speed had carried it past seeing. As he watched, he sensed that something was about to happen.

He thought he recognized a myth, a Sarahan, lifting itself on beating wings from the ship's deck. The Bridgeman had spent his entire life studying this species. Though he did not immediately recognize the flying form, when he did, his eyes opened wide. He realized he was observing the fulfillment of the first Bridgeman's final prophecy. A Sarahan flew over the battlefields of Dran. In slow, worshipful tones, the Bridgeman whispered urgently, "Lord of Light!"

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

THE ASTORI

It was better when the Swiftstar wasn't overhead. Easier. It had been many days since he had rested, but he now took strength directly from the source of the power. His body seemed inconsequential.

"Land abeam!" The call from the crow's nest brought everyone up from below deck. Ocean spray splashed onto the bubble that surrounded the ship. Many crew gathered at the ship's rail. Balanor had not relaxed his hold on the made wind. They'd long since broken every speed record held by any vessel, fresh or salt water.

Efferæet licked his lips, nabbing a drip of water from a canteen he had just drunk from. "The sea below us seems to be fresh water! How can this be?"

"It's as I told you. Though still at sea, we are in the middle of the greatest river on the planet, the Drew. She flows into the sea, separate and distinct, for many leagues. Set a westerly course, Number One. Soon we will be out of this chop, and we'll see how fast this good ship can really travel!"

Dirk turned the ship's wheel until the land was nearly on the beam. Dirk's turn actually had no effect on the ship. It was Balanor alone that moved the vessel now.

One of the Sarahan pointed ahead. "There is a thing there! Something is out there!"

"What eyes you Sarahan have! I'd hire you to sail with me anytime! I see nothing. Ahoy! Crow's nest! What see ya, ahead!"

The sailor, pushed forward by the made wind, shaded his eyes from the midday sun. "Land only, sir... Wait! Ships! Three, no, six... seven! Blackships, sir. Corsairs!"

"Damn! Most of the Ragnall war fleet, waiting for us! Dirk, move us to the middle of the river's path." Venture leaned into the turn, losing some speed. Balanor was following Dirk's tack.

"They've spotted us!" Efferæet grabbed the rail with both hands. "They're moving to intercept!"

"We'll never get a shot off at this speed! Balanor, can't you slow us down?"

Balanor didn't respond with words, but with action. The wind in the sails turned into a gale. Venture lurched forward.

"We won't be slowing," suggested Efferæet with dry wit.

"It appears not!" Longstaff searched his tortured canvas for signs of a rip. The mainmast protested the incessant pressure as though it would splinter.

"Three more, sir!"

"Damn it!" The Captain was not prone to expletives, but a blockade of ten ships warranted it. He moved to Balanor's side. The boy's jaw was set in granite concentration. "Do we have to do it this way, son?"

Balanor's lips moved, but no sound issued. Sweat dripped down his face as he nodded yes.

"So be it! Crew! Rig for ramming!"

Dirk echoed the order, sending the crew into frenetic action.

Longstaff was certain they would avoid most of the Black Ships. Speed alone would do that. With the enemy in sight, he maneuvered Venture like a game master, weighing his opponent's options, countering with his best.

At the Ragnall fleet grew larger, he could see that two of the vessels would be within striking distance. They had taken up a parallel, albeit slower course, and were waiting to pinch him.

Waiting until they had committed themselves to inward turns, he grabbed Balanor by the shoulders and shouted, "Stow the wind, son. Stow it all!"

Balanor gripped the sword and laid it before him, not taking his hand from the hilt. The wind dropped off as though a storm door been closed. Longstaff had judged correctly. Venture came to a quick halt, sending water over the forward deck. Her bubble was gone, and her stop created a bow wave that nearly swamped the ships before her. The Ragnall corsairs continued their turn, ramming each other rather than the Venture.

"Now, son! Turn it back on! Give it all you've got!" Venture was picked up from the near hurricane that filled her sails, bringing her nose completely out of the water. Once again and finally, the Venture's perfect bubble shimmered round her.

"Prepare for ramming! Grab something!" Dirk shouted the order while he tried to weave a course between the two vessels. There was not enough space for a clean pass.

"To port! Port!" The order came too late; a large gash was opened up on the starboard Ragnall ship. The enemy ship splintered completely, leaving little afloat. The other ship was afire, burning brightly in the blackness.

It was over as quickly as it had begun. The Venture had suffered little damage. The enemy hadn't

pierced the bubble of force that surrounded her. However, many on board suffered damage from ramming the corsair.

Venture quickly passed the remaining Black Ships. On the glass-smooth waters of the Drew, Venture would skim all the way to Dran.

The ship's carpenter got to work on Venture's damage. Through Balanor, Longstaff navigated, mostly through the middle of the river, keeping the deepest water under the keel. Efferact and the other Sarahan studied war. One of the few marines not to go with Thandor taught them what he could. He shortly concluded that Sarahan were not a warrior race.

The next day Balanor neared exhaustion from controlling the Sight Sword storm. The Venture entered the great lake, a vast body of fresh water, larger and deeper than any other in the world. Everyone was especially careful not to stand near the rails. Swimming in these waters was a flesh-eating fish, prone to leaping up to catch its prey. One could get a nasty bite.

Captain Longstaff called all crew and passengers together. "At this speed, we are only one day away from Dran. We shall reach the city by early morning. Balanor has told us to expect that there will be a battle taking place when we arrive. Sarahan will wait for instructions from Balanor and Efferact. Depending on what we find, Number One will be in charge of the land attack. I will stay with the ship and see to its defense, and some offense too." Longstaff winked.

Weapons were made ready. Oil-soaked rags wrapped around rocks were kept near the ship's catapult.

That night, the moons should have risen full in the eastern sky, but they did not. The stars had also failed to make a showing. There was the smell of smoke and oil in the air, and men began to fidget for want of action. Few slept.

As the night grew darker, Longstaff asked Balanor to sheath the Sight Sword. In the darkness of the unnaturally black night, he feared running aground on a sand bar. To the Captain's surprise, Balanor nodded no. Instead, he lowered the sword to point the direction the ship should steer to keep deep water under beam. Riding on a bubble, there was little chance of going aground.

No one was surprised when dawn did not show at the expected hour.

"The Astori must be with the Ragnall at Dran. Maybe it is the one that blotted out the sky while at sea with us, but I don't think so. This darkness is deeper, and grossly larger, than the one that he placed over Venture." The Captain wondered aloud, "Do you suppose the one that Balanor spoke of, the leader of the Ragnall nation, has come to Dran?"

Efferæet, nearby, answered the rhetorical question. "I would guess not. Balanor said that he was sending his forces, and his general, not leading the attack himself. I do believe that the battle is at hand, though. We sail into a fight."

"Yes, a fight," worried Dirk as he looked at the dark, blood-red sun. "The air reeks of carnage."

"Fires! Lights!" The man in the crow's nest was covered with black soot from low-hanging smoke. "I see many fires!"

"Efferæet! Come here!" shouted the Captain. "What do you see?"

Efferæet strained to peer through the blackness. "There are many lights of a great city on the left! It is huge!" He looked to his right, and wore a puzzled expression. "On the right the land moves! Everywhere I look, it moves! Does the army of Dran field so many men that they seem to make the land move?"

"Those might not be the men of Dran that you see." Longstaff left his dark thought incomplete.

Balanor pointed out a new direction, one that would carry them to the riverbank on the starboard side. Longstaff ordered Dirk to change course.

"The river! What do you see in the river?" The Captain wished he had better eyes.

Balanor released the ship's bubble. It popped out of existence. The Venture moved into the muddy banks of the river.

"Many boats! A hundred boats; a thousand!"

"Captain," shouted a sailor stationed at the ship's bow, "the Ragnall are putting boats into the water for a crossing! There is a great engine of war on the field!" The words were the sailor's last. A bolt from a Ragnall crossbow pierced his throat. More bolts picked off the sailor in the crow's nest. He fell; his body was caught in, and hung from, tangled riggings.

Balanor pointed for a final, sharp, change of direction. Dirk waited the needed second for Longstaff to confirm the order. The crew looked on in fascinated horror as Venture plowed through several, then dozens, and finally more than a hundred boats. They'd barely missed passing over a grouping of boats coming from the port side of the river. The men standing within these boats were busy casting powerful magic into the Ragnall war horde.

There was the sound of mud and sand under the keel of Venture. Everyone braced for a sudden stop. Even so, three men and three Sarahan were flung into the bloody water or onto a mucky shore. Venture ground to a halt.

Longstaff got his first good look at the scope of the battle, and went numb with horror. He shook off the ice that had filled his heart, and hurried down the deck, picking

up fallen men and Sarahan as he went. He shouted orders to fight back.

The ship's catapult had to be moved, but not much. It wasn't a matter of picking a target; the Ragnall were everywhere.

The wind didn't abate, for Balanor had a use for it still. In the periphery of his vision, he caught his wife lifting someone from the muck of the river. Could that be Thandor? With a profound selflessness, Balanor didn't go to his wife. His task lay elsewhere. He stripped off his cloak, vest and undershirt. His sword went into its scabbard and his hands went into his wings. The dying wind was yet strong enough to lift him from the deck of the ship.

As he put air between him and Venture, he thought he heard someone call his name.

He flew above the heaving battlefield and allowed himself a last look at his friends. Dirk and Longstaff, brave sailors, Efferæ and his fellow Sarahan, all fought upon the noble deck of H.M.S. Venture. Far away, Strifus and Rosie fought back-to-back against hopeless odds. Nearby, Destiny and Prince Edwin battled the Ragnall war boats. In the water lay Thandor, who had once hoped to bring him here to Dran, this place! With Thandor was Dercy, helping, as was always her nature to do.

Balanor could see his target, clearly. The Astori sat, waiting, fully aware that Balanor was coming to him. The evil power that ruled Thickthorn, the Ragnall nation, had sent this High Lord General and his Ragnall army, full of faith, to destroy all that was not Ragnall. All waited for him and for this moment.

Larger than a small village, the war machine moved toward the river on multiple boulder-sized wheels. The general sat on his throne, alone, master of the monstrous device. He spoke to his Ragnall horde like a dragon speaks, and they obeyed without question.

Balanor felt inadequate to the task ahead, but he knew that if he couldn't do it, it wouldn't get done.

He landed at the forward edge of the gargantuan thing and removed his hands from the folds of his wings. In a singular move, he unsheathed the Sight Sword and held it forward, pointed at the general.

Slowly, stride after cautious stride, the distance between them closed. When it was half what it had been, the general stood. He drew a dark sword from a black scabbard.

"Come to me, abomination, and I will finish this." The general had spoken to Balanor's mind intuitively, as dragons do.

Balanor stopped. "Why did you murder my people?" Curiously, anger was absent from his voice.

"Me? Not me, child. It was he that did that... but I showed him how. Now, give me that toy. It is quite dangerous, you know."

Balanor winced at the soft, mind-spoken order. It felt as though a loathsome grub was eating into his thoughts. His arm began to tremble, and he raised Fa Calamber. The massive power of the jewel, only barely held in check, pulled at him incessantly. The sword urged Balanor to release its potential.

Balanor realized that he was being attacked. He was being pulled along, mind by mind, much as he had done with the seer elf. The Astori was dragging him along, preparing to cast him into an empty cusp, a moment that had never happened, and never would. He was doing to Balanor what Balanor had done to the Drow Elf. Frozen in time, Balanor watched as the general lifted his black blade. It began its descent. He knew that its arc would pass through his neck, and his head would be severed.

He did what he had never allowed himself to do. He focused his mind on the array within the Sight Sword. His mind entered a place populated by Sarahan that came before him.

He opened the door to all the wonder and all the power in the world. Everything that he had felt so remotely before became part of his very being.

He fell into the array, as simply as a leaf falls from a tree. As far as his mind could see, from infinity to infinity, there lay lines. Amongst the lines were moments, countless moments, filled with the Sarahan that had been murdered by his enemy. These cusps were not as he had seen them in Efferact's stone. These were fully complex. Entire lives lay within each cusp, and each cusp was alive. The Sight Sword was the repository of all the souls, all the minds, and all the power of each and every Sarahan that had ever lived. Complex beyond even a God's imagination, cusp after innumerable cusp lay living before, behind, beside, above and below him. Each was a four dimensional hexahedron, for time was here too. Each was full of life, love and experience. Lines stretched into the past and the future. Time and space knew no limits here.

All around him were infinite cusps, each one full of answers to as yet unasked questions. Infinite knowledge, moments in his life and the lives of others, were before him. The Sight Sword's array accessed the essence of the entire Sarahan race for all time.

He touched the mind of the Astori and was swept with a vision of incredible technology. He saw machines the size of buildings, hideously fast flying things, fantastic cities, and billions of beings with access to powers beyond belief. Yet, for all their technology, they were cursed by a single, all powerful flaw. Balanor saw it for what it was.

The mind of his enemy was alien and unnatural. It didn't belong here, and Balanor didn't understand why it was here. Whatever reason his enemy had for being here, it

was clear that its resolve was terrible, and that behind it was a hideous hatred.

As awful as this mind was, there was something worse out there, something far worse. This black servant had given itself up to a malevolence so dark, so vast, that to Balanor it seemed to objectify madness, wrong, and evil. The force he opposed was wanton, unchecked, and unapologetic hatred.

In seeing all that he had seen, Balanor had joined a great whole. He sensed that he had changed utterly. He felt that there was little chance of going back now, and it was unimportant what happened to him personally.

Balanor put aside all his reservations and opened himself to all that he could. Knowing rushed in upon him, and he was altered and evolved. He delivered himself to all the cusps in the jewel. He tuned them, every one.

In an instant of sadness, he learned how his race had been obliterated. Their strength had been used against them. Their souls, their very minds, a million or more, had been set free of mortal bounds and sent to another place. The great, dark force from Thickthorn had killed his people and enslaved the Ragnall. Oddly, what had been done by force to his people, Balanor had done to himself of his own will. Knowing what he knew, he couldn't go back.

By all the laws of nature and chaos he was dead. His mind was apart from his body. Yet there was one small thing yet to do. He would make the ultimate sacrifice for a spiritual being. He would live again.

He tore and wrenched himself back into the pains and limitations of corporeal life. As sight returned, he realized that he was in danger of death by sword.

He opened himself up to the smallest fraction of the power within the common Sarahan mind. It was there for him.

In an explosion of unbounded power, he unleashed the force of his will, and the will of all his ancestors before him. He spoke the words that the general feared the most.

He whispered, "We are free of you."

In an concussion of white, impervious light, a brightness akin to the moment of creation itself, every mind present was blasted of its dark corners. A light greater than the sun itself seared away at mental shadows, leaving none. The divine illumination washed in and around everything. It was a moving wave, washing over the field of battle, across the river and into the city. It moved over Ragnall Pass and into Thickthorn. It traveled the entire world, and would not abide darkness. It left only stone-cold white light truth.

The light bleached minds clean of lies and superstition, be they Ragnall, Giant, Man, Dwarf or Sarahan. A great light had cut their bonds and set them free. At that moment, many beings had the first rational thoughts of their lives.

Balanor looked with his eye's sight at what he had done. Where the Astori had stood lay a pile of empty, steaming, black armor. His evil sword lay bent and misshapen, partially melted. It burned into the wood of the floor where the black creature had stood. The golden throne was gone, consumed by the cool, burning light.

* * * * *

The orange-yellow sun burned bright in a morning's azure blue sky. Though death lay all around, light and life had won. Ragnall, free of the mind that had made their choices for them, at last chose to lay down their weapons and return to Thickthorn. This they did; the fighting had stopped.

Balanor fell to his knees, and then to his hands. He dropped the Sight Sword and lay face up on the timbers of the war machine. He too had been set free, but to a freedom greater than all others. His spirit winged away. He was dying.

Behind him, Dercy landed on the platform fast and hard, nearly hard enough to have broken her legs. She folded her wings and rushed to her husband. She fell to her knees beside him and gathered him into her arms.

"Balanor! Husband!"

He opened his eyes, which shone with a strange light. A gentle smile played across his lips.

"I love you. Dercy, more than life, I love you." He closed his eyes and seemed to sleep.

"NO!" she pleaded.

He opened soft eyes again, slowly, and spoke. "Take the sword. Find a way to finish this. Set them free once and for all. Set our people free." His breathing became shallow, and his eyes closed, the light in them extinguished.

"BALANOR!" She screamed. Again and again she called his name, but he did not return.

They found her crying over his body, and she would not be consoled.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

THE MORNING AFTER

It was a new day. Thandor stood, head bandaged, his thoughts his own as he watched the fires burn. Weapons of war of every kind had been gathered for melting down later. Spears, arrows, wooden shields, staffs, even the Ragnall's war boats, anything that could be burned, was gathered and set afire. In the middle of the valley, the huge platform upon which Balanor had died was fully ablaze. It was the largest fire anyone had ever seen; a fitting funeral pyre.

The Ragnall bodies, tens of thousands of them, were carried across into Thickthorn and buried in mass graves. The citizens, soldiers and allies of Dran were buried in marked graves all across the Fields of Dran.

Oddly enough, It was Ragnall stragglers that did most of the work. After the paroxysm of freedom that had been unleashed on them, on everyone, hundreds of Ragnall had not left for home, but were wandering around, as though they were lost children with nowhere to go.

Thandor weighed the cost of the conflict, and it was incredibly high. Could it be called a victory? Perhaps, but only because it wasn't a defeat.

The bandage on his head did nothing for the pounding ache he was suffering. Yet he knew he was lucky to come away with so small a wound. So many others had lost so much more. Dercy had saved his life.

The monolithic device, the war machine of the Ragnall, was fully afire now. Flames reached high into the sky.

"Took a shot in the head, ea, Giant? At least they didn't hit a vital organ."

Thandor managed a smile. "Rosie. Gods, it's good to see you alive!"

"And you, Thandor." She looked at the carnage. "It's going to take weeks to set things right." She paused. "Who am I kidding? Things will never be right. They will be writing songs about this battle for a long, long time. What a glorious fight. What songs will be sung!"

"What an unexpected victory. May I never see such glory again. Where do you go now, Rosie, back to Onserf?"

"I don't think so. The boy isn't returning, at least not yet."

"The boy?"

"Edwin. He's going back to Eue to marry Destiny. Ah, to be young again."

"Yes, to be young again."

Rosie heard the pain in his reply. "Don't take it so hard, Thandor. You did your job. The city is saved. The losses may be unbearable, but we weren't given a choice. Now bend down here and give your best girl a good-bye kiss. I am leaving for Clangedin."

They kissed, and exchanged a warm hug. That was the tall and short of it. Their eyes were moist when they parted.

Strifus had remained at a respectful distance, and waved his good-bye to Rosie as she left. He came to stand beside Thandor.

"It's like waking up from a nightmare, is it not?"

"Strifus! Be you all right?"

"I am all right, but I am changed. It is hard to have hot desert blood when you have seen such a cold sight as this."

"Thank you for coming to this fight, my friend."

"We should've been here sooner, years sooner. When I think of what our isolation has cost us... I am going to speak to my father, and my brothers. I think that Eue will have to change. You may see an ambassador from Eue here one day soon."

"Then I wish you a good change. Are you leaving right away?"

"No."

Thandor was surprised by the desert Lord's answer.

"What's left of my men and I are going into your city to see how others live. I wish to see and learn much."

"Then you have changed. Come and see me before you go."

"Yes, I will. Speaking of change, here comes the Princess of Eue and the Prince of Onserf."

Strifus left. Edwin and Destiny came to stand beside Thandor. Somehow, amidst the great disaster around them, they had found enough hope and optimism to continue to express their love for each other. They were holding hands.

"So, you are returning to Eue to be married! An Invoker ceremony, I assume?"

"Strifus must have told you." Edwin looked into the aqua-blue eyes of his Destiny. "Yes, Thandor. She and I are to be married. Whether we simply leap over my sword or get married in the palace of the King of Eue, we are

going to be married." The two were so in love that it was touching.

"And after that, what will you do?"

"What?" Edwin didn't seem to understand the question.

Thandor envied their focus. Their love for each other was so great that they hardly saw the death all around them. They couldn't even see tomorrow, only today, and each other.

"Go, you two, and take care of each other."

"Good-bye, Thandor," the pair echoed. They left, hand in hand.

Ahead of him, closer to the raging pyre, stood the one being that had been injured the most. Thandor went to her and placed his strong arm around her shoulder. The reason for their unspoken sadness burned away in the fire before them.

"You know what they are calling him?"

"Yes, Dercy. I've heard it."

"Lord of Light." She weighed the worth of the words, and remained quiet for a long time. "I would give everything, everything I ever hope to own, just to have him back for a minute. I miss my husband." The grief brought tears.

After a respectful pause, Thandor asked, "You would give up the Sight Sword?"

"I would gladly give up it up. It means nothing to me. I'm only keeping it for one reason." She paused, leaving the thought incomplete.

"Why are you keeping it?" Thandor was forced to ask.

"I will use it to kill the one responsible for my husband's death."

For a moment, Thandor was afraid that Dercy might be thinking about killing the old teacher, Efferæet. It was he that had opened the door that led to Balanor's death.

"My husband told me to free his people, but he didn't tell me how." She looked up at Thandor. "I think I know how. I am going to kill the lord of the Ragnall. I am going to Thickthorn and murder the one that is responsible for all this."

"Dercy, you don't know what you are talking about! You'll get yourself killed trying to do something like that on your own."

"I'm not going alone. Efferæet is coming with me. I blamed him for my husband's death, at first, but he is not the one, though he still blames himself." Dercy looked, with a gaze full of hatred, at Ragnall Pass. She looked through the mountains, deep into the land beyond. "I will find the one who did this, and I will kill him."

"I can't let you go alone. I'll go with you. You came with me when I needed you. I must come with you now. It is a blood debt. There is little left here for me to do."

Dercy looked up, staring into Thandor's eyes, looking for reasons, for answers. "Thank you, Thandor. I need your help, and I can use your strength. There are more. There is a religious leader here called 'The Bridgeman'. He came to me, before I'd told anyone what I was going to do. He asked if he could send one of his acolytes with me. I agreed that he could."

"So there are to be four of us?"

"Five. I have asked one other." She looked behind her. She sighted the one she was looking for. "Render! Come here!"

Render dropped the Ragnall body he was dragging and ran to Dercy. He stopped and stood. He was Ragnall, still filthy from the battle. "Yes, mistress? Can I help you?"

And thus ends Loftlore

