

INTRIGUING INCEPTIONS

~~The following have been removed from the list~~

"Elymourt" "Elmoret" called out the door. "Whim-whoo!"
and he had taken the name "Elymourt" because he was
born there.

He was looking by the middle of the 12th was 6.50-8 from the tower in

The above figures speak for themselves. The public has no doubt
followed its gut feeling. It has, with good reason, been misled.

get the quantities of Chambers for 1st class of Butler.
I have been Chambers for a while out of a long time.

[illegible]

over the shipwrecking the results of the battle of the sea - much past his

"Younger generation" listed. "The first to go, the last to stay."

But the interesting & ripe or perfectly matured ones
be a long time with it & will grow to the size of some of the

16-17-18

The original opening page of *The Doom of Innocence*

An Anthology

INTRIGUING INCEPTIONS

Essays in Fantasy & Science Fiction

MATTHEW ROLAND

First U.S. Edition

This is a work of fiction. All the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this book are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

INTRIGUING INCEPTIONS

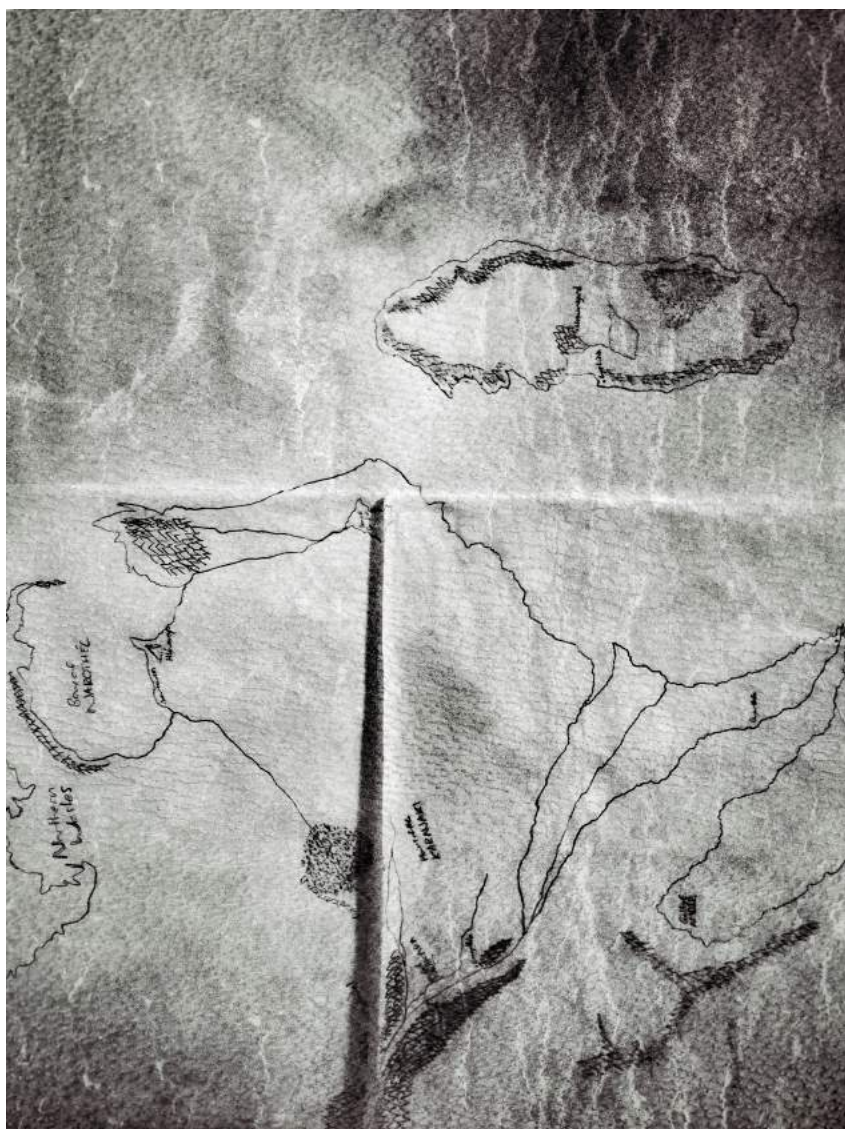
Copyright © 2019 by Matthew Roland

All rights reserved.

*For the lovers of story and word,
I hope and pray that you are not bored.
And all those who emboldened me with their speech,
To forge ahead once more into the breach.*

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	ix
PART ONE: THE EPICS	
I The Doom of Innocence	i
II The Stone of Foundation	95
III The Rebel and the Tyrant	135
IV Mythopoeia	144
PART TWO: THE SCI-FI	
I The Legend	153
II Ravagers Across a Starry Sky	160
III The Shadow that Lives in the Twilight	176
APPENDIX: Script – Opening Page of <i>Mortal</i>	187
AFTERWORD	190
A Special Preview of <i>The Mighty Shall Rise:</i> <i>Part 1 – Swords Unhallowed</i>	192
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	209



An old sketch of Pergelion in the very beginning stages

INTRODUCTION

I'll be brief and quick to the point: this volume came together relatively fast (about a week)—especially in comparison to my many other projects. This is mostly due to the fact that all of the pieces included had already been written, and were merely in need of some fine-tuning or minor tweaking.

The narratives here put forth constitute no whole when looked upon as one singular, entity, and all are unfinished in the literal sense of the word. As such, do not expect any amount of “consistency”—whether that be between names, events mentioned, or history—because you will not find any. Each “Inception” has been presented in such a way to both show the creative process at work and to showcase some of what I've been doing over the past several years.

Allow me to elucidate and say that much material was written that continued the pieces (mostly *The Doom of Innocence* and *The Stone of Foundation*) but was excluded either because 1) the writing severely deteriorated, 2) the primary narrative broke off and did not resume until several scenes later (or in some rarer instances, chapters), or 3) the succeeding material had been incorporated into my current story, *The Mighty Shall Rise*. Additionally, I should make it abundantly clear that not *one* of these narratives is considered *canon*.

Feel free to jump ahead to whatever section that interests you the most. There is no specified order in which you must read these “inceptions,” and this is primarily seen in the (for the most part) highly-differing styles in play between each section.

Therefore, if you happen to find yourself choking of the “epicness” of *The Doom of Innocence*, go ahead and dive into the much more straightforward *Stone of Foundation*. Or, forgo the fantasy altogether and flip your way to the sci-fi division. Whichever is your preference.

As for myself, I prefer *Doom* over the others. It has been with me the longest and has undergone the most rewrites and transformation. Through it, I have learned much concerning the intangible intricacies of writing, story, and all the like. Furthermore, it is (I believe) the deepest and most relevant to our modern age, and as a result, yields striking parallels to the current trends of our present society.

Below, I have attempted to shed some light on each piece as a means of “introducing” them to you, the reader. This, I have hoped, will make the volume you now hold more accessible.

You may love this. You may hate it. You may not even care. Either way, I don't care, myself. After all, I *did* abandon them for *The Mighty Shall Rise*, and they are not at all in the form I would like them to be. This is not to say that I don't think they're any good; in fact, *The Doom of Innocence* may just be my #1 favourite story I end up writing. However, someday, in the future, I hope to return to the majority of them.

And maybe then I'll actually finish what I started.



PART ONE

I

The Doom of Innocence

The original “germ” so to speak, of this unfinished tale, was written as far back as the spring of 2017. At that time, I was still learning the very basics of story, and this was a big step ahead for me in learning to write well-written, non-derivative stories.

The crown jewel of this motley collection, the two and one-thirds chapters which make up this piece are only a very small part of the envisioned work.

The Doom of Innocence is largely a sentiment about what happens when the full degeneration of moral and ethical decay takes its inevitable toll on society—albeit in a once-held “illustrious kingdom/nation”—a clear parallel to America itself.

II

The Stone of Foundation

I began work on *The Stone of Foundation* in early 2018. It was my second attempt to finish a novel by summer’s end (the first being in 2017), and I started off strong, only to fade later down the stretch.

For this to be understood, I should explain the above statement in greater detail:

1) 1st attempt to finish a novel by summer’s end: 2017—*The Stones of Istamár*.

2) 2nd attempt to finish a novel by summer's end: 2018—*The Stone of Foundation*.

3) 3rd (and presumably final) attempt to finish a novel by summer's end: 2019—*The Mighty Shall Rise*.

Squeezed somewhere between Fall 2018-February 2019 is *The Doom of Innocence*, then titled *The Serpent and the Scroll*. After many failed attempts to breathe life into the ill-fated *Stones of Istamár* (which ran to an estimated 60,000 words in its unfinished form), I eventually rebooted it due to its derivative and cliché story/mythology. That reboot became what I now call *The Stone of Foundation*, and after much outlining and world-building, I began anew in the summer of 2018.

As you have probably already deduced from its insertion here, that attempt did not pan out as I had hoped. *Stone* only made it to 40,000 and tapered out because of my fading interest and subsequent desire to tell a more in-depth story: one with meaning and evocative themes. While the beginning of *Stone* was not necessarily “bad,” it did not adequately set up the story I wished to tell, as I would have liked (in addition to not being very *unique*), and therefore, this was a major factor in my abandonment of it.

I kept most of the later story threads, though and in its place, I inserted an alternate, and much-shorter version of *The Dark Tree*—the first chapter in *The Doom of Innocence*. *The Dark Tree* had initially served as the prelude to *Istamár*, and while I had discarded it, I was still greatly intrigued with the prospective story possibilities it set up.

Thus my decision to reboot the story with it.

The period of drafting that followed afterward (Fall 2018 to February 2019) went much better than I had anticipated (reaching upwards of 57,000 words) and I, at last, began to get a better feel for my world. However, once again, I was faced with a problem: the stories of these two primary characters I had merged (the Aulendur-character and Urathane) began to conflict.

For one, there was just too much going on. I didn't have any one story thread that I was following, and I had a wealth of subplots and characters that I was having trouble "meshing together," so to speak. And second of all, Urathane's story was beginning to grow and take up much more "screen-time" than originally envisioned.

In short, it was becoming its own story.

And so the decision was made to split the plot lines and characters that made up *Serpent* into two different stories: 1) *The Mighty Shall Rise* and 2) *The Doom of Innocence*. Only once this decision had been made, did my writing/plotting began to improve dramatically.

This is really only a roundabout way of explaining why *Stone* is included here. So, this is why! Read and understand!

III

The Rebel and the Tyrant

This was first put down sometime in late 2017 and was the first of many attempts to retell what was at that time called *The Stones of Istamár* (see above for more details) before I eventually decided to reboot it, altogether.

For some reason, this small fragment did not proceed beyond the first-draft stage (which is really quite a head-scratcher, since looking back I can see now that it is one of the more intriguing

narratives in this collection) and for long it has lain in my stack of tossed-aside manuscripts.

Until now, that is.

IV

Mythopoeia

Mythopoeia was first penned in late 2017/early 2018 when I still harboured that ridiculous conceit of mine. The one where I was, in fact, *translating* all of my fantasy stories from ancient manuscripts retrieved from a time period set in the early years of our world. And from whom did I receive all these tales and songs?

Well, apparently it was a dwarf.

Yes, I know what you're thinking.

PART TWO

I

The Legend

When digging deep to find when I had written this little nugget, I surprised myself by finding that I had done so in December 2018. I say I was surprised, for, in my eyes, this is the most poorly written piece in this entire collection.

Funny how life works that way. You can still write something horrific when you're very advanced in your craft and at the same time, look back on something you wrote way back when you were just starting out and realize that the older piece is much better.

However, I'll let you, the reader, be the judge of that.

The small sequence included here is the beginning of the first chapter of a science fantasy that I work on in my off time when I am in dire need of writing something both ridiculous and absurd.

II

Ravagers Across a Starry Sky

Ravagers Across a Starry Sky is the Prologue to my sci-fi saga, *Fallen Son*. I include it here because I simply do not see myself returning to it any time soon, and also because it serves as another way to showcase what I've been accomplishing as a writer the past couple of years.

Fallen Son began out of an attempt of mine to sort through and bind together a wealth of disregarded storylines and characters that had for long lain on the dusty shelves of my inner instinctuary (and yes, I did just happen to invent a new word for the English language). This mass of story elements had been something I had found myself unable to do much to anything at all with, and it was only by chance that I was able to bind them all together (mostly) into one, cohesive story. At the time this occurred (around Christmas 2017), I was taking a break from already-mentioned *Stones of Istamár*.

Somewhat fatigued with the historical, barebones nature of epic fantasy and inspired by giant sci-fi sagas (in addition to wishing to try my hand at something a little more high-tech), I began brainstorming and sorting out the details of this novel.

In sharp contrast to *Istamár/Stone/Mighty*, I was able to throw together a rough plot synopsis for *Fallen Son* rather quickly. Within a few months, I had a 15-page (albeit a size-10 font, and single-spaced) synopsis rapped out, an exhaustive character bible

with pages upon pages of backstory, characteristics, and all the like, and scattered notes for five more sequels to follow. I must admit, that period was quite exhilarating, to say the least.

At that time, I had been preoccupied with my fantasy stories for almost two years straight, and due in part to my growing maturity as a writer, I had experienced a great many speed-bumps along the way (here's a small hint: reboot after reboot after reboot)—and through all of this, I had still been unable to come up with a story that I was satisfied with. Thus, my success was very refreshing.

I believe this was due to several reasons, among them being 1) my growing maturity as a writer, 2) a fresh perspective, and 3) a clean canvas upon which to draw. The thing is, when you've immersed yourself in a particular project for such a long time—albeit one that originated the whole thing in the first place—you can become somewhat blind/brain-dead to the more apparent constraints of that project.

For quite some time, I had been bogged down by a massive wealth of diverging storylines and structural changes, accumulated and piled upon one another with the passing of the years. With *Fallen Son*, I was able to draw myself out of that mindset for a brief time and throw my newly-honed skills at a fresh, new project.

To use an abbreviated analogy, it's sort of like a painting. Let's say an amateur painter decides to paint a picture. While he/she paints more and more of their growing vision, they become at the same time, more acclimated and acquainted with the rules and ordinances of 'painting.' They learn what to do and what not to do; they learn what works and what doesn't. As they're picking up all of these new guidelines, they're constantly erasing certain sections,

starting over, erasing again, starting over, using a bit of blue where once there was red, etc. You get the picture.

Now, over time, that canvas becomes more cluttered and messy, so much so to the point that it is nigh on impossible to figure out just what it is they were originally drawing. Such was the case with what would become *The Mighty Shall Rise*.

With a new canvas before me, the many problems I had encountered in my fantasy stories seemed to disappear altogether and hammering out an organized, clear-cut story turned out to be much easier than I had anticipated. However, upon beginning the manuscript, I was quickly confronted with a bit of a problem. So long had I been writing fantasy, that I was having a hard time transitioning to a different style of writing. Besides, I positively *hate* starting something when I have left another thing incomplete. It just itches at me.

I knew it would take me more time to adjust to such a dramatic shift in word usage, and...I was chomping at the bit. In other words, I was impatient, which is why I returned to the fantasy novel. Nuff said on this matter.

III

The Shadow that Lives in the Twilight

I wrote this around the same time *Mythopoeia* was being transcribed. It began when I was faced with the challenge of having to write three different accounts—all pertaining to the same “car crash.” And well, as you will soon see, it kind of turned into its own thing.

I have not yet decided where I would go with this episode should I choose to pursue it (I have already explored many

different possibilities, but those ‘possibilities’ morphed into entirely independent stories).

Writing this was an altogether new experience for me at the time, as I had never really written anything outside of the realm of epic fantasy (save for very early on), and I found it to be quite enjoyable.

PART ONE



THE EPICS

I

THE DOOM OF INNOCENCE

The Dark Tree

URATHANE IVRONWINE made his way down the slight, rocky trail which wended ever westwards along the banks of the Dwarthéa, to the shores of the Great Sea just a little ways ahead.

“Irolas! Irolas!” he called out, sharp blue eyes probing his surroundings with a keen regard. His excursion to the outside world was mainly due to a desire to speak with his only son. Time was run short for him, and he hoped to find a common mind upon whom he might unload the fusillade of troubling introspections which had been pressing upon his heart of late.

Overhead, the sun shined dimly in the overhung clouds with a tint of paleness, yet still gave off enough light to make the sparkling waters of the river shimmer in a somewhat mellow brightness. Around Urathane, green bushes sprawled out of the fertile riverbank here and there, while the light of the sun filtered softly through the leaves of the ash trees which hovered over the waterside. In front of him, however, the river curled and twisted lazily in a small, descending slope, before coming after several

more miles to the seaside, where the oceans ruled, and the crests of their waves pounded against the land in a heraldic fury.

Urathane halted his promenade to gaze eastwards. Slowly, his eyes passed over the distant Pëlindori, to the valley below, to at last the great city of Elgarost, the capital city of Ared'dor. There, his eyes lingered, and he looked upon it fixedly. Even from over a league away, Urathane could see the uppermost spike of the high tower of Ephén-Laranal, wherein hung the bronzed bell which rang loudly for all to hear each time the third hour came to pass upon the city.

For all sakes and appearances, his face bore no sign of the conflictions that warred within him. His heart was caught between two different sentiments: each contending upon the other, thus creating a fermenting unrest inside of him that was the permeating source for his overwrought state of mind: an unrest that pervaded most all of his thought and served to agitate his heart and soul greatly.

But Urathane had not come to look upon the wonders of the world that existed outside his home. He had come to see if he might find his son, Irolas; for he wished to speak with him before he left for Elgarost to take over his new duty at the Ship-yards. At this, he turned away resolutely and continued his ambling trudge down the riverbank.

"Irolas!" he called again.

"I am here, my father," said a voice suddenly out of nowhere. "I am if truth be told, quite near to you."

Starting, Urathane looked around to discern where the voice had come from. Just a little ways away to his right, he espied a large boulder which jutted out authoritatively from the sandy

riverbank. Upon seeing it, his eyes lightened in realization, and he quickly crossed the distance between it and himself.

On the other side of the boulder, he found Irolas standing stalwartly upon the rocky shore, hands clasped firmly behind his back, and eyes gazing out upon the calm sea which gleamed scintillatingly a little ways beyond them. His dark hair fell a little ways past his ears, and a thoughtful, wondering expression was upon his face.

In looking upon him, Urathane's heart filled with pride. Irolas was strong and fit; the vigor of his youth was evident about him. In Irolas was represented one of the last bits of dignity which he had once worn about himself before evil came upon him. Yet, in thinking of the pride which he felt for Irolas, the sadness felt in days long past returned to him. For a moment, his face grew grey almost and distant, as his mind reflected upon times past. Then, with a quiet sigh, he pushed aside the reminiscence, driving away those grief-haunted times to a much darker corner of his mind, where they would not give cause to haunt him.

"Irolas, my son," he said. "I wish to speak with you. The shadow which I believe has fallen across this land weighs now heavily upon my heart as well, and I would have someone in whom I could confide. I hope though that I am not intruding upon you or your thoughts in any ways which might give cause to irk you. If you wish it so, I shall spare you the fears and worries of an old man for another time." He hesitated, not knowing whether to take his leave or to draw closer.

"Your presence is not displeasing to me," said Irolas. "Nor is it a hindrance or bother to me in the slightest. You are my father, and if I do not have the time to be a rock upon which you should lean in

your most trying seasons, then I am no good of a son at all; you may speak whatever it is you would say if you wish so.”

“I thank you for your comforting words, and I pray that you never think of me as troublesome,” said Urathane, relaxing and drawing nigh to the water’s edge. “Alas! All is heavy and dark now, and under some black shadow which I feel shall soon rear its ugly head and spew its poisonous breath upon us, if it has not yet already done so.”

He paused, as if contemplating the words he was about to say; but then made up his mind and said, “Of the matters that have been pressing upon my mind of late, this is one: what think you of the Lord Surentûr? When you hear his name uttered or chance to espy his face, what feeling comes upon your heart? Is it hope or disquiet? Trust assured or distrust warranted? What think you of the hold which he has over the peoples of Ared’dor and their King?”

“Why I feel nothing at all,” said Irolas assertively. “Indeed, there was once some hesitancy on my part in regards to him; however, my stance has changed, and I now believe him to be caring and full of wisdom: a leader who cares greatly for the better welfare of the people: one who consistently sets their interests above the concern of his own. There is a strange aura about him, an ambiance which fills my heart with a sense of peace and tranquility of heart. But wherein this matter lies your distress? No justification can I here perceive in regards to the dark portents which you have taken pains to evince.”

For a moment, Urathane’s countenance fell; but he managed to hide this before Irolas caught sight of it and discerned it for what it was. Taking no notice of Irolas’s presumptions, he said with

deliberate intent, "Then is your outlook upon him positive or negative, that being so? Do you believe that he does good for the people? That he is what they need?"

"Yes, indeed," said Irolas. "I *am* of the opinion that he is good for the people. Look around us! Are we not the most impregnable realm in all of Pergelion?! And are we not the wealthiest?"

"Our cities are the most glorious there are to behold, and the soldiers within them are staunch. They defend our borders with a zealous aggressiveness that is held in so much esteem by the neighboring countries and realms, that none have dared to assail us for many long years; and all flock to our kingdom and cities so that they might trade and barter with us! To me, this seems an easy question to answer: I say *yea!* Surentûr has done much good for us with his wise counsel, and we thrive exceedingly because of it."

My greatest fears have been confirmed, thought Urathane to himself. *Surentûr's hold on the people is indeed very great, and now it is that I shall hereafter have to choose my words carefully in these matters when speaking to my son unless he should one day see Surentûr for the serpent that he truly is.*

Aloud though, he said, "In your words, you seem to forget that we are of Asgalarion and not of Ared'dor, although once we were one people, as you well know. Do you not bethink yourself of why we became two nations? The shadow was already creeping over Ared'dor ere Surentûr came; the soil was fertile: all he needed was to plant the seeds and let them fall to the right ears."

"So some would say; but history was changed, it is said, and elsewhere another story is told."

"And what is the story now?"

“That we were the dross the needed skimming off: the chief tyrants. With our departure and the rending of the kingdom, Ared’dor was left in peace to grow to new heights hitherto unseen. And now the Lord Surentûr guides the ship through the murky waters which would despoil it.”

“Your heritage you fail to remember, Irolas,” said Urathane, his trepidation growing with this unseen revelation. “And you have let your guard drop, allowing your mind to be deceived by falsities sent to beleaguer and persuade our reasonings to another, unknown purpose which has not yet been revealed at this present time.”

“That, my father, was the story told from our persuasion. Each person has their own story, which is right in their own eyes; we are not held exempt from this. *Truth* is what we make it to be.”

“Nay, but you err in your assertions,” said Urathane. He looked askance upon Irolas and continued. “There is Wrong and Right: there is no in-between. Surentûr changes history to fit his own scheme, casting shadows over the Light and enlightening the deeds of the Dark. But they were never selfsame. Nay, but they are at great variance with the other. From whence have these pollutions come to enter your mind?”

Irolas made no answer, regarding him with a perturbed expression.

Urathane pressed onwards. “The houses of Ared’dor and Asgalarion have been separate and estranged from each other for over two generations. Though society as we know it, may become so enamored of Surentûr, that they would place their trust in one who would lead them blindfolded on the path ahead, you must hearken to my words! There is a great darkness in this world that

seeks everywhere it might look to find those whom it would devour.”

“Your words reek of treason, my father,” said Irolas. “Do not speak so loudly! It is decreed that none shall speak unfavorably in opposition to the royal house or those that serve within its courts; for that is considered blasphemous and of a treacherous nature against his Royal Majesty.”

“If it is treason, then it is treason,” Urathane replied. “I serve not Darkness, but Light only. If our sovereigns and those who serve them are servants of the Dark, then I serve them not, nor abide by their law. The only allegiance that I may owe to Surentûr is through the fear and dread of dark torments, which he sets within our hearts. That is how he would control us.”

“Us? What mean you by ‘us’? I do not give my allegiance to Lord Surentûr through such ways as those which you have spoken of. And what do you mean when you talk of ‘dark torments’? This is the first time I have heard of such acts, and I am out and about more in the world than you. Your utterances seem unfounded.”

“No, you do not,” said Urathane. “That, I meant for myself and those of like mind. But though it indeed is true that you are out and about more than your father, I have other means of gaining access to disclosures. This is not something that is spoken of out loud; it is merely a rumor: something whispered of only by those subverters of the Steadfast: one which is made to spurn fear in the hearts of good men. However, do not let me misinform you! It is an actuality and was personally reported to me by those who have gone to great lengths in discovering the secret doings of our leaders.”

“Whatever are you saying, my father?” said Irolas, a look of fear momentarily entering his eyes. “You do not mean to say that you are actually a leader of these fools who would try and depose of our hierarchy, do you?”

“I am the son of Neldoreth,” said Urathane. “Even though I am removed from the House of Ared’dor, my seat still resides in the hearts and minds of its former people, and the Lords of Ared’dor are not so easily displaced. There are some who still hold themselves loyal unto my line, and I am bound in more ways than one to serve them as I still can.”

“You would unseat a great lord who has done much for the benefit of Ared’dor without cause? That seems low for you, my father.”

“Have you not been listening to my words? Do you not observe the minds of the people? Yes, they may be prosperous on their own accord, and yes, wealth may be abundant, but what of their hearts? I deem that you are right when you say that Surentûr speaks soothing words which comfort your heart and assuage your mind of all fears, but what is their effect on the people? Riots are more plentiful than ever before; weapons of war are increasing, and the people are become more restless and quicker to violence by the day: I say, is this *truly* good?”

Irolas looked at him warily. “Why is it that you speak like this? Simply because the world outside may seem dark, this does not portend that all else is under shadow; can there not be some good left? I believe this to be so and in following this line of thought, I also believe that Ared’dor is exemplified perhaps through this. Yet you speak as though Surentûr were unwholesome for the people.

Has someone come and given you reason with his or her words to think so?"

"I speak of what my own mind ponders," Urathane responded sharply. "Though you may no longer be a child, that does not make you wise. I am still elder than you and shall always be; I merely give voice to such thought, because I have seen such things before. My years are weightier than yours, and I have more reason to be wary than you. I have known and felt how it is to be betrayed by those whom I once deemed good."

He paused and regarded Irolas with a knowing glance that yet held a measure of decidedness to it at the same time. "Tell me Irolas, when was the last time that the King of Ared'dor appeared before the people? His presence has not been felt or seen here for many long months, and during this time, these 'royal decrees and proclamations' have only served to increase, more so than has been the custom in times past. Bethink yourself of this also: every time he appeared before, unfailingly was it that Surentûr stood at his side: *always* whispering something in his ear, always giving him some 'advice' that we were unable to hear. I deem that I would be right in saying that Surentûr, not the King, rules Ared'dor."

"Whatever on earth are you suggesting?" said Irolas, almost denunciatingly.

"Nothing, but that which I have observed with my own eyes: eyes which are more prone to search out, than to trust absolutely. If you did likewise, then you might understand me better, and it might be that we could agree on this matter."

"However that might be," said Irolas, with a small hint of annoyance in his voice, "Surentûr does do good for the people whatever you may say. You may be wary because weapons are

increasing, but the enemies around us are growing stronger with every passing day: why then should an escalation of weapons be deplorable?"

"Have you not taken heed of the discontentment which lives and festers everywhere you look?" Irolas's constant rebuttals were beginning to try Urathane's patience. "Always when you make an answer of me to defend Surentûr, you speak of that which grows on the outside, not of that which grows forth from within. This is precisely what I speak of; this is one of the reasons why I have been stirred to doubt and wariness. Looks can be deceiving. Just because all may look well and prosperous on the outside, it does not always indeed bode that all is at peace, I speak of what I see when I deem to look upon the true hearts of the people or listen to that which they utter with their mouths. As the old proverb relates: *From the abundant fruit of the heart, the mouth doth speak.*

"Everywhere I look, I see discontent and restlessness. Ere Surentûr came, the people seemed at least somewhat content with what was allotted them in life; however, since the day he first arrived here, bringing prosperity and affluence, they now wish for more. Through this, they have become filled with a lust and greed for pleasures and worthless trinkets, making it so that they are no longer content with what they already have."

Irolas eyed him for a small while, and he seemed now to be almost leery of Urathane. "Why have you come to me with this, my father?" he asked. "I would not wish for a rift between us; cannot we lay aside this matter and speak of it no more? Solitude is more preferable to estrangement is it not?"

Urathane sighed. "So it is, Irolas, so it is. However, one might wonder if compromise hinders more than abets here. Yet this is

perhaps why I have come before you at this given hour, ere you leave for your new post. There, I wonder if you would be driven even more so away from me; for your betters would likely be most inappreciable of my sentiments and would wish for you to think as they do. However, if you wish it, then I shall lay aside this matter for the time being and not speak of it for an indefinite amount of time."

"I would wish that so," said Irolas.

"Very well."

The moment passed, and Urathane withdrew from Irolas's side and returned within the house shortly thereafter. True to his word, he did not bring up the subject again, and Irolas conducted himself as if the conversation had never taken place. It was on the following morning that Irolas departed for Elgarost. The distance was not far; it was merely a few miles from his house which lay near to the sea, but Irolas would be taking up a permanent residence there hereafter.

As he began to ride down the path that would take him to the city, Irolas turned back for a brief moment and said, "I hope O my father that you bear no ill will towards me or my judgement."

"I bear none, my son," replied Urathane.

"Palisor informed me that he would pass by here now and then to give you company, so that the days may not become wearisome to you."

"You may have no fear of that," said Urathane. "Though my beard may hold some grey in it that ripens and grows out further with every passing spring, I am no dotard; however, I shall appreciate his company, should or when he deigns to give it."

Palisor was a good friend of Irolas, and on times when he was away, he often came by to converse with Urathane on various matters or subjects of interest to them both. Since the very first day when Urathane had moved his place of abode to the small settlement that existed below Elgarost, Palisor had dwelt there with his father, who was not long passed away. He always spoke to Urathane with great respect and likewise, treated him with much deference; for which Urathane was appreciative. He *did* mean it when he said he would welcome his company.

Thus, Irolas departed, and for a little while, Urathane stood silently in the doorway, watching him proceed further and further down the road before he was lost from sight altogether. Then, with a quiet sigh, he closed the door and busied himself with a few menial tasks that kept him busy till the day was ended and night had drawn nigh.

The following days passed without much to anything of importance occurring, and Urathane contented himself with various tasks to occupy his time; and when those ran out, he spent his time reading from some of the books or scrolls in his small study. Palisor visited here and then, though most of his visits were uncustomarily short; but still, he came, mostly it seemed to check upon Urathane and to see if he was in need of anything.

The steward of his estate and his consort—Urathane's housemaid—managed to keep him company some of the time when they were not otherwise occupied with the tasks pertaining to their functions. Their names were Alwen and Indra, and they had been availing themselves of Urathane's comfort for nigh on twenty years. Long had he known them from before even that time

and when he was still a young stripling, they had been young and the chief-caretakers of his father's house. Now, they were older and frailer than in past years, yet they were venerable: kindly and good-natured persons who still took pleasure in aiding and abetting Urathane in the maintaining of his house and the surrounding grounds.

Now, it was on the twenty-seventh of May—approximately a fortnight after Irolas's departure—that Urathane received several letters: the first of which was the first communication he had received from Irolas as of yet. When the dispatcher had taken his leave, Urathane opened the first one and read thus:

THE SHIP-YARDS, ELGAROST. May the 26th, Yr. 4679, 2nd Epoch.

Dear Father,

All is going well here, aside from some few matters of small interest which I shall disclose here shortly. This new position provides me with a much more substantial income than the previous one had proffered to me. I have furnished a 'small' house: one that fits me quite properly for the time being. I hope that you shall be able to pass by sometime soon (take care that you inform me first, as I am often put out to small excursions at sea more and more these days) and thus see it in its full glory if it could even be called that. Among other matters that I find worthy of recounting is the news that was posted by Lord Surentûr (I hope that you are not displeased that I mention him here) some days ago. He wishes to greatly increase our naval arms and to change the way in which we build our ships. In this at all events, I conclude that he does ill. For he has ordered that we—using

his designs and teachings—construct ships wrought of metal which have the capability of journeying over the waters without sailcloth or canvas. These, which we have already begun to build are hideous to look upon in my eyes; and in this, it seems to take away some of the glory that Ared'dor now possesses. And also for matters of more gravitas: I can only deem that he wishes to increase our already extensive fleet for the sole purpose of expanding our borders into those of the surrounding realms, and of this I disapprove also. I am glad that we can at least agree upon some matters concerning this contentious subject betwixt ourselves, though the ways by which this has occurred I wish would not have presented themselves as they have done so. Lastly, but certainly not least, I have some stranger and maybe darker tidings to infer: it has been reported that several of the King's Ships in the Royal Armada have disappeared, along with the men who had gone abroad in them. This was first brought to our attention when they failed to arrive at the ordained time, and now we are beginning to suspect that fouler work is at hand. Naught has been found or heard of them since the onset of their voyages, and we have already sent out inquiries to other ports along the eastern seaboard, in hopes that they might have alighted there; but so far, we have heard no word concerning them. Nervousness and tensions are beginning to mount. But then again it may all be for no point: perhaps they have merely been delayed by foul weather? Winter's arm is grown long this year, and though the cold begins to wane, the sun has not blessed us all too often with her amiable rays. We do not know. I hope that we shall meet again soon and that all is well with you.

Your son,

Irolas.

The next letter was unmarked and showed no sign of an address, save for a single word which had been transcribed upon the envelope's opening flap: *Thiräelaiu*. This was evidence enough to the fact that only one specific person could have transcribed it: Jerushin.

Jerushin was one of the foremost progenitors from which the small sect of 'fools'—as Irolas referred them to be—had initially been engendered. They were obliged to keep all of their doings and communications as cryptic and clandestine as they could make them be; for Surentûr was vigilant and ever-watchful for any suggestion of disloyalty. Wherefore, though they had not openly begun practicing anything akin to treason as of yet, they still had to carry out everything they did, in the most covert fashion available to them.

Another reason for this, in part, was that not long ago, Surentûr had openly forbidden any form of 'philosophy' and had attempted to gather together and amass as many narratives as he could which pertained to a historical and philosophical nature concerning events of the past. Needless to say, Urathane and those of the same disposition as himself had been attempting to preserve and consign as many books and tomes as they could into more prudent hands, in an attempt to uncover and hopefully discern what Surentûr's over-reaching intent was, in addition to their shared goal of preservation and eventual restoration.

Hence the reason for all the secrecy involved.

Quickly unfolding the single sheet, Urathane scanned the slanted script that appeared to have been written in much haste:

To Those Whom it Might Concern,

Friend, it might be of interest to you to thus discern that there are certain persons in certain places that are performing certain deeds at a certain time with a certain approach for certain people of a certain travesty.

It is Certain, that after reading this you will have bound together your assessments for the resulting judgement. It is elemental, that you keep safe your precious wherewithal, using all Instruments necessary to retain that which was bequeathed to your friends and enemies from falling into the hands of a Thief and a Deceiver.

In doing so, you may yet preserve many fates told and the old tales and lays of past times may be sung yet again in portents of Lustrous Shadow. Show not your ignorance by disregarding the slight blade when beginning the allotment of bread. Betake yourself to preserve that which may be lost forever, if let rest in soiled hands. Scour the Monuments of Memory and make to sing the Song Reborn of Ages Past.

Unremembered, Unsought, Unfound.

Thiräelaiu.

The script ended there. Urathane set aside the letter and leaned back in his armchair. “So a storm is coming then,” he muttered—half to himself, half to the letter. “Or is it all a feint? Who knows?” The air inside suddenly seemed stuffy and hot. He needed fresh air: a cool breeze upon his face and some time to clear his mind and process the abundance of information that had just been

imparted to him. Alwen and Indra were out in the marketplace spending the afternoon at their own leisure, so he was alone.

Standing, Urathane walked to the door, which led to the back of his house and was greeted straight away by a soft, cool breeze that flowed gently over the stone walls surrounding his garden. Almost immediately, he felt refreshed, although the burdensome weight which had fallen upon his heart still remained.

Raising his eyes to the expansive clouded skies that stretched out far above him, he searched them with an uncertainty born out of many years of anxieties and hardships. Already, the day was beginning to wane, as all the while, the sun descended ever further into the horizon. Urathane felt as though he needed to move his abode of residence from within sight of Elgarost to someplace much farther away: a place where he might live in peace without the strains and encumbrances of disquieting news, troubles, and all the subsequent anxieties which naturally pertained unto these matters.

But alas! Where in all Pergelion could such a place be found? He could think of naught. The wild, untamed regions of Pergelion were becoming more unsafe by the day. Since the onset of the Second Epoch, after Eldamír the Renowned had forever driven the Great Oppressor from the reaches of the world, thus bringing peace and security to all, order and solitude had fallen across all of Pergelion like never before and the peoples were content and no longer feared to betake themselves of the lands beyond, as they had in times past.

But now, the mood of the people was grown dark, and a shadow of malice seemed to lie upon their hearts. This was one of the reasons why Urathane distrusted Surentûr so: as the years seemed

to darken, so also did the hearts and minds of the people. Surentûr, for his part, seemed only to encourage this: spurring them to the desire for more and better things than they had already, so that if they were content before, now few abstained from putting themselves forth to these things.

His deliberations were broken up by a rustle sounding to his side. Looking around himself so that he might discern the source of the racket, he beheld the old, nearly rotten back-door to his garden being pushed open on its hinges. It creaked noisily till it had made almost a full turn, to reveal Palisor.

“Palisor,” said Urathane, turning to face him, “Whatever are you doing here at this late hour?”

“Hullo, old man,” replied Palisor, with a seemingly-forced smile. In truth, however, he did not look particularly cheerful. “I knocked upon your front-door; but when you did not answer accordingly, I thought to find you here; and lo! I have guessed rightly, for here you stand. Oft is it that I find you here of late, it would seem. Yet, you look as though you are greatly troubled and weighed down by some great burden more and more these days, wherefore giving me cause to wonder.”

“Wonder for what?”

“Why, wonder for the way you conduct yourself, if not the reason for your troubled mind, of course. But I did not make my way hither for small talk on matters such as these. Would you mind if we sat alone for a time? I have some things upon which I would confer with you if you would be so inclined to spare me some of your time.”

To this, Urathane assented, and he wondered at Palisor’s sudden if unusual forwardness; for this did not come across as the Palisor

he had been acquainted with in years past. They sat on a long stone bench which lay beneath an alcove, surrounded by several stooping elm trees. Urathane waited in silence for Palisor to say whatever it was he wished to say.

“So,” said Palisor, “have you heard the recent news? It is not long past.”

“Nay,” replied Urathane. “At least I think not the kind that you speak of mayhap. I have not been the recipient of much news lately, and all of that has come only through letters or rumors spoken by those visiting me at my house, such as yourself. If I may so ask, what is this ‘news’ that you allude to? Does it bode good or ill for our welfare?”

“We shall see, as some would say that it bodes both ways and maybe you would think it ill; but I am undecided.” Here, Palisor paused for a brief moment, then proceeded to say, “In the streets of Elgarost, they are saying that the King has been taken ill by some malady and now lies upon his deathbed, with no hope of healing. It is said that he has just weeks left at the most, ere it takes him.”

“Poisoned, more likely,” Urathane muttered darkly under his breath.

“What was that?” Palisor leant forward in his seat, lips twitching slightly.

“Naught,” said Urathane. “What do they say is the cause of his...” He struggled to think of the word.

“Affliction?” supplied Palisor.

“Aye.”

“From what I have heard tell, the royal physicians are thoroughly mystified as to what *is* causing it; but whatever it is, it’s burning him up frightfully quick.”

Urathane nodded his head grimly. "That's what I would have suspected."

Palisor cocked his head to the side, an eerie sort of look loitering within his pale eyes. "You believe his ailment to be the cause of some dark malice, do you not? I suspected that you might."

Urathane did not reply: his gaze was fixed steadily upon Palisor.

Palisor paused before seeming to resolve something in his mind. "Lord Surentûr will preside in his stead for the time being until the Head Council reaches a settlement on who will succeed the throne, as the King has left behind no heir to receive it."

"You need not tell me of that which I am already apprised of," said Urathane. "It has long been known unto me the uncertainty surrounding the heirship, though maybe that circumstance is not all as they say it is."

Palisor dismissively waved his hand. "Forgive me, I spoke more than was needed. For the other matter, there is also talk that Lord Surentûr wishes to break off all the ties and alliances that we have with the surrounding kingdoms and realms so that Ared'dor might advance its borders."

"And what think you of this?" said Urathane. "Do you think it good or bad?"

"Ared'dor is one of the most prodigious and distinguished realms in all of Pergelion..." said Palisor, a small hint of caution entering into his voice.

"So once was Asgalarion, ere it fell," interrupted Urathane.

Palisor looked at him, curiously for a small moment before continuing. "It once had ample room for its peoples; but as it has grown in affluence, so has the populace increased likewise. It has

now become if you will forgive me for the vulgar usage: densely populated, unvaried, and to a degree, over-familiar. Dissatisfaction is growing: the people are murmuring not so quietly. The old is thrown aside for want of the new. Maybe it is, in my mind at least, a good thing for us to expand our borders. But I am not sure if you would approve of my assessment.”

“Indeed, I would be at variance with you on this,” said Urathane. He was opening his mouth to say something further but then checked himself.

“Again, that was the outlook I expected the more from you,” said Palisor. “However, this does not change *my* opinion. Lord Surentûr is wise, and he looks ahead to a future hitherto unknown. Where else can we grow but outwards? If we tarry within our borders, then we will erupt from within. These are the only choices laid before us: expand our borders, put restraints on how many offspring can be brought forth from each respective house, or another, more unfortunate option.”

Urathane's eyes darkened, and he looked as though he might give voice to something, but again, he desisted from this resolve.

“Surely you have some further sentiment in these matters which you would express, Master Urathane,” said Palisor, impelling him to speak.

Urathane stared at the younger man for a hard while, before finally speaking. “What is it that you are endeavoring me to say, Palisor? Your apparent exertion has not gone by unnoticed by me, and I feel as though you are somehow trying to ensnare me within my words.”

"It is known to an extent that you have expressed *some* enmity towards Lord Surentûr in the past, have you not?" As he said this, Palisor's eyes seemed to glint with some strange thought.

Urathane studied Palisor's face with a small trace of thoughtfulness, as he tried to discern his real motive; then he nodded slowly in concurrence. "Aye. I have, and I still do at times, though in these dark days, one must be discerning with what they give voice to. Oft it is that we are more and more harried by restrictive and imperious ordinances which increasingly regulate our freedom; this is one such repercussion among a sea of many: no longer are we allowed to openly contend with the Royal House and any assertions made against it are considered of a fallacious nature."

"Indeed they are, Master Urathane. And though I am quite aware that you may think otherwise, you err in your reasoning. Lord Surentûr seeks to uphold the morale of the kingdom in these dark times: he endeavors with as much power as he has been granted, to deliver us of the petty grievances and affronts of the past. Quarrelsome contentions made flagrantly, only serve to darken the mood of men and stir up the insurgent and unruly emotions which naturally lie within them."

"You speak of freedom, my young friend; yet as with my son, in vindicating Surentûr, your words solely function to work against you and not for you. If you would only look to the past, to history, to *our* history: then you might not be so quick to flaunt the celebrated folly which Surentûr has instilled within you and those of your generation."

"You have become suspicious and maybe even foolish in your old age, Master Urathane," said Palisor in response. His voice had

grown cold and almost haughty now. "Folly you say? Many enervating worries may yet cloud a shrewd mind and thus become blind to the folly in its own perception. In bidding me not to flaunt my own supposed indiscretion, take care not to parade the seeming astuteness of your judgement."

Urathane laughed brusquely. "Do you not see how Surentûr has twisted your mind?!" His voice quickly took on a dismal quality, and he said half to himself, "But no: the young are naive and therefore do not have the weight of years which the old have, which in of itself brings wisdom, and through their gullibility, they are thus easily deceived and led astray."

Centering the whole of his attention back upon Palisor, he said, "Wisdom we debate, and on imprudence, we utter our sentiments. Yet none have demonstrated a greater display of folly than our king himself. And wherefore, from that folly has spawned all of the quandaries upon which we now exchange discourse in our wrangling words. The King was a fool to bring that sleazy, duplicitous rogue into his company. Surentûr befouls the hearts and minds of all who place great merit in the quintessence of their vanity and thus would they hearken unto him, just as the King has done. His forked tongue may speak of things high-minded and scrupulous, but Surentûr is a deceiver!" Urathane's voice, which had at first been equable in its tenor, had slowly risen with the all-encompassing range of his wrath until at last culminating in a shout.

Palisor's eyes glinted again. "It would be wise if you kept your words down," he hissed in a snake-like whisper. "Lord Surentûr has ears everywhere. Sleazy or not, he is now the most powerful man in all of Ared'dor, and he will not be refused."

“Refused! Refused!?” Urathane laughed almost bitterly. “Tell me this, Palisor: when has he ever been refused?”

Palisor began to reply, but Urathane cut him off.

“Nay,” he said, “We both know he *hasn’t* been refused. Bit by bit, his ill counsels have prodded the King to some overarching goal of his. What that is, I know not; but I am enlightened enough to tell about things such as these, I think. He has not been refused ere now, and I deem that unless this kingdom is shaken by the roots of its foundation, then he shall not be refused again, even if it be the kingship.”

“The kingship he could very well gain if indeed the King fails in his illness.”

“And since the day Surentûr first arrived here, our fate has been sealed. While our body may look strong in appearance, inside, we rot like a corpse that has been left to weather the world’s storms. As the hunted prey takes the bait laid for him, so did the King fall into the trap laid for him. Honeyed words are a snare for those who would thus be tempted to take them, and unwholesome company corrupts the good people.” Under his breath, he muttered, “Especially in the race of men.”

Palisor’s sharp ears heard him. “What of the ‘race of men’?” he asked.

“Men are weak,” said Urathane, almost contemptuously. “Their most regrettable feature is their quick satiety with good. Throughout history, a continuous pattern has developed: whenever evil’s dark hand is stayed and the world is at peace, they become discontented and restless, eventually finding some way to stir the old evil back to life. Their hearts are easily corrupted and can be led to treachery on a mere whim.

“It is like unto a tree, which can never be completely felled. For all our efforts, it continues to sprout forth dark fruit which falls like seeds into the hearts of men. It seems that no matter how many times we may fell the tree or hew off its branches, it grows swiftly anew and again spawns much evil with its darksome yield; maybe even so until the end of days when Oros returns and the Day of Doom* wreaks its path upon us.” Urathane desisted from his tirade as if becoming aware for the first time how contemptuously he was spitting out the words.

“Much is upon your mind I see,” said Palisor. His face grew doubtful, though, beneath that benign demeanor, there seemed to lurk a loftful smile, sinister almost in its nature.

“Maybe,” he mused, as if to himself. “But then again, maybe not. Perhaps darkness has more power than light, and your question is answered by the fact that light cannot fully overcome the darkness because of this. People speak of a ‘Final Battle’ or a ‘Day of Doom’ as you so purported it to be. A battle, where a final epic clash of Good and Evil shall take place: a struggle in which Evil shall at long last be overthrown. I wonder though if this is but a ruse: a fairy tale as some might call it; merely something perpetrated by those who would consider themselves of the Light.

“Throughout the ages, Good and Evil have warred and still, after many thousands of years, darkness yet endures. Mayhap, in the end, it is the darkness that shall triumph, and it shall be the light that is overthrown, never to rise again.” As these last words left his mouth, a mad light came upon his face, like an eye into his very soul.

* The prophesied final battle fought in Pergelion. Also known as the Ishnár Tulerivous.

And what Urathane saw there greatly disturbed him.

For a little while, he eyed him warily. "I have grown weary of this discourse," he said, at last, rising from his seat and turning to leave. Inside, his heart had grown cold, as if a raw iciness had crept into his body and now surrounded his bones, chilling him to the marrow.

Palisor said quickly, "You speak of a 'Dark Tree'."

Urathane stopped dead in his tracks and turning back midway, inclined his head to Palisor, a chary expression upon his face. "Aye."

Palisor's eyes seemed to grow larger, and so did the strange leer which resided within their depths. Then, with a whisper as soft as night itself, he said, "Then you have heard of *Malaketh*?"

Overhead, a cloud shifted in front of the sun, casting a dark pall about them. Something seemed to rumble tremulously in the skies above, and the very air stilled: a hushed quiet enveloping the garden as if all had been turned into stone.

"Malaketh?" Urathane's eyes momentarily widened in some ancient horror; before they quickly steeled over. He said in a low voice, "You should not speak of that darksome name with such flippancy. The mere utterance brings a black shadow upon us all."

He paused. "Tell me Palisor, where do all of these prodding and probings of yours lead to? What is it you are trying to gain from me? Do not believe that I have not noticed your offhanded manipulation. You have slowly guided our wandering words to some hidden purpose of yours."

"You run from the past, Master Urathane; however, eventually, that past will catch up with you. So it also is with the world. More so even, you could say. That which was hidden ages ago now seeks to regain that which was lost."

“Why speak you in riddles?” said Urathane. “Still does your purpose remain unclear to my mind. Speak that which is upon your mind and bedim not that which you would.”

Now Palisor stood. With some abruptness, he took some steps away from Urathane and gazed outwards at the cloudy sky, shifting slightly. He said, “A growing number of people are not content. This, you have undoubtedly already noticed. The old look backwards, searching in vain for the past: in this, they have blinded themselves. Us that are young instead look to the future and that which lies ahead. Lord Surentûr was sent as a sign: a portent and preamble to that which will return. We look now for the fruit of that preamble's promise; for we know that the time of its coming draws nigh. Do not be naive, Master Urathane; if you merely make to look into the innermost depths of your heart, you will know of that which I speak.” He turned and shifted his head to look full on at Urathane, a knowing simper on his face.

Urathane leaned forward, his eyes searching Palisor's. “What does this growing animosity plan to accomplish?”

“Animosity?!” Palisor shook his head. “Nay, not animosity, but aspiration eternal.” For a time, both men stared at the other, their eyes locked in a silent battle of determined will, each waiting for the other to give.

“Neatly have you spurned my attempts for answers,” Urathane said, finally breaking the silence. “Why do you evade my question, Palisor? I would believe that you had something to hide, were it not for the fact that you dangle small morsels that promise fruition; yet at the last instant, you snatch them away. Why?”

Palisor paused, then said slowly, “I will tell you all that you wish to know if you join me at the place of the Duar-Aranaoth at the

first hour of night, clad in black. However, you must come alone; otherwise, your questions will remain unanswered.” Having said these things, Palisor finally took his leave of Urathane's garden.

For a long while, Urathane stood still as a statue, gazing into the grey sky, yet seeing naught. Palisor's words profoundly disturbed him—so much so that it took him great strength of mind to even begin wrapping his head around the matter; he also felt the considerable unease of some unsettled dread swirling about within himself. He knew that all was not as it seemed in Ared'dor—he had known this for some time—however, his conversation with Palisor had managed to radically heighten his fears and suspicions. If one such as Palisor was apart of it, then how many more were there also to be figured in? All of them? Palisor had seemed to hint that something of the sort was close to the truth. And indeed, though his words had a profoundly disturbing effect on him, Urathane could not help but think that deep down inside, there was some truth to them. While the older generation looked back to the past, the younger generation—goaded and manipulated by Surentûr's duplicity—looked forward: to things that were better left unsaid and let be for all of eternity, if that could be. Their dabbling, whatever they were, would only bring forth evil if left alone.

This sudden change in Palisor's character seemed so abrupt, so sudden, so unexpected, and so unlooked for that he wondered how many others were hiding a darkened heart beneath a fair facade, just as Palisor appeared to have done. Again, his heart went cold as he thought of Irolas.

Perhaps he was wrong, maybe he was so burdened by worry that he saw darkness where there was none; and in doing so, had

wrongly discerned Palisor's motives. "Yet the mere blithe with which he had mentioned that dark name, the leering gleam that had seemed to lurk deep within his eyes..." he said to himself.

There was too much. Too much to go through. Whatever it was that was manifesting itself in Ared'dor, he did not know with any sure certainty what it was. In fact, he might never know—until it was too late—unless he accepted Palisor's offer. Though he was wary of it and the prospective implications that might arise thus in such a venture, he decided after some thought that he would betake himself of this journey; though he would bring his sword hidden within the folds of his cloak, just in case things happened to take an unexpected or unwanted turn.

Deep, down inside, Urathane suspected that something dark, secret, and deadly, was at work in Pergelion. Something evil was simmering under the fragile blanket of what people called peace these days. He resolved to learn what he could from Palisor—if he truly knew anything at all—then depart as soon as he was able. He did not wish to be about outside too long when night lay upon the land and when there was the chance for evil to be prowling about; the dark was no longer wholesome in Ared'dor anymore.



Well-nigh an hour later, Urathane sat in his study, slumped over Jerushin's enigmatic letter at his desk. He had spent some time poring over its contents, and he was still *utterly* confounded as to what the correspondence pertained to. No matter how hard he tried, Urathane felt that he was no closer to the seeming verity contained therein, than where he had been when he first began.

Clearly, Jerushin was endeavoring to impart some consequential information, something that he wanted only Urathane to have knowledge of, something so indispensably crucial that he had been compelled to create a cryptic paradox that called for Urathane to somehow elucidate. Undoubtedly, Jerushin believed Urathane would have the sagacity to construe the indicators straightaway, thus enabling himself to ascertain the real message; but even so, Urathane remained at a complete loss as to what Jerushin sought to convey.

So he read the first line again.

To Those Whom it Might Concern.

Plainly, that was an impartial reference to himself. There was naught to be discerned here. He perused the next section.

Friend, it might be of interest to you to thus discern that there are certain persons in certain places that are performing certain deeds at a certain time with a certain approach for certain people of a certain travesty.

“Why seven uses of the word ‘certain?’” Urathane thought. This was where he had first gotten stuck. No matter how hard he tried, he could still not determine the meaning of ‘seven’ and what it pertained to. Could it perhaps be a reference to the seven prophecies of Lemuel, the olden sage? He did not know; nor could he discern how it stood in relation to the sections proceeding.

It is Certain, that after reading this you will have bound together your assessments for the resulting judgement. It is elemental, that you keep safe your precious wherewithal, using all Instruments necessary to retain that which was bequeathed to your friends and enemies from falling into the hands of a Thief and a Deceiver.

It was clear that Jerushin was extorting him to safeguard something that, at all costs, must be preserved from falling into the wrong hands. He was, however, altogether perplexed in settling on whether it was some relic or information. Yet, although he was undecided as to how ‘Thief’ stood in relation to ‘Deceiver’—whether they were one person or two—he knew beyond any doubt that ‘Deceiver’ was a clear and obvious reference to Surentûr; it was a frequent watchword that they used whenever referring to him. Beyond this, however, Urathane could glean nothing further. He turned to the final paragraph.

In doing so, you may yet preserve many fates told and the old tales and lays of past times may be sung yet again in portents of a Lustrous Shadow. Show not your ignorance by disregarding the slight blade when beginning the allotment of bread. Betake yourself to preserve that which may be lost forever, if let rest in soiled hands. Scour the Monuments of Memory and make to sing the Song Reborn of Ages Past.

Urathane slumped back in his chair. For some reason that he could not determine, he was utterly stumped, unable to understand Jerushin’s intent in the slightest. Likely there were others besides himself who, when merely sparing a glance at it, would be able to pick up the meaning forthwith; Urathane, however, was not blessed with such an aptitude for cognizance.

In desperate need for a change of scenery, he stood, letter still in hand, and departed from the room. Passing through the hallway to the sitting room just beyond, he entered therein and seated himself comfortably into the folds of his large, high-backed armchair which was positioned appropriately beside the fireside. Placing his feet

atop the footrest, he settled back and once again, began to re-read the letter.

At that moment, Indra bustled in, her slight frame passing through energetically and her hands holding a tray whereon were set nourishments and provender concocted for the day's end. "Here now, just you fix yourself there, Master Urathane; enough worrying about the winds of the world for today: there's naught you can do to stay them at the present." She set the tray down on the small stand neighboring Urathane's chair, while simultaneously sweeping off two books to make room for it.

Expressing his utmost gratitude, Urathane momentarily set down the paper to take a small draught of the tea she had so conscientiously prepared and to sample some of the food alongside it, so as to satisfy her probing eyes.

"Simply delectable, my dear woman," he said. "Now where is your good husband? It has been some time since I last saw him walking about. I hope he is not ill?"

"Nay, lad," she said in her usual, genial fashion. "The man is out in your garden, studiously exerting himself in an undertaking to maintain some herb or another. Can't he see it's evening already? Supper is nigh on ready yet." She clucked her tongue. "Honestly, that silly man! In all frank sincerity, I don't know where he would be today, if not for me. Ah, well, what does it matter? I must call him in."

Then, in a brisk flurry, she had gone from the room, leaving Urathane alone. He smiled and simultaneously set down his mug of tea; other matters preoccupied his mind, and though his body hankered for food, he had a task before him that was unfinished: one that he knew should not remain so in such a state.

He reread the letter again.

The sun had nearly set beyond the uttermost extremities of the sea and eventide was nigh upon him, when Urathane departed from his house. Before betaking himself of the path that had heretofore been determined for him, he made his way to the waterside and took a moment to observe the sun, set in the west. A soft ocean breeze was blowing in; it ruffled his hair and calmed his unquiet spirit to a point. As the sun disappeared below the distant horizon, Urathane was struck by the beauty contained wherein the panorama before him. Slowly, the sun sank further and further, hovering above the water's periphery, thus engendering a fiery blaze that lit the oceans with a ghastly, red hue, yet still glistened iridescently whenever he shifted his position.

"A great storm is coming upon Ared'dor," he said aloud to himself. For some reason that he did not know, the words came unbidden to his mouth, and it was if a sudden foresight had come upon him in that moment of verity. The sun sank at last, and then the gloaming of twilight was upon the whole land. Urathane sighed and left the tranquility of the opulent sea to take the path ordained unto him.

As he trod down the trail that led to his journey's end, doubt suddenly clutched at his mind, and he almost contemplated turning back; but then thought better of it and continued onward. Momentary caution ran through his mind like dark arrows of foreboding crashing against his soul with the breaking of the wave; some commanding in their plow, some deadened. For a moment, Urathane felt as though he were being followed, and indeed, it seemed to him that he heard the pattering of footsteps on the

winding path behind him. Slowly, his hand came to rest upon the hilt of his sword, and he gripped it tightly, while glancing back over his shoulder. Not seeing aught, he relaxed, if only slightly.

The Duar-Aranoth was placed in the very midst of the small settlement that existed only several miles downhill from Elgarost. It was called so for the great fountain that rose in the middle, sprouting forth great bursts of white water which then fell upon the undercurrent sustaining it, with a great splash that foamed thickly; it stood over three persons tall and four just as wide.

Tarrying near the edge of the center, so as not to appear fully in the moonlight, Urathane peered into shadows which encircled about him, as he sought for a familiar face. At first, he could descry naught. Then, just for a second, he thought he observed a small movement in the shadows of an outcropping tree nearby. Peering into the shadows which seemed to cloak all, save for the very center of the small square, he was able to discern that someone was standing there.

Stepping out of the darkness, he strode forward resolutely. Better to show courage than to show naught at all. From his new vantage point, it was become easier now for Urathane to see what lay within the enshrouding darkness. The figure in the shadows seemed to shift his weight.

"Palisor?" whispered Urathane. The shadowed figure stepped forward into the moonlight.

"I am here," said Palisor. "Have you come alone as I asked of you?"

"Aye."

"That is well." Palisor's face gave way to the same leering smile he had borne earlier in the day. "Then let us take a walk, you and I,

Master Urathane; a pilgrimage you might call it, succinct though it might be in its replete veracity.”

Urathane did not stir from where he stood. “To whither do we wend our way?”

“To whither I say!” snapped Palisor, instantly breaking any reverie which might have once lain upon the commune. “Let us not tarry on the road set before us and depart from this place henceforth.” He made a move to absent himself down a nearby trail.

Once again, Urathane refused to betake himself of the path Palisor had indicated. “I would know to where I was being led hither, ere betaking the road unto it. It is certain folly to walk blindly ahead and to place your trust in anyone and everyone who would durst to lead you down an uncertain path.”

“Yonder and near the high knoll not far from us,” said Palisor in an even tone that still seemed fraught with impatience.

Urathane sighed. “My heart is at a great unquiet, due to the sudden waywardness of you and your irascible words, and I cannot fully portend as to what your true intentions be as of yet. Be that as it may, I shall yield regardless and be led whither you say; for I would not bereave myself of a chance to learn something of consequence yet unknown to my ears.”

“Then let us be off,” said Palisor. And they departed.

The path Palisor had evinced, was one Urathane had yet taken some times before; and for some time it appeared to be well-trodden. However, many other trails spawned from this one and snaked off in different directions. It was one of these which Palisor betook them of and the many marks and impressions of which the

first path had been so privy to, began to fade away, or rather, be dispersed in their number.

Darkness had fully descended upon Pergelion when Urathane perceived the hesitant flicker of light playing off the surrounding foliage about them and a faint chanting which echoed from some ways away. The intonations rose and fell in their tenor, and though Urathane was unable to make sense of the words at that time, he perceived that they were harsh and menacing: full of anger and hate.

He had not walked more than a little ways further when the overhanging trees cleared away abruptly to reveal a great hall that seemed to be somehow built or ingrained into the stony hills that twisted and turned ever northward and away from Elgarost. In the murky windows inset within the enclosures, Urathane beheld the light of many flickering candles wherein were illuminated the silhouettes of many persons within.

The settlement in which they resided was in fact, more undergrowth and foliage than aught else; the buildings that existed there, were merely a small cluster of brown scattered about in a sea of green. However, if one happened to withdraw from the central core of this community and venture far enough away, then there was a good chance that one might happen upon one of the abandoned halls and forsaken shacks that were strewn throughout the countryside. It was to one of these that Urathane found himself being led hither.

Passing through shadow to the edifice, Palisor turned the door-handle, and thus they entered within. The hall was large enough to accommodate many people, and accordingly so, Urathane found himself to the backs of at least a hundred. They moved in a

fluctuating fashion with the swaying and murmuring of those within, while the insides of the darkling chamber danced and glimmered with the red light of many burning candles. At their ingress therein, some few turned and spared a quick glance or two. However, many did not for some reason, instead, staying where they already stood.

All in all, it was a rather eerie and most disturbing side to behold and almost at once, Urathane began to find himself again wishing that he had not taken up Palisor's offer. Not content to be positioned by the door, Palisor strode soundlessly to the wall at their right, motioning for Urathane to follow him. He halted at an open place in the wall, and they stood shoulder to shoulder on the outer fringe of people that lingered at the very edge of the assembly, their backs to the engirdling walls.

"What is this? What are we doing here?" asked Urathane in a furtive whisper to Palisor. He did not make any attempt to veil the dubious and chary expression which resided upon his face.

"You shall be enlightened ere long," breathed Palisor. "You have asked for answers, Master Urathane: this is my rejoinder. Be forbearing for a time and do not let your onerous irascibility show itself at a time such as this. Listen to the singing and be illuminated!"

Urathane regarded Palisor darkly for a moment, then turned his eyes and ears to those before them. All had their eyes closed, and they swayed back and forth as one, chanting in an ancient language that had long lain in disuse. Though it had been many long years since Urathane had last felt it fall to his ears, he bethought himself again of it, and as the intonations washed over

him, he knew the words for their true meaning. Here is it rendered as much as can rightly be remembered:

*On dark shadows rising to mar,
we hear a sigh as if from afar.
A murmur in the windless bay,
a shudder in stone born of sunless day.
The vale is swept; shadows gnaw and devour,
the blade gleams in crimson light dour.*

*A forest of masses gathering near;
hearts beating with a wrenching fear.
Thunder roars and lightning crackles,
an austere voice laughs aloud and cackles.
The Dread Lord rises from darkness enthroned;
and makes to wield the dark blade honed.*

Urathane grimaced inwardly at the resonance of those sickening utterances. Averting his eyes, he looked to those around himself, his gaze finally falling upon those persons who stood at his side. Several of them did not appear altogether at ease; some shifted apprehensively, while others eyed the oscillating assembly with either disinterest or intrigue.

However, there was one person who caught Urathane's eye. He stood near the back of the hall, leaning against the innermost corner; one hand rested upon the pommel of his sword, while the other vaguely fingered the hairs of his ragged beard. Though he had a hardy look about him, he still appeared young. Broad-shouldered, yet tall, his bare head was overlaid with thick, golden

hair that was shorn just past his shoulders; his beard was of the same hue also. His eyes were dark, and a small curl of his lip displayed the evident distaste for which he held the ceremony.

Before Palisor could have time to react, Urathane left his place by the wall and silently crossed the distance between the other man and himself. Behind him, he heard Palisor grunt in slight irritation; yet he made no move to follow him. Without so much as a word, Urathane slid into an opening at the man's right. For a moment, the other regarded him almost contemplatively; but eventually averted his gaze when Urathane did not exchange eye contact with him.

After a time, Urathane said in a small undertone, "I see that I am not the only one ill at ease in sight of such an odious spectacle to which we are held privy."

For a moment, the man persisted in his silence. Then he said in a low voice, "It is indeed true that I hold this mindless susurrations to be of an unsettling nature; but this I would ask: who are you and what is your interest in me? I am a hard man who has lived a hard life; and I would not hesitate to draw forth my blade or loose an arrow if any thing or person were to show the slightest of threats towards me or mine compeers."

"I understand well the wariness that you harbour towards those strange to you," said Urathane, still not turning his eyes away from that which lay before him. "And I wish there were more of like mind to you and myself: chary and not one to be led so easily astray on feigned words."

"You speak then of the madness which has originated itself within the hearts of the Ared'doreans: that which has been fostered and nurtured by the Lord Surentûr?"

"I do."

A hard edge had grown in the man's voice. "You speak then of the lunacy which is ensuing before our eyes this very night?"

"The one and the same."

"Then it is indeed true that we have an accord."

"Their 'enlightenment' is the subterfuge by which the full encompassing nature of their ken shall be depreciated. So do all things once held glorious fall into the rot of decay."

"Dark, are accounted the works of Agandaûr," the man said. "But methinks darker still to come are the deeds of Ared'dor and its peoples, and wherefore, I deem that they have drifted too far astray for there to be a hope of renewal."

"I too, account all of these happenings to be wholly spawned of the dark," Urathane concurred. "They must be ended ere their roots are grown too strong for us to hew off."

"However many times you would cut off the branches, so then shall they grow swiftly anew," whispered another voice at his side. In his pronouncements, Urathane had failed to mark the sudden arrival of Palisor, who had surreptitiously made his way back to Urathane's side.

"Palisor," said Urathane in a decidedly equable voice. "You promised me answers, not the mere desecring of a multitude of muttering and babbling fools. What are the intents and ambitions of these mad rites to which we are witness? Answer me quickly, for my patience is at an end."

"The Dark Tree," Palisor murmured softly as if he had not heard Urathane. "The Ascension of the Unnamed; the darkness descending upon men." He turned and gazed suddenly at Urathane; a glazed look was borne in the gloaming of his eyes.

“The Incantations of the Dead are the wherewith we avail ourselves of to bring forth our liberator.”

Urathane narrowed his eyes at Palisor. “The Unnamed? What is—” He abstained from further words, as the enigmatic chanting came to a sudden, halting end.

“It is ended,” said Palisor, the glazed look fading from his eyes. “And we are come nigh unto the very zenith of our rites.”

At the far end of the hall, a man robed in drab black raised twain hands in the air to signify the end of the intonations. The room had gone dead silent.

“*Nataryã*,” said the robed man. “This gathering of the enlightened has now come to full order. I, Verath, chief orator and ordainer of this assembly proclaim that the time has come.” Verath drew his hands together and then spread them outwards, bringing them at last, to rest upon the table in a clenched fashion. “Draw near all you who have heard the Call, for we have come now to the time when we suffer any would-be-initiate to join themselves to this assembly.”

A small surge of about twenty people pressed forward and formed themselves into a line. To each one, the chief orator said, “Wilt thou take an oath to forever conform thine mind and life to the well-being and furtherance of this assemblage, and wilt thou pledge thy forevermore loyalty unto the Lord Surentûr and the Unnamed?”

And each said *yea*, and they were thus made to recite the words of avowal in the harsh, grating tongue which those persons already joined together had been chanting in. Then, the chief orator took forth a ceremonial knife which he used to make two long

lacerations upon their left palm; while at the same time holding beneath it a silver chalice in which to accrue the blood loss.

Then it was ended, and the new acolytes took their place in the assembly. “Are there any more who wish to be joined to Us?” asked the chief orator. With birdlike eyes, he scanned the room, probing each and every corner. When none came to step forward, he said, “Then, let us come and—”

“Wait just a moment now!” said Palisor at a sudden, seizing Urathane’s arm and thrusting him forward aggressively.

Verath’s eyes darkened at the disruption. “Palisor, son of Saëgor, do you have an explanation for this unseemly behavior?”

“I do,” said Palisor, undaunted. “This very night, I bring before you one Urathane, scion of Neldoreth, last sovereign of Asgalarion and a direct descendant of Eldamír himself.”

A collective gasp ran through the crowd and Urathane, who had wrenched his arm away from Palisor, stared at him, eyebrows arched in surprise. *How has he discerned this?* he wondered to himself. In all of his years, Urathane had never spoken of his ancestry to anyone, save his own son, Irolas. How then had Palisor found him out?

“Is this true?” asked the chief orator, eyes widening.

“If it is not so, then I proclaim my own life to be forfeit,” said Palisor in return, his voice ringing with assurance.

“How?” Urathane asked Palisor in a low voice. “How did you know of this?”

Palisor gave Urathane a disparaging smile. “Do you think I am blind, Master Urathane? You may hide your traditions and your lifestyle in favour of parading yourself as someone else; however, you can never fully shroud the inherent nature of your upbringing.

There are other ways from which I was able to discern this verity, but now is not the time or place for them.”

Palisor turned back to the chief orator. “Yea! This man is a direct descendant of Eldamír himself. As such, you then know what this portends for all our efforts and now at last, we can see if they have all been for naught thus far. Let us make the trial: either by that of a willing acolyte or by way of the other, more unfortunate route.”

“Willingly and agreeably would we accept this, if we had but one certitude: where is your proof?”

Without hesitation, Palisor reached within his trouser-pocket and brought forth a small, gold ring. The ring had a bezel, upon which was an engraved design—like a stamp. “I have here, his very own signet ring. No further evidence of corroboration should be required.”

“Let me see this thing with my own eyes,” said the chief orator. Confident and self-assured, Palisor passed the ring to one who stood nearby, who then subsequently presented it to the chief orator.

“Not only have you intruded into my own personal affairs and concerns; but you have also managed to bereave me of one of the few possessions that I was able to preserve from the fall of my house,” Urathane said angrily. “I am wroth at you and your deceptions. Never again, shall I be taken so easily! And I say this to you Palisor, son of Saëgor: a bane and plague be upon you and your house forever!”

For a moment, Palisor looked stricken; but then the same lofty leer which seemed to have become an ever-pervading feature of his face, returned and he regarded Urathane with a haughty expression.

"This does indeed prove beyond any reasonable doubt the true nature of our guest," said the chief orator, who had been turning over and scrutinizing the signet ring. He laid it gently upon the small table before him and looked up, fingers crossed at his belt. "Have him brought hither to me."

Urathane immediately began to step backwards; but halted mid-stride, when he saw that the mass of people had begun to form a circle about him and Palisor. He had no other choice but to go forward. Peering quickly over the heads of those that encompassed him at all sides, he managed to catch a glimpse of the man who had appeared to share his sympathies, yet he could glean nothing from it; for the man's face was become inscrutable and abstruse.

The sea of people swarmed towards him, pushing him to the forefront of the room—and the robed man who stood in somber bearing behind the table. Then, as he had done to the others before him, Verath asked Urathane thus: "Wilt thou take an oath to forever conform thine mind and life to the well-being and furtherance of this assemblage, and wilt thou pledge thy forevermore loyalty unto the Lord Surentûr and the Unnamed?"

"Nay," said Urathane. "I will not."

For a small moment, Verath simply regarded him with a pensive and humorless expression. Then he said, "And are you sure of this?"

"I am," Urathane replied defiantly. "Naught will sway me in this matter."

"Then you must forgive us for the actions which we must take forthwith." Swiveling about on his heel, the man pointed towards two acolytes who stood nearby. "Bind him unto this table."

The two acolytes drew their swords and advanced upon Urathane, eyes callous and hard. Without taking time to further contemplate the situation, Urathane leapt away and, snatching up the knife wherewith the chief orator had used to draw forth blood from the newly-initiated, turned to face the advancing men. In answer, they both raised their blades to block Urathane's expected thrust.

But Urathane did not thrust at them. Instead, he brought the full force of the knife down to bear upon the long rope which stretched lengthwise down the center of the room. Upon this was strung many candles that lighted the room. The line slashed in two, and the entire length came whipping down: ending with the crash of the candle-holders upon the stretch of rug which ran synchronously down the hall.

For a moment, a diaphanous darkness settled over the room. Then, with a loud *whoosh*, the rug ignited in a flash of red flame. Urathane seized the opportunity granted to him by the chaos and ensuing panic, to reach within his cloak and draw forth his sword, *Durendurl*. The two acolytes who had been drawing near to him, rushed now upon him, to disarm him before he could wreak any further havoc.

With one easy, underhanded blow, Urathane sent one sword flying, while using the short knife to pierce the shoulder of the arm holding the other blade. With a loud cry, the pierced man fell to his knees, hand clutching at his arm where the cloth was already darkening from the blood flowing forth. Urathane had seen more gravely wounded men cry far less.

The acolyte whom he had disarmed, stumbled backwards as Urathane advanced upon him and then fled in the other direction.

Some men had grabbed flasks of water and were now trying to engulf the fire with it. The water managed to dampen it somewhat, and they might have been able to utterly extinguish the flames if it had not been for the attempts of one man to dump the contents of his ale flagon upon the fire.

With a loud roar, the conflagration leapt back up, completely eradicating any chance there had once been of quenching it. Urathane vaulted away on his heel just in time to see the man with whom he had been conversing with earlier, rush past him to the blanketed table and reach beneath it for something. Then, before he could see what was being drawn forth, he found his view obstructed by the chief orator.

Snarling savagely, the man bounded towards him, sword drawn and raised high over his head. Urathane deftly blocked the blow, only to find that his assailant had deliberately allowed him to do so, while he brought about a hitherto concealed knife, which then he drove into the lower part of Urathane's torso.

Urathane gasped in surprise and with a small jerk, pulled the knife free. Yet he did not take fright at the small stream of blood that came flowing forth; for the blade that had pierced him was short in length and he knew that the wound was not mortal.

Growling viciously, the man heedlessly brought his erstwhile blade down to bear on Urathane's side. Recovering quickly, Urathane stepped backwards half a step, parried away the blow and then—when the man fell back from the force of Urathane's lunge—hewed the man's sword-hand from his arm with one clean stroke: cleaving flesh from flesh and bones from bones.

With a piercing scream, the chief orator collapsed to the ground, crying out for aid as he did so. No respite was Urathane to

get, for three young acolytes, having heard their master's plea of help, swiftly took his place and set upon him without delay. Urathane had barely enough time to turn aside an oncoming blow before another was upon him. He fended it off, twisting and spinning out of the way of impending strokes while blocking those that he could not avert.

Then, while he deflected a slice aimed at his shoulder, a scornful voice said from behind him, "Fool. So engaged is your mind in that which is before you, that you fail to behold that which is beyond you."

Urathane didn't have time to accost the cognizant voice. Something hard slammed against the back of his skull and the whirlwind of shouts and cries surrounding him, faded away as a torrential darkness overtook him.

He fell forever.

The Shadow of the Shadow

It was unreservedly frigid, and a biting wind was blowing rather fiercely when Urathane came to. He was sitting upright with his back to the side of a hovering willow tree. The tree had entrenched itself in a small clearing of green grass that ran lengthwise down the waters of the Dwarthéa. The overhanging branches managed to cloak him somewhat from the outside.

The back of his head was fraught with a stabbing pain and it throbbed. How he had gotten to this place, Urathane did not know. He remembered being taken to a gathering of fools who had wanted to subject him to some dark ritual. He had fought back, then he vaguely remembered Palisor uttering something behind him before he felt a pain in his head and everything went black. All

that he could remember after that felt like a dream, wherein were hid only small snatches and half-discerned fragments that he could but try to bethink. For all he should know, he should be a captive, not free as he was, seeing how things had ended earlier back at the old hall. Shaking away all vestiges of his thought, he pushed aside the wonderings; for they would avail him not, save for furthering the confused state of being his mind already resided in.

With a faintly audible grunt, he raised himself up to his feet and plowing out from under the shelter of the tree, stumbled to his knees at the edge of the twinkling and splashing waters. Retrieving a pocket-handkerchief from his woolen waistcoat, Urathane lowered it in into the waters, taking care not to let it slip away from his hands in the soft current and then, wringing most of the water out, brought it to his face. The brusque coolness was inspiriting, and it managed to revive him somewhat. He was bringing it back down again; but then halted suddenly in mid-motion, when the waters in front of him appeared to still and then freeze. He could still hear it tinkling in the downhill current—make no mistake of that—however, the water in front of him was frozen mid-motion and was still as rippled glass that has been left unaided, before it was full-wrought. It was like unto a glass plate, whereon were set swirling ripples that cascaded in a flowing way upon the other in a circulating fashion.

“What is this fell sorcery?” he thought aloud to himself.

Then, the still water shimmered, and Urathane gazed intently upon it, as the silhouette of a figure appeared in the small light of the dimly-lit water. The figure drew closer and closer, till Urathane found himself staring into a face.

The face was dark, like coal, and a hood covered the upper regions of its head. A pair of dark, yellowish eyes peered out from the shadows of the hood, and a dark beard covered his face. Urathane's eyes opened wide in sudden recognition.

"Urathane," said the face.

Urathane inclined his head. "Mairon?" he whispered.

Mairon nodded. "Lord Urathane, I am in grave need of your person at this present time. It would be well for you to make your way unto my halls as soon as you are able. There is something pressing of which we must speak of together, you and I."

"Whatever on earth is the matter?"

The outline of Mairon's shadowed face contorted into a grimace. "I cannot speak of it openly here," he said. "The power of the Wizard King grows stronger with every passing day. Soon, I deem, he will reach out with his hand to destroy us and then the whole of Pergelion will be at his feet. My own power is being drawn from me every day it seems, and whereas he grows ever-stronger, I grow only weaker. Even now, I fear that he may be watching our discourse from afar. I cannot hold this mirage much longer: it taxes much of my strength to hold it thus in such a fashion for you. What we must speak of must be at another time, at another place; a place where we can be safe from his spying. Now, will you come hither?"

Urathane made a grimace of his own and rubbed his head gingerly. "I am uncertain," he said. "Things have taken a sudden, dour turn here. I fear that I have somehow managed to entangle myself within a web of treachery and deceit so deep that I do not know how I should escape it." Quickly then, Urathane told Mairon

of what had befallen him the past few days, including what had occurred leading up him waking up with his back to the tree.

Mairon's eyes narrowed. "You must be on your guard and ever-watchful, Urathane. The days are ever-darkening. Sacred oaths sworn in ages past have been broken; dark curses wrought long ago are again at work within Pergelion; ancient foes as old as the earth itself are come back to haunt us, it would seem, and the dead stir within their very graves. The shadow of some sleepless malice begins to throw its waking shadow upon us yet again, as of old. Stones speak, statues have become living things. Take heed of these things! You must take extreme care to not entangle yourself too deep in things that are beyond the reach of our ken, or else you will fall prey to those who seek to mar all that is good in this world."

"You needn't worry," replied Urathane. "I know full well the peril into which I have drawn myself into."

"I cannot here say for what reason it is that we must converse," said Mairon. "However, ere I leave you, you should know one thing: that which is of such import to me and mine is bound in troth to that which you meditate upon. The key to all that you seek lies within your past. Bethink yourself then of the words which were spoken by your forebear, Eldamír the Renowned, long ago in ages past. You must, at all costs—"

Just then, something flared up in the background. Mairon spun around, shouting aloud words that were of another tongue. A line of red fire whipped towards him, and Mairon brought about a black staff to ward off the oncoming blow. With his free hand, he reached back behind himself to Urathane, shouting out, "*Ethëtrae!*"

With that last word, the scene dissolved in a flash of black and grey and Urathane found himself looking upon the same twinkling waters into which he had been looking when he first happened there.



Urathane was beginning to make his way back to his house when he heard voices. Stopping dead in his tracks, he bent low and hearkened his ear to the sounds. At first, they were too far away for him to rightly discern what was being said, so he crept softly closer to where they appeared to be coming from and concealed himself behind a patch of foliage that ran abreast to the line of trees running down the riverside. Now the voices grew louder, and Urathane was able to perceive what was said, and it appeared that the persons who spoke them were steadily making their way to Urathane's position near the river.

"Can't see why we have to be out here rummaging about in this nasty blight," said one.

"Well, the Master wants us to find Eldamír's cursed heir, and if we don't, it'll be the end of us, that's what," answered another's voice. "Besides, think of the reward if we *do* happen upon him."

"*He* also happens to be not just any other person; and if what that conceited fool Palisor said is indeed true, then he is *Eldamír's Heir* and unjust compensation will only bring about the reckoning of his venerated line upon us."

"He may also *not* be Eldamír's Heir. I have always been of the thinking that he was slain when Orthalon burned with dragon fire. If it weren't for that trifling of a ring, then I would almost certainly

be of the mind that Palisor set us up to gain the glory. He has always been one for the sensational and likely as not, he wished to find some favour with the Master.”

“Don’t we all,” snarled the other man. “Sometimes, I just think he’s making it all up and is misleading us. What good has he ever brought upon our gathering? He brings a supposed ‘Heir of Eldamir,’ whom he claims will bring to consummation to all of our trials in one moment; only for that Heir to subsequently maim several of our men and leave our gathering-hall in ruins.”

“We almost got ’im though, and he would be in our hands *now* if it weren’t for that cursed stranger.”

“What stranger was that? There were a bunch of new faces among the crowd and hard to spot any person out.”

“The one in the far back on the right,” replied the man. “He had a grim look about himself and didn’t take part in any of our rituals. Methinks he was just there to spy on our proceedings. Anyways, one of our own—might have actually been Palisor, now that I think of it—knocked him on the head, but that stranger managed to push him aside and dragged the Heir out of the building over his shoulder. Mighty strong, he must have been to carry him out like that.”

“Indeed, but I still don’t remember him.”

“When and if you see him again, you’ll know him.”

“But where could he have got him off to? That stranger might be strong, but he couldn’t have carried him far; eventually, the strain would prove too much and, he would have to set him down someplace to rest or just leave him be in a secreted place.”

"I don't know where and you don't know where and nobody knows where, and that's why we're out here searching in this blasted cold, that's what."

Urathane could almost feel the other man glaring at him. Then, "I'm wondering as to why nobody's thought of searching out his house yet. Palisor seems mighty familiar with it, yet he hasn't done aught about it. You'd think that the first thing he'd do after recovering, would be to make his way there; but no: it's been almost an hour and no signs of that are about."

"Haven't you heard?" the other man said, sounding taken aback. "They've already gone and done that. As a matter of fact, that's one of the first things the Master had done."

"Then, did they find aught of him or his whereabouts?"

"Nothing's what I heard. The Master actually paid a visit to the house *in person*, which makes it clear that this is no small matter; but apparently, he wasn't there. He must have caught wind or suspected that would be the first place we'd look at, so the likely thing is, he flew the coop and is trying to find a way past Elgarost at this very moment."

"Which then brings to question again, what exactly it is we are doing here at this present moment if what you say is true?"

"Well, we're here, just in case that hasn't happened and he's still wandering about here somewhere. Anyways, if he does happen to somehow make his way back to his house, the Master has a pleasant surprise waiting for him. Some personal matter or something is what I heard." These last words made Urathane freeze, his blood churning cold as sudden fear raced through his heart.

"What exactly is it he's got planned?"

“Don’t know rightly. Just know that he’s left a little token of remembrance behind, should Eldamír’s Heir be so kind as to show his face.”

“Well, the more ostentatious, the better, is what I always say.”

“You can certainly say that again.”

“Well, the more ostentatious, the better, is what I always say.”

“Alright, shut it.”

Two men appeared on the periphery of Urathane’s vision. One was tall and thin, like a rail and the other was short and stocky, like a bottle-cork. They were sauntering aimlessly down the river’s edge, perilously close to Urathane.

But it was not the sight of the men that had drew Urathane’s attention. It was the the last words spoken by one of them: that of the ‘pleasant surprise’. He had no suspect idea of who might or mightn’t be the ‘Master’ or how or in what relation he stood to Urathane, in a retrospective look upon the ‘personal matters’; but of one thing, Urathane was sure. His enigmatic enemy was on to him, and Alwen and Indra were in grave peril. Maybe even mortal danger.

Without thinking, he made to remove himself from his position, whereupon a stick broke beneath the weight of his body with an audible *snap!* The men on the far side halted in their tracks, heads turned and eyes straining towards Urathane’s position in the thick underbrush. Urathane bent low, remaining as motionless as he could and holding his breath.

“Did you hear something?” said the tall man to his companion.

The shorter, stubbier man shifted in his position and took a step forward. “Who’s there?” he said in an unfriendly voice.

There was no answer, for Urathane remained where he was. The shorter man began to take another step forward, but his taller fellow placed a hand on his shoulder. "It's nothing. A beast of the water or something akin to that, in all likelihood."

The shorter swatted the hand away, snarling, "Don't touch me! I *heard* something or someone. My bet's that someone's down there hiding from our view and I intend to find out who!"

Ignoring the angry protest, the taller man reset his hand on the other man's shoulder. "Come now, Féri, you're so eager to find the Heir, that you're turning a little molehill into the Darklëar Mountains. Let us be off, there's naught that would durst hide in such a place as that. Why it's full of pitfalls, brambles, and water-pits. Besides, it's too noticeable."

His companion's stiffened form relaxed noticeably, and he returned to his former position, though he was still growling under his breath. Then, "Fine, let's remove ourselves to some other place."

It was only when they had made their way all the way down the bank and had disappeared down into one of the plains below, that Urathane was able to relax completely, and make his way to safety.

Down he sped in the opposite direction, taking no thought or heed for whom might discern him. Gloaming trails of fog drifted past him, the oblivious entrails of the ocean's froth swirling about him in the deepening night. The path rushed past beneath the trodding of his feet, and he did not pause for rest, till at last he had reached his house and placed his hand upon the door-handle to enter therein.

It was then that at last, he paused and for a moment stood motionless in the cold night, as he bethought himself of the implications proceeding from his coming here. The words of the two acolytes had hinted that his house might be under watch right now, which would, in turn, portend that he also, was being watched.

He opened the door, and it declined inward. An ominous silence pervaded all the air, and suddenly, Urathane was stricken by some strange, mortal fear. It was not a fear of who might be observing him and his movements; but a fear of some unknown thing, some thing or feeling that seemed to be laid upon the whole of the clearing surrounding his house. The trees did not stir as they were accustomed to, and the very air seemed dense, thick, and without the substance of the usual sounds to give it sustenance and verity. Urathane's breath caught in his chest, and he again hesitated, before entering the house cautiously.

Moonlight streamed through the unshuttered window on his right; the drapes fluttering softly in the nightly breeze that, as Urathane observed, was not stirring the foliage of the trees outside, as it should. He was immediately aware of the sinister feel to the room, an odious presence that seemed to have taken hold of it and all therein and now it overhung upon him, drowning, overwhelming, bearing down upon all his senses and training his emotions into one facet of presence: dread fear. In that suspect, Urathane could not help feeling that all was not as he had left it. Things were set about in a disorderly fashion, and a curious smell wafted in from one of the rooms beyond.

Passing from the room into the sitting room, Urathane stepped forward warily. All inside was darkling, and the room was very

dimly lit by the small light of the moon streaming inwards from behind him. In that faint light, Urathane discerned that his rocking chair was still situated where he had left it by the fireside, though no fire now lingered in the depths of its maw. In the corner, stood the candle stand, as it had formerly stood. But still, something was missing.

Reaching up to the uppermost part of the candle stand, Urathane took one of the candles set therein and, striking a fire with a match from his tinderbox, lit it and set it back in its holster, before moving onwards.

As he crossed this space of the room, the soft breeze suddenly pushed hard, gusting upwards, and pushing up a ragged piece of parchment from a spot where it had lain in the shadows at the outskirts of the room. It floated softly towards him, and with his free hand, Urathane bent low and caught it. He scanned it in the light provided by the burning candle, and while he could not make out most of it due to the feeble reaches of the light, he was able to glean from the scraggly lines and place-names sprawled out across its surface, that it was a map of some sort.

Folding and then stuffing it carefully within his pocket, Urathane took another step forward and once again, was struck by some ominous dread that seeped through his body, and permeated his senses. It was unlike to anything Urathane had ever felt before, save for one night, long ago. And Urathane remembered it even now.

Steadying himself on the rail to his left, Urathane attempted to breathe some sense into his fear-torn mind: he was within his own house, with his own floors beneath him, and a roof over his head

to shield him from the sudden outpouring of rain that now pounded upon the outside of his house above him.

Then, Urathane stood straight and righted himself. And he breathed the fear out of himself, if just for a moment, and attempting to relax, lit the other candles abundant about the room, casting away as much of the darkness as he could muster with the light come to his aid. And it was then that he noticed, as if for the first time, though he had smelt it earlier, the curious, yet foul smell that wafted towards down the hall from one of the rooms beyond.

At first, when he had smelt it, he had thought naught of it. But now, it was grown stronger and his stomach upheaved inside of himself. Fear again gripped his mind and body momentarily; but he quickly thrust it aside, like one does an adversary, when rushing for the victory and he thence hurried down the hall towards the foremost of the rooms, candle in hand, whereupon he pushed open the door that lingered in the air, halfway cracked for the seeing eye to discern and perceive.

Horror and then terror filled his eyes and heart as he gazed upon all that contained therein and the sinking feeling in his stomach crushed downwards in a descending spiral. With it, fell his heart, in the irrepressible wave of despair that at last, overwhelmed and nigh on consumed him. Within that room were situated two chairs and sat in them were Alwen and Indra, motionless forms in the flickering light of his candle. Below them and upon the floor, a dark liquid that could only be blood had pooled and then hardened, crusting over upon the decorated carpet.

Though his body told him otherwise, his mind prevailed, and Urathane pushed himself forward into the room as if straining

against a great force the entire time. Quickly, he felt for their pulses and was rewarded with naught, as he had presumed. Tears formed in his eyes, as he looked down upon the caretakers who had faithfully cared for and attended to all his needs for as long as he could remember.

“They didn’t deserve this,” he whispered to himself. “This is my own fault, and none other than myself should bear this blame.”

Eyes wandering aimlessly, they eventually strayed to the back of the door, where at last they settled upon six lines carved crudely into the hard wood, where once there had been naught before.

*In old of dark Azigüir,
there is a minstrel here.
Who sings of facets cold;
nay, not one, but sevenfold.
Like a lone light shining through,
netted trees ring in dark hue.*

Something in Urathane’s mind clicked, and he stared in atypical fascination, eyes riveted on the six lines, and as he pondered them, suddenly he *knew*. He knew what it was that Jerushín had so urgently been trying to tell him. He knew why Mairon felt so compelled to confer with him. He knew, in part, what the Dark Tree’s overall purposes and intents were.

And he knew who it was that had slain Alwen and Indra.

He *knew*. This precipitous knowledge induced a torrent of other memories bound in relation to this hitherto troubling paradox, to burst forth from within and to come pouring forth unbidden; and,

as the belaboring surge gradually subsided, Urathane knew what he needed to do.

Hurriedly, he rushed about here and there, this time with a renewed sense of purpose. First, he put on a pair of old, soiled garments which he had not worn for many long years, then a ragged cloak which he wrapped about himself, along with a hood to obscure most of his face in the shadow of its overhang. Next, he entered into the confines of his garden and, rubbing dirt in his beard and soot from the fire pit on his arms, legs, and face. He packed a small leather satchel and put therein what food could stay preserved for a prolonged amount of time; for he knew that it might be some time before he could consider returning. Last of all, he grabbed the hawthorn staff that he kept in the corner and strapped on his sword beneath his cloak, as he had done in what now seemed ages ago.

Here, Urathane goes into his garden and calls an Enki—bird-like messengers native to Pergelion—and commands it to carry a message for him. Having done this, he returns within the house and prepares to leave.

While he wished he could give Alwen and Indra a decent burial, he did not have the time required to perform such a task, and in wanting to put some meaning and purpose behind their deaths, he knew he had to take action as soon as he could in order to successfully evade and thwart the plans of his adversaries, who would undoubtedly be on their way to apprehend him.

Prepared and ready, Urathane bestrode the stairs down to his deep, cold cellar. Upon reaching it, he immediately set about removing several large and expediently-placed barrels from the

opposite wall. Then, when there was nothing to obscure his view of it, he stood still for a small time, contemplatively eyeing the bricks which made up the body of the wall and pondering old designs and ways. Then, stepping forward resolutely, he pushed against one brick to his left,

Nothing happened.

In response, Urathane pushed harder than before; but again, nothing gave. Frowning, Urathane stepped back and again studied the wall with a renewed fascination. Then, a seeming remembrance flooded his mind, and with a renewed assurance, he stepped forward and pressed upon a brick near the base of the wall, upon which was the design of a curled serpent, its tail caught between the teeth of its gaping maw.* For a fleeting moment, the brick moved not; then, there was a snap, like it had caught on something and the brick reverted inwards with an ominous rumble.

At the same time, the bricks began to break apart in the middle, forming a digressive line that opened up at the beginning and end of each new brick to pop loose. The break twisted and turned in a snaky fashion, each wall furthering itself further away from the other to reveal a dark recess in the wall, which led downwards for a small ways. The orifice stood nearly six feet in length.

Lightly picking up the small lantern which he had set on the floor above him, Urathane entered the enclave. Wispy cobwebs spun out of the stone-cold, dew-covered walls here and there, some frayed with age at the ends, others newly spun and stiff. Urathane held the torch out in front of himself and waded through

* The universal emblem representative of the Kingdom of Ared'dor.

the mess slowly at first, then picking up speed as his feet found surer footing and the ground began to level out.

Behind him, he heard another ominous rumble, as the brick doors closed in behind him, colliding with a loud *thud*, having been instigated by a triggering mechanism built into the wall, specifically designed to close shut after a small amount of time had passed.

It had been some time since he had last used this tunnel as a means of transportation. In former times, that had mostly been ordained for when he needed to escape from Elgarost to the safety and comforting refuge of his home. Now, it was the other way around.

It was imperative—no *dire*—that he find a way within Elgarost without revealing himself for who he truly was, and this was the only way he could achieve this without being spotted. Furthermore, at this late hour, the gates would be closed, and he would be left in solitude by the door, with no seeming way to enter therein.

The sides of the passageway were carved and straightly-aligned, hewn out of the old earth by men of old in more desperate times. It was only fitting that in such a time as now, that they should again be used in furtherance of their former purpose.

For nigh to an hour, he plodded along down the dark tunnel, sometimes walking briskly, other times trudging forward one step at a time, in an effort to conserve his energy. Then, when his legs were just beginning to burn from the strenuous exercise, the air, which for a time had been stuffy and warm, began to cool; even as the path took on a steady, upward tilt. Colder and colder it

became, till at last, the tunnel's proportions began to drop off and he found himself at a supposed dead end.

In his hunched over position, Urathane extinguished the flame of his lantern, and all was instantly clothed in a thick, inky blackness. Without waiting for his eyes to adjust, he flexed his fingers and set them against the stone above his head and slowly pushed upwards. There was a small grating sound, and a square section of the rock popped loose with just enough noise to make Urathane grimace. This, he pushed softly to the side, taking especial care to minimize the noise as much as possible, then heaved himself up out of the small hole; at the same time remembering to set the stone tile back into its former place in the floor and erasing the fine layer of dust which now thinly coated the floor.

He still needed to exercise caution and not draw unwanted attention to himself if he could avoid it. If found climbing out of a secret crawl space beneath a communal building, he would almost certainly draw suspicious looks and uncomfortable questions.

He was in the distinguished library of Elgarost, a place that—for now at least—was a place that contained some history of the past and was still open to the general public, though Urathane was sure that Surentûr's servants went out of their way to dissuade the commonplace from visiting it as much as they could. The less knowledge one had of the world's ways and its history, the easier to deceive the peoples. He was convinced of this from his own personal experience.

Again assuming the likeness of a common beggar, Urathane made his way down different and varying aisles, back bent and the soles of his boots padding silently upon the stone floor. Even now,

at such a late hour, he espied the flickering lights of those people who sat alone at small alcoves or tables in darkly-lit corners, reading away the wee hours of the night. Or was it morning now? He did not know.

He took care to avoid these persons as much as he could and thus passed through the whole of that great building to the foremost part of the library unnoticed, at which point he departed the premises through a small side-door and betook himself of the path ordained.

Once out on the streets and with the fresh night air brushing against his face, Urathane set off at a brisk pace down the road, keeping in the shadows as much as he could. Fortunately, no one seemed to pay him any mind; to those who saw him, he was just another beggar: lowlife of the under streets which were to be avoided.

Thus was the way he made his way to his destination, until coming to the high statue of Eldamír the Renowned, which was placed at the very center of the city square. Here yet was still a small remnant of the glory which had once been an inherent virtue of Ared'dor, and of old, Asgalarion.

The statue was wrought in a great likeness to Eldamír as he had once looked; for the architects of those former ages had been more ingenious and dedicated to their work than those of the present time, and they took the time necessary to make the finished product worthy of its taxing effort. With the passing of the years, Ared'dor (and in the case, many of its fellow countries) had—unfortunate though it was—lost a rich dimension of their former culture.

The effigy stood over twenty feet in height and was clad in the arms and raiment of that day, completely obscuring the body, save for the helm itself, which covered only the very bridge of the nose and the sides and back of the head. The upper piece of the helm was adorned with a plumed array of swirling feathers and one of its hands it held a magnificent, double-edged sword, which it raised aloft in the triumph of victory. On its lowered arm, it held a shield, an eagle atop its eyrie emblazoned across the front.

The tunic, which covered the torso and thigh, was overlaid with pale armour and was cut off at shoulders and shorn at the knees. The insignia decorating the chest was that of four crossed swords, around which encircled that same form of the serpent which bore its own likeness on the stone brick in Urathane's cellar: that of the snake which lay curled in a circular shape, its tail caught in its mouth.

Having gazed upon it for some time, Urathane turned quickly away and departed from the edge of the square, hobbling off in a beggar-like fashion as fast as the encompassing nature of his guise would permit him, to make up for lost time.

The street which he happened upon eventually tailed away, and as he went further in, the seeming-grandeur of Elgarost disintegrated into the rust, and...sensation one naturally felt while in a city of this magnitude. It was only sometime later when he came to a dirty, brown sign that hung above the door of an inn: Painted across the cracked wood in faded green letters were the words: *THE BULKING BOAR*.

Urathane did not pause to gaze upon the rickety structure that stood entrenched in the ground before him, the cracked, dusty windows that spotted its exterior, or even the general sense of

churlish forbidding that seemed to surround it. He simply entered; for he knew already what was before him: it was a familiar passing-by place for those who wished to keep covert company or voice one's thoughts, without the fear of being informed upon.

Inside, it was neither rowdy nor tranquil. A flurry of dilapidated tables dappled the creaky floor of the inn. Tallow candles hung in iron receptacles on the walls, burning leisurely and sending off a somewhat unpleasant odor. Tumbledown chairs sat adjacent to the tables; and although the chairs that occupied were mostly made up of men, several women could be spotted here and there, all playing their hands at various games or sipping from their mugs of ale, eyes boring aimlessly into the wall beyond them. Those who were trying their skill at gaming were naturally, more robust than the rest of the crowd and indeed, as Urathane moved down the room, he heard a loud cry of presumptuous laughter as one person raised up their hand in the triumph of their conquest. Following this was, of course, a low chorus of grumbling groans, as the defeated ones pushed their respective piles of coins over to the victor.

Urathane regarded the room, his blue eyes piercing every shadow and corner, till they had settled fixedly on those of one man in the far corner. There was a small glimmer of recognition between them, and in response, Urathane rapidly bestrode the room, sliding smoothly into the seat opposite that of the other man.

"I hope that I have not kept you waiting long," Urathane said in a low voice, as he settled in across from the man, who was hooded and cloaked so that not much could be discerned of his features.

"Nay, do not worry yourself with that, my Lord Urathane," said the other man. "I noticed not the passing time; for my mind has

been busy pondering these tidings which you so felt necessitated my attention.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Urathane. He glanced around the inn, then back to the man. “Not to sound over-fretful, but where, Lord Celador, is Arillion? I had originally passed this message to him to be sent on to you so that I might meet with you both. But here I find only yourself. Is he simply late in arriving?”

“Ah,” said Celador, biting his lower lip in sudden perturbation. “Just minutes after relaying your message to one of my servants, I received word that Arillion had been found out and arrested by soldiers of Surentûr.”

“What?”

“It is most unfortunate.” Celador shook his head. “Men like Arillion come around only every other age. It will be a sore loss for us if he ‘disappears’ like so many others already have.”

Urathane’s grim face took on a dour quality. “I would not have it happen this way,” he growled almost to himself. “Not for Arillion.”

“Peace,” said Celador. “There is naught we can do about it this time. Arillion is more than capable; we must place our hope in that he *will* find a way out of this: remember, this is not the first time he has been in a situation so similar to this one.”

“I know.” Urathane sighed. “Sometimes, I feel as if we are on a downward trend of degeneration and profligacy that shall, in the end, lead only to our doom. Tell me, Celador,” he said, looking at his companion square on. “What do you think of my dispatch? Do you believe me right or wrong in my assertions, or am I overthinking and drawing everything out of proportion?”

“No, I fully believe you,” said Celador. “It certainly makes sense to me. For the last several months, Jerushin had been obsessed

with something that he would tell none of. With every passing day, he seemed to grow more and more excited about this thing which he would spend hours behind closed doors, deliberating and thinking hard on. We suspected it was some sort of enigma, or historical detail, due in part, to the fact that he was asking for the acquiring of many books of prophecy and other such matters. We were beginning to actually be somewhat worried as to his state of mind, when, just several days ago, he discovered something that he seemed to consider to be of a momentous nature and of the utmost importance. But that was just before he disappeared to a place where we know not, leaving behind no clear clue as to what he was researching.”

Urathane could not have been caught more off guard. “Jerushin has disappeared also?” he asked incredulously. “Whatever on earth, do you mean? How come no one has told me of this? Have we been found out? or was it he alone?”

“We have, as of now, not yet been discovered. However, as for Jerushin’s whereabouts, I do not know. He went off all the sudden. Very peculiar, he was. During that time, he must have sent off that letter to you. He came back sometime later, but he appeared then to be greatly at unease about something. I believe that he was so much disturbed (or perhaps, he suspected that he might not have much time left) that this was why he took me into his confidence and told me that when I next saw you again, I was to say to you these words: *To Prevail, one must tear the Veil. To Apprehend, one must not Bend. But to truly Heal, one must have Zeal and break the Seal.*

“It was on the following day that we became aware of the fact that he had evanesced completely and utterly.”

Urathane's brow furrowed in consternation, eyes staring at a knot in the table, as he mulled over Jerushin's words. The message was enigmatic as usual, and Urathane felt frustrated and intellectually inept at his inability to perceive the true meaning behind Jerushin's words at first glance.

"May I see the letter, or would things be served better if it was kept in your confidence only?"

"Certainly, you may see it," said Urathane absentmindedly, drawing out the letter from where he had stuffed it in his trouser-pocket and sliding it across the table. "You might as well. I could not make head or tails of it at first, although now, as I have already formerly relayed to you, I think I have now discerned at least a part of it."

Celador took the piece of parchment and held it up close for inspection. Out of the corner of his eye, Urathane quietly observed as Celador's eyes scrutinized over it and then with a small grunt, he curled his lip and frowned. "What is this?" he asked, at last, holding it back out to Urathane. "It does not make sense. This is no letter."

"Why, of cour—" Urathane stopped mid-sentence, as his eyes fell upon the front of the parchment. "Why you're quite right," he said in a surprised tone, taking back the paper. It was the map which he had found floating around his house, upon entering it after his little run-in with the Dark Tree.

Scanning it with a practiced eye, he said, "This, I found upon returning to my house this very evening. At the time, I did not pay it much thought; for my mind was preoccupied with things of another interest." Urathane's eyes darkened momentarily at the recurring memory, and he stared at the parchment, to help avert

any other remembrances from coming pouring forth. As he had deemed earlier, it was a map of some sort.

“This is a mistake,” he said, half to himself, half to Celador. “This is Indorión’s doing.” A sudden thought spawned forth from within his mind, and in that vast array of contemplations and ruminations, a small grain of truth stood out. “And if my supposition holds out, then I might have an inkling as to what it is and what it portends to.” He looked into Celador’s confused countenance, a grim sort of laughter dancing within the dark embers of his eyes. “Fate is with us this night, it would seem,” he said. “An ill chance for our enemy, thus turns into an advantage for us, no matter how slight it might be.”

“And what is it?” asked Celador, his eyes narrowing.

“Do you not see? It is a map to Azigüir itself. The key to all that we seek. Do not doubt me in this matter! I know whereof I speak.”

Celador’s eyes lightened in sudden wonder, then grew slightly grim again. “And are you positively sure that Indorión is the one responsible?”

“I’m dead certain: there can be no other person who could leave such an inscription like the one which I found engraved upon my door. A small token that is assured, but a glaring oversight, when one looks upon the matter as a whole with light to shine through from the past.” Urathane quickly illuminated Celador of the words that he had found.

Celador did not speak for a time. At last, he leant forward over the table, hands gripping the wood and eyes displaying all the urgency inherent of meaning. “Then, if you are deadly certain, then so must we be deadly careful; for our foe is one of the deadliest there is.

"I am well aware of that," said Urathane softly. "If you know me, then you know that I am more aware of this than any other person upon the face of this Pergelion."

"It is merely a warning, Lord Urathane: one that you would do well to keep at the forefront of your mind."

Urathane nodded. "By the way, where's Andriel at?"

Celador rolled his eyes. "He's at the palace, frolicking with the royalties at one of their parties."

Urathane frowned. "He's what? How on earth did he manage to—"

Shaking his head, Celador said, "Don't ask. I have no idea how he managed to get himself invited, and I can't fathom why Lord Surentûr still stomachs him. Just consider it some of the baggage that naturally comes along with keeping tabs on him and his comings and doings."

Urathane's eyebrows, which had been raised noticeably, returned to their former state. "Well, does he know of what happened to Arillion?"

"I'm sure he's heard something of it. You know how he is, always catering an ear for the ladies' talk and hearsay. Besides, talk gets around fast in Elgarost."

"That it does. Any plausible idea on when he'll be around soon? We could use his help, I would think."

"Nay, one of those parties by itself could last any number of—"

The doors to the inn slammed open.

"There he is," said Celador. "Allow me to rephrase myself."

"You're allowed," said Urathane, as Andriel came sauntering over.

“Ah, here we are,” Andriel said, stopping at Urathane and Celador’s table. “I thought I might find you here.”

“Andriel,” replied Urathane, with a small nod of his head to acknowledge his presence.

“Lord Urathane,” he said, flopping down and settling into the chair neighboring Celador’s.

“Now,” he said, folding his hands. “What, may I ask, is going on?”

“Arillion has been arrested,” began Celador.

“Yes, yes,” Andriel said, with a wave of his hand. “I know all that already. I’m interested in what’s *truly* important.”

“The safety and well-being of your closest friend and ally, is ‘unimportant’?”

Andriel shook his head. “You mistake me, my good sir. Really, I don’t see what you’re all worried about. Arillion is in good hands. I assure you, he’s quite well to do.”

Celador’s eyes narrowed. “I assume then that you have a plan?”

“Of course I do,” said Andriel, a hint of indignation creeping into his voice. “What do you think I do, make it up as I go along? Although it is somewhat true that I haven’t had the time necessary to think one out yet, consider our dilemma in excellent hands.”

Urathane grunted to get their attention, and both Celador and Andriel looked at him. “I’m sorry for having to break this up, but could we get back to what we were discussing? Time is wasting and we, quite simply, do not have that necessity.”

“And what is it we were discussing exactly?” said Andriel, his tone taking on a serious quality. Omitting and disregarding all minute details of little viable consequence, Urathane quickly filled Andriel in all that had occurred and taken place in the past day.

Andriel's eyes widened at his words, and he carefully examined the letter alongside Celador, who again brought his finger to it.

"As I was saying, Teghorëan is a language of yore and nearly foregone, though there are most assuredly some who would take issue with that happening. Very, very few have a working mastery of the language, and even fewer have much proficiency in translating it. In light of this accordance, methinks this to be merely a fragment of something larger in the original working."

"But why then would Jerushin bestow to us, only this fragment?" said Andriel wonderingly. "It does not make much sense unless he was pressed for time, and the need was very urgent."

"He did," said Celador. "Can you not see the slant of the writing? The scribbled words and sometimes half-scrawled letters? This is not all like Jerushin's wonted style. Verily, the manner of the wording of very much the same and the writing is undoubtedly his; however, Jerushin always wrote perspicuously, and each letter he transcribed was formed as elegantly as he could enable himself; a sort of idiosyncratic refinement he had: one which he prided himself much in."

"You speak truly," said Urathane. "And this much I was able to discern at the first reading. Yet Andriel speaks rightly: Jerushin, evidently pressed for time, put pen to paper and gave us information: enough information as he deemed; or quite simply, information with sufficient indications that could lead us to the fuller narrative than the latter which is here presented to us. It was then up to us to ascertain his meaning; and this I believe we have done for the most part already, at the very least, for that which was transcribed in the upper regions of the paper."

“And in view of your former assumptions which you had already relayed to me, the first portion becomes much clearer,” continued Celador. “Simply count the uses of the word ‘certain’: that comes out to seven: or seven souls. To this end then, the accentuated ‘Instruments’ can only refer retrospectively back to this perceived verity.”

“A ‘Thief’ and a ‘Deceiver,’ ” said Andriel. “Do these refer to one person or two? I can bethink myself of several persons to which they might pertain to.”

“They are two persons,” said Celador decisively. “One of them is Surentûr; that much is clear. As for the other...”

“That would be Indorión,” said Urathane softly. “It becomes clearer now what it was Jerushin was endeavoring to tell me.” He paused for a brief moment, then said slowly: “The Helm and Sword of Azigüir, forged long ago for the hand of the Nameless One, are now brought forth from the depths of time, back into the light of day. Undoubtedly, Surentûr is desirous of them. So is Indorión and through him, Agandaûr.

“Legend has it that once the Sword is found, the road to the Final Battle will, at last, be made clear. It will be verily, The End.”

“And once the Helm is found, that *road* comes to its full end,” intruded Celador grimly.

Urathane nodded grimly. “The resting of the sword or helm is not now known at this present time. However, if we are right in our line of thinking, this map may hold the location to where they lie, or where they had once been bestowed in ages past.”

“Unless, from the depths of his guile, Indorión has sought to bewilder our minds with a falsity; and this is naught but a red herring,” Celador said.

Urathane paused. "Yes," he said after a time. "You are right in your thinking; that would certainly be his style. Yet...at the same time, we will never truly know for certain, unless we try our hand at the game and if hope holds out, play our true ace. Mayhap it is that this is the chance we have for long been awaiting: the chance in which we are given the strength and means to defeat Agandaûr and forever rid the world of his vile presence and schemes. We must, at all means, take the bait, even...even if it be a trap. Remember friends, this is not the first time this game has been played; if one uses one's head, then we may stand a chance and perhaps even undermine our opponent."

"And if we are cheated?" Celador said grimly.

"Then so are we cheated."

Celador and Andriel eyed him grimly, then with a firm resolution.

"So be it," said Andriel, the once-dancing light gone from his pale eyes.

Celador nodded his agreement. "Aye."

"But," said Urathane, "I am unable to read the runes on this map and so are you. We are lost in a pit of unknowns."

"It may not be as unknown as you think it to be," said Celador. "Look at the letter again! Is it not clear? Behold! The answer lies here, right before our very eyes: it is up to us to discern where that answer is.

"As Jerushin has yet warned us, we must not act in ignorance. See? The 'slight blade': what else can he here be referring to? We must gather all of these things together, or else they will be lost forever, 'if let rest in soiled hands.' "

“ ‘Scour the *Monuments of Memory*,’ ” said Andriel. “Whatever does he mean? Is that an old reference? the name of a place?”

“The ‘Monuments of Memory,’ ” said Urathane to himself. He sat still for a spell, contemplating and pondering the enigmatic words: turning them over in his mind in hopes of seeing if he might glean some truth from them. Then, a sudden realization dawned upon him, and as this feeling enwrapped and nigh consumed him with renewed fervor, he said, “What is the ancient Eluthian word for ‘Monument’?”

“*Rimbēda*,” said Celador slowly, beginning to catch on.

“Which translated, literally means: ‘holy place,’ ‘shrine of ancients,’ or ‘temple.’ The Temple of Elgarost contains many trinkets wherein have been preserved many ‘memories’ of things past. This is the second clue we have been given: the Temple of Elgarost: the Black Stone of Helíngrod: *a Monument of Memory*.”

Celador nodded in agreement. “The Blade of Azigûir lies within the Temple; therein, we will thus find that which we seek.”

“Last, but certainly not least, is this final fragment imparted to us by Jerushin. What it betokens, we can only but guess. What does it mean? And better yet, what does that meaning portend? Would not Mairon perhaps know? Indeed, this seems to me, to be the more likelier route. But were that Jerushin were here to enlighten us!” Then did Urathane tell them of his previous conversation with the Wizard—and of what had befallen him, before their discourse was ended. At this, both looked up in surprise, then consternation.

“If this is indeed true, then we must make for Mairon at once,” said Andriel.

Nodding his assent, Urathane said, "But not ere we first retrieve the blade."

"If what we speak of is true, then we will need to find some way, somehow to access the vaults of the temple. Moreover, this 'relic' likely has its place of refuge in a secret room that will very likely be most harrying to our efforts; there is no other attainable reason of why and how it has been preserved for so long, without having been recovered."

"Which it might have been already," said Andriel. "We truly have no idea for sure whether or not its resting place is still even in the Temple; for all we know, this could be but a wild goose chase and all for naught."

"But that is a risk we shall have to take if we are to succeed in our quest," Celador said. "But that only returns us to our former dilemma: how to access and then, how will we find that which we seek in the hopefully-sufficient amount of time granted unto us."

"The first is of no difficulty," said Andriel. "As for the second, I do not—"

"Mining records," interrupted Urathane. The other two eyed him questioningly. "We need to find old mining records: undoubtedly there must be some account or annal in which were preserved notes of some kind or another concerning the Temple and its establishment. If we could but lay our hands on those—"

"Then we might discover the precise place and location of the sword!" Andriel finished, eyes enlivened. Then he frowned. "But now the question is: how do we gain access to documents of this import. I would think it somewhat problematic to somehow convince those who would have those in their possession to allow us to, what's the word...ah, yes, *manhandle* them."

"I *may* be able to help us in that area," said Celador slowly. Urathane and Andriel looked at him in interest.

"I wouldn't count on it," he continued. "Nothing is certain, and I believe that things once held to be under my sovereignty and jurisdiction, have been inappropriately, and even fallaciously I might add, assumed and dispersed by the Lord Counselor. I gainsay as I can in the King's Councils, but He has become too powerful, and I must take greater care in all that I say and do. Such is the nature of my behest. There are some, I think, who would have once sided me; but they have become now too afraid of him. None durst oppose him for fear of being taken in the night. And moreover, He has much of the people's support to back him in all his endeavors, as you well know."

Urathane nodded somberly. "I do."

"But," said Celador. "What I can, I will do, and what I must, I will see it through. So do not be afraid, friends; I am here preserved, and I have been placed in my position for a *reason*. And rest assured, I *will* see that reason fulfilled."

"As will I in all my endeavors," said Urathane. "We *must* stand strong together: disparate and wholly divergent personalities aside, finding common ground in this one hope: the hope that we must needs embrace: the hope that will spur on the one beacon of Light remaining in this darkened world. With this one hope, we can take courage and be of fearless heart, even in the face of this irrepressible darkness that seeks with all within it to utterly consume us."

Andriel inclined his head. "I concur."

"That is good," said Urathane. "Then we will see what we might do in this venal city. Let us be about it then."

Celador shook his head, and a certain unease seemed to creep into his eyes. "Urathane, my place is here; that much I know for certain. But as for you...I am beginning to think that your place lies well...somewhere else."

Urathane frowned. "What?"

"Trust me, Urathane." Celador bent forward in his seat, eyes earnest and unprovocative. "You must hearken unto me. We will do what we have already deigned to do here; but after these things have taken place, you must leave Elgarost. No, let me rephrase myself, you must *flee*. And as soon as you can get yourself gone."

Eyes narrowing, Urathane looked at Celador dubiously "And go where? And for what purpose?"

"It is no longer for any that still openly contest themselves as of the Steadfast to remain. This excursion provides the perfect opportunity for you to do so."

"I cannot go," Urathane said adamantly. "I see no real purpose in doing so, besides that of preserving my own life. And I would have you know, I care not for what befalls me: what will happen is what will happen. Furthermore, I feel an obligation to these people, my son Irolas yet makes his home here, and I cannot in good conscience, let the Ared'doreans bring about their own destruction without doing my part to aid them in what I still can."

"I know and recognize this," said Celador. "But that is not my point! Urathane, understand that we *need* you. I begin to wonder if these pieces have thus been situated for this very reason. And who else is better to take command than you?! I see none in sight. Your knowledge in these matters, the depth of your perception, the primacy of your former heritage: they all fit so very well into our present predicament and are, I deem, a true solvent."

“Which, even if these things were so, simply go to show *exactly* why I must remain here. And although I sorely deplore lending my authority to dominate in any way, shape or form, I must do as needed.”

“It doesn’t have to be up to you, my friend,” said Celador quietly.

Something in his eyes made Urathane pause and consider him, if just for a moment. “What?”

“There is one who might be of aid to us here. One to whom even the powers that be, might hearken to. But the difficulty of this lies in the fact that *him* whom I would name, is not among us at this present time.”

“And none know of his true whereabouts,” said Andriel. “Yet the concept is intriguing, I’ll grant you that.”

This sentiment made Urathane pause further and sitting back in his chair, he contemplated Celador’s words, a pensive expression upon his tired face. It was true, he hadn’t exercised any thought upon this particular facet of their paradox; but then who would consider it? “Something of that nature is risky and certainly fraught with much peril,” he said finally.

“Undeniably so,” agreed Celador.

Urathane sighed. “I do not know, Celador. I am uncertain of many things, and my mind is clouded: too clouded, I fear to give just reconciliation to such a propensity.”

“Very well then,” Celador said. “But I ask that you at least give it some thought when you are less overborne with such burdens. As for now, I will do what I can in procuring what mining records are yet available, which I will then—assuming that such things do exist and I am successful in gaining access to them—peruse, in hopes of

gaining that knowledge that would enlighten us and further our undertaking.”

So engaged had they been in their discourse, they had failed to observe the cloaked figure that now bustled by them and pulled up at Celador’s side. Urathane drew back apprehensively in response and saw Andriel doing the same out of the corner of his eye; Celador, however, was nonplussed and with a severe expression, lent his ear to the man who began to whisper something in his ear. Realizing that the man was only a servant of Celador, Urathane began to relax slightly, then stiffened sharply, when he saw Celador’s face go pale.

Celador said something quietly to his servant, and the man drew silently to the side, hands at the ready and pose stiff. “I must go,” said Celador, hesitating, and then rising from his seat. “Something...something has come up.”

“What is the matter?” asked Urathane, his trepidation at Celador’s unease growing.

Celador shook his head, his disquieted eyes betrayed that something was or had gone amiss. “Now now, not here. Not enough time. Later—I’ll tell you later. Farewell, Neldoreth’s son.” Then, with a small flurry of movement, he and his servant were gone.

For some time, Urathane and Andriel discussed what it was that could have drawn Celador away, Arillion’s capture, and their plans going forward.

Their conversation was beginning to die down when Urathane was drawn from Andriel to a movement on the other side of the room. He felt as though he were being watched from afar. In the shadows in the corner of the room, there was a man. Momentarily,

his eyes seemed to flicker, as if he had been observing and was just now averting them upon noticing Urathane's probing gaze. He stood there, eyeing the crowd in general disinterest, his slightly-sullen eyes regarding all therein as if with some inner contempt that only he was aware of. Finally, as if he were unnerved and uncomfortable by Urathane's stare, he left his corner and began making his way to the door beyond.

Urathane nudged Andriel, who responded in kind.

"I see him."

Meeting Andriel in the eye, an unseen message passed through them, and Andriel began to rise. When the man had passed over the threshold and out the door, Andriel stood up and made his way quickly the same way, ignoring the occasional, curious looks that flew his way.

Andriel was following him, to apprehend and hopefully interrogate him on what he was doing in the inn. Perhaps, if they were lucky, they might have landed upon a young weasel: one who might sell all in fear of his life. They hoped to find out what he was doing and who he was working for: there were many movements in Ared'dor, good and ill, and many that would not look kindly upon Urathane or any members of the Steadfast for that matter.

For some reason that he did not know, Urathane waited. He *should* be finding a place to rest for the night—or morning for that matter—it was nearly one o'clock in the morning, and Urathane was fatigued beyond measure. Yet he stayed and waited. What he waited for, he did not know. He *could* leave; Andriel would fully understand if Urathane needed to be off and would likely do the same anyway. Perhaps, it was due to his unease and trepidation,

built up from the shore of dour happenings that had occurred of late.

Time passed. Urathane fidgeted in his seat. He wasn't staying, because he so wished to see what information Andriel managed to get from the suspect man; yet all the same, he should have been back by now. Ten minutes passed. Soon Urathane began to be perturbed.

"Why is he taking so long?" he muttered to himself. Suddenly, he wished to depart. He was getting too worked up. He would find a bed for the night and rest there until morning. Urathane stood to his feet and took two steps towards the front.

The door opened.

A troop of soldiers pushed their way in, shoving their way past several wide-eyed onlookers. Urathane froze. Then one of the soldiers pointed to him, gesturing wildly to his commander. Urathane cursed inwardly and looked frantically about for a place to hide himself

But it was too late. Sweeping the room, they were in front of him before he could so much as blink. "That's him," said one. "Apprehend him."

"What's this?" cried Urathane, taking a step back. "On what charges?"

"None of that now," said one, reaching past him, to lead him forward.

"No," said Urathane firmly, glaring the man in the eye. The soldier hesitated, then lowered his gaze uncomfortably. "I *demand* to know why I am being taken as a prisoner."

Several of them grumbled, but the Captain held up his hand to silence them. "Our sources have confirmed that you spoke 'in

opposition' of the King and his trusted counselor, the Lord Surentûr. You are to be brought in for examination and prospective retribution."

"Don't be absurd!" laughed Urathane. "I did no such thing."

"I'm afraid that we trust our sources very well," said the Captain. "You were heard self-proclaiming yourself as 'Lord'; and in light of these happenings, you're going to have to come with us."

Urathane's face became impassive, as he realized that he could say or do nothing to dissuade them. Dropping his arms to his sides, he allowed them to cuff him, then they led him thither out of the inn and out into the cold, bitter night.

Echoes of the Dead

Urathane was led to the city dungeons, where he was quickly searched and bereaved of all belongings on his person, before being thrown into a dank, empty cell. No matter how hard he tried, he could not endeavor his captors to respond to his repeated requests for a clear explanation as to why he had been arrested. Most infuriating of all, was the loss of his sword, Durendurl. Not only was it a prized and treasured possession of his; but it would also make Surentûr's servants much more likely to discover the true nature of his identity. His disguise would help in shielding him some; but eventually, one way or another, Urathane feared that he would undoubtedly be found out. And then there was Palisor to keep in mind.

He *knew*. How he knew, Urathane did not know, though he might try and ponder it. Had Irolas perhaps informed Palisor of this verity? Through his arts or some concealed facet of his person that Urathane had failed to discern, Palisor had managed to convey a

wholly different facade than that which he had shown himself to be earlier that night; and with this ponderance, Urathane began again to wonder if Palisor had acted in the same manner towards Irolas: like as to a many-coloured robe: turn it one way, and it will shine in one hue towards one person, turn it another way and likewise will it also change to another. This only served to make Urathane more uneasy in regards to the whole situation. Like snakes spawned from the great serpent, it almost seemed akin to.

He sighed. It frustrated him to be here this way. He should *not* be here at this time; time was wasting away, and with every passing second, their vision was becoming less and less of a reality and more of a distant hope, only partway realized. This was a hitch in the road. No, a *major* hitch.

Maybe Celador would hear word of his incarceration and mayhap send his servants to come and extract him from his present predicament. The idea was intriguing at first; however, the more Urathane mulled over it, the more convinced he became that it was in of itself, genuinely unfeasible in many aspects. Especially now that Urathane was under suspicion, Celador could not risk associating himself with Urathane. If what Celador had inferred earlier was true, then Surentûr would undoubtedly take notice of him, thus drawing much-unwanted attention to himself. Celador had already taken more than enough risks and endangered him and his position enough as it stood already. Furthermore, his seat in the Head Council was invaluable to the Steadfast and to the continued advocacy of their cause, small though it might be.

He woke suddenly to the familiar sound of keys jingling and jangling in a lock. Sitting bolt upright in his seat as a cascade of

thoughts rushed upon him at this unseen eventuality and who could be making their way here, he focused his bleary eyes on the furthest reaches of the hall as far as he could see them and on the sounds that came echoing his way from beyond.

“Doesn’t matter!” said a surly voice. “That is my duty, not his. Unlike others, I would mention, my obligations and responsibilities do not change with the mere gusting of the wind.”

“The Lord Surentûr will not be happy, my lord,” said another voice. Urathane took him for one of the guards.

“I don’t give a Dragon’s tail for whether he’s happy or not. My commission is not to go about making all the belligerent fools of the world happy. Why is everybody so willing to act in accordance to his every whim and conceit, anyways? He’ll cope with the time. Come now, Forast, hurry along there! Time is wasting! Take me to the captive!”

“He’s not exactly a captive, my lord; more of a prisoner of war if you take my meaning. From what I’ve heard tell, he’s one of those anti-loyalists. The talk’s been going around that he’s some reputable overseer or what-have-you.”

“Oh, cut your blathering! I know full well what they say. Fact is, I likely know better than any of you put together and squeezed tight into a pickling jar.”

“You do?” The guard’s voice rose with his piqued interest. “What do you thi—”

“Enough of that now!” said the first man, who was most evidently a nobleman of some repute. “If I were to tell you of all that’s going on, then soon the whole city would be in on it.”

“Sorry, my lord.”

“And I likewise,” muttered the nobleman.

A guard came into view in the dimly-lit passage, followed shortly after by a portly, well-dressed nobleman, just as Urathane had suspected him to be. Selecting a lantern from a nearby hook, they made their way past the long line of intersecting cells, the flickering firelight playing ghostly shadows on the walls, until drawing up to Urathane's cell, where they halted. The bolt was undone, and the door slid ajar, hanging loosely on its rusty hinges.

"This is him, my lord."

The nobleman nodded almost indiscernibly. "Leave us."

"Yes, my lord." The guard withdrew, and leisurely made his way back the way he had come.

The nobleman turned towards Urathane, eyes probing him up and down with an evaluative and somewhat censorious air. Then, he opened wide his mouth in preparation to speak.

However, Urathane did not allow him to do so. "Why," he said slowly, articulately forming his words. "Are you here?"

For a brief moment, the imperious facade that resided about the nobleman and his eyes ogled him, before he collected himself and said in an assessing way, "Why do you ask?"

"Because," said Urathane. "I have met my fair share of noblemen in my storied lifetime, and a fair number of them all seem to bespeak of one thing only: a singular and unequaled absorption with their own melody."

The nobleman raised an eyebrow. "You are very perceptive, Lord Urathane."

Urathane's eyes narrowed. "How do you know that name?"

"I'm also very perceptive." The nobleman smiled knowingly. "And I have my sources."

"I see."

“My sources have inferred you to be quite adroit and intuitive, I might add.”

“If one is truly ‘perceptive,’ then one must also assume that something of a competent or shrewd mind is bound in troth to this discrete aspect of the intellectual genius.”

“So might one assume.”

“Indeed,” continued Urathane without missing a beat. “And as all persons of this nature can thus relate, ‘relative genius’ does not necessarily bequeath wisdom unto itself. Would you not agree, my good nobleman?”

“Err, well, yes. Certainly so,” said the nobleman. “Name’s Tharbür, by the way. Lord Tharbür.”

Urathane regarded him with a flat expression. “I have also perceived that most nobleman, such as your good self, happen to be less inclined towards the wellspring of prudence, more so than others. However,” he said, raising a single finger. “I have also discerned that although wisdom might not be a common attribute, the knack of a somewhat knowledgeable and astute mind does occasionally provide for some of the deficiencies already inherent within. More simply said, *rational* more often than not, prevails upon the boastful pride of life to induce perspicacity and one hopes, an intuitive enterprise.” The exchange was simple, yet pointedly tactful; nothing said here was to be passed on to other ears outside, save unless prevailed upon by the other person. They both knew how this game was played.

“I am not amenable if that is what you are inferring.”

“Certainly not,” said Urathane.

“Good then.” Lord Tharbür rubbed his hands together. “Because I am of a mind to disenthral you.”

Urathane frowned; of all the things he had expected the nobleman to say, this was the most unexpected.

"I see that this sentiment of mine surprises you, my Lord Urathane," said Tharbür, with a self-satisfied air.

"Your conceit is unbecoming."

Tharbür scowled at him for a brief moment, then said, "Come now, Lord, let us not commence this arrangement with petty contentions and indecisive altercations; I have not the time nor wit to hassle with you concerning your moral quandaries or premonitions, and neither can you afford to do likewise. I have come because I need you and likewise do you need me. You may not yet be aware of this, but most the courts and nobilities suspect that Lord Surentûr is planning on having you hanged tomorrow, along with a whole lot of other various persons."

Urathane raised an eyebrow. "I was not aware that news of me and my endeavors had thus reached so far nor traveled so high. Do the nobility always pay so much attention to the happenings and doings in Elgarost's under streets?"

"You are not so inconspicuous as you think yourself, Lord Urathane." Tharbür's eyes glinted. "And due to the current circumstances that abound, the royal courts are fraught throughout with various intelligencers, and seldom does a small thing such as your arrest occur without me knowing of it."

"Why then, may I ask, would you be in need of me?"

"It's quite simple actually," said Tharbür, bending low to eye level with Urathane and whispering, "There is a snake in our very midst, and I fully intend to remove it off the face of this susceptible Pergelion. And from what I have heard tell, you seem to share my sentiments similarly."

"Ah," said Urathane, with a small smile. "Now, I understand."

"I thought you might."

"I *am* curious, though. What are your reasons for this 'sentiment' which you have so felt justified in sharing with me?"

"Betrayal and unadulterated duplicity." Tharbür's eyes had become thin needle-points, displaying his internal anger and aggravation at some past wronging. "That quisling, that backstabber has, in the course of six short years in some way, managed to maneuver himself with glib assurances and slickness of tongue, into the foremost position of influence and puissance in the entire kingdom." By now, the man was practically seething.

"Save your ravings," said Urathane. "I know well the nature and premonition of that which you would deem to give voice to."

"Then you must also know," pronounced the incensed nobleman. "That he is now publicly purporting the preposterous verity that he, Surentûr, has been bequeathed the Kingship by our dying king himself."

"Is he now?" Urathane said, brows knitting. "I had heard something of this ilk not long ago. But surely he must have presented some validation or corroboration to substantiate his claim?"

"He does," growled the nobleman. "He has submitted a document bearing the King's own signature, thus verifying the validity of his claim. Moreover, the King has remained unresponsive to all efforts endeavoring him to speak. He is fast in the arms of a waning sleep from which he shall never wake, and he fades fast."

"Would I be right then in presuming that Surentûr was the last one admitted to the king's presence?"

“Indeed, you would be.” Tharbür began pacing the floor of Urathane’s cell. “Your name...it is an unheralded one and I would have you know that I do not forget such things so easily. When I first heard yours, I knew there was something faintly familiar about it. After that, it did not take me long to rightly ascertain the true nature and personage of the man who bore it.”

Urathane raised his head.

“You must imagine my surprise when I discovered him to be one and the same as Urathane Ivronwine, son of Neldoreth, last lord of Asgalarion.” The nobleman laughed aloud to himself. “Imagine my wonder and then appreciation for this certitude: verily thought I, through this, my effectuation might now be achieved!” Turning again to face Urathane, he said, “So, tell me, Lord Urathane: if I arrange to free you from this dingy cell and set you free, will you aid me in my great undertaking?”

“That depends as to the true and ensemble nature of your endeavor.”

“I...” Tharbür stopped as if taking time to carefully consider his next words. Then he said slowly, “I am beginning the stirring and raising up of a rebellion that would oust that snake, Surentûr, from his seat and allow a more amicable process of choosing an heir to take place.”

“I would be greatly confounded if you managed to raise a mere thousand,” said Urathane, shaking his head. “I fear that Surentûr’s appeal to the people is now grown too great.”

“So might some think,” said Tharbür. “Yet you must trust me in this. The true numbers are greatly repressed. Believe me, that is what Surentûr would have you believe. If you can promulgate the postulation that everybody thinks a certain way, then those who

might in most circumstances think another way, will eventually succumb to this viewpoint. Disseminate and spread an idea or belief enough, and soon the people will begin to believe it. Show them there is one way and one way only, and they will follow, willing or no. That is the way of things. Surentûr is not the first to play this game.”

“I concur,” Urathane said. “But I still fail to see how I figure into all this. What I may once have possessed, I do so no longer. I have no kingdom, no people, no true title; I am bereft of all but my name and conscience.”

“That, in of itself, is sufficient enough,” said Tharbûr. “A sort of plan as that which I am initiating, entails this one thing, minute though it might be. Now, will you join forces with me? Alone, you and I can do naught; but together, we can accomplish great things.”

Urathane was silent for a time, as he considered Tharbûr’s proposal. “You are angry,” he said at last. “Embittered and aggrieved over some past event or specific instance where Surentûr wronged or humiliated you, methinks.”

Tharbûr’s face darkened with these words. “You speak truly, Lord Urathane. Surentûr abashes and displaces those whom he no longer has any use for. He takes upon himself authority that is not his to take, and the once-friendly, complacent attitude with which he treats all, at first sight, is soon shown to be merely a devious persona: a mask to hide his true ambition. And I would see him unseated.”

“As would I,” said Urathane thoughtfully. “Yet, there is something else you would have me do, I am sure of it. My name,

you are saying, is our greatest asset. You would use me, then, to perform the function of recruitment?”

“What I am *saying* is that I need your aid in stirring up the surrounding countryside. Elgarost is a black hole for all those persons who are so enamored of Surentûr; however, the areas that lie about us may tell another story altogether. You have friends, many of whom I believe, are very capable of this sort of thing. Put them to use. We need them.”

“I must admit I am somewhat surprised with the extensive and thorough nature of your plan,” said Urathane. “I had not expected as much. You may be right in saying my name is an invaluable resource; however, methinks would it not be even more advantageous to us if we could perhaps bring Him who has been exiled back into the limelight? The One that, if he should accept, could rightfully wrest back control from Surentûr? I would think he has yet many supporters and adherents who would yet yearn for his return and were dispirited at his extradition.”

“No!” snarled Tharbûr in sudden fury. “That will not do at all. Banished he was and ever shall be.”

“Very well, then,” replied Urathane, momentarily disturbed by the nobleman’s response. “It was merely a suggestion and a small one at that.” He was beginning to understand where Tharbûr truly stood. Likely, he had at one time, been humiliated in front of his betters by Surentûr, thus prompting him to begin thinking of ways to get rid of him. Yet, as was the case with most noblemen, he was corrupt; and even likelier was the fact that he would be pushing for one of his fellow cronies to gain the throne, so that he could later be in the position to ‘exchange favours’—when and if that time should come. This would, conceivably place him in a position

of considerable power, where he would yet be utterly free of any responsibility pertaining to the throne.

“Will you accede to this proposal?” asked Tharbür, his impatience beginning to show.

Urathane nodded; it was the only way he could see himself getting out of this mess. “I will on one condition; I ask that my friend, Arillion, be freed as well, alongside me.”

“The insurgent?”

“My friend.”

Tharbür sighed overly loud. “Is your own life not enough?”

“I’m afraid that it’s either both of us or our planned settlement will become void.”

“You make things all the more difficult,” he grumbled. “Very well. I shall do as you have so asked. I must leave now for a time; I have a work to be about, one that I intend to finish.”

“And when do you plan on liberating us?”

“Tomorrow, at the hanging.”

“The hanging?”

The nobleman smiled grimly. “I see that you have not yet been informed. The Lord Surentûr wishes to make a public example of those persons who practice or display signs of anarchism.”

Urathane set his jaw. “How do you plan on accomplishing these things, with my foreseeable end so close in sight?”

“You will see; only time itself will reveal.”

And with that, Tharbür the Nobleman took his leave of Urathane.



II

THE STONE OF FOUNDATION

Roots and Beginnings

LONG AGO, in the days of the Dark Kings, when a man could rule his own, and the world was both young and old, there lived a man and his two sons. Their house was situated on the edge of a somewhat small cliff and over-looked the southern shores of Pergelion. Now, one day, the youngest of the brothers lay upon his bed as the sun was slowly westering in the distant horizon, and stared serenely out to sea.

A cool ocean breeze was beginning to pick up and many feet below him, waves splashed against the rocky crag: splattering and frothing into foam which coated the rocks; before a fresh wave swept them away, replacing them anew. The sea breeze felt good upon him as it brushed softly against his face rustling his shoulder-length black hair.

“Peaceful, is it not?” came a voice from behind him.

Aulendur turned his face from the warm light of the fading sun to see his father gazing fondly upon him. Orodwen was fair of face,

and a noble air resided about him; much lore did he know of old, and he was greatly skilled in hand and not only in mind.

“Yes, father,” replied Aulendur.

“The seagulls chirping and gliding soundlessly through the golden sky, the sound of water crashing against stone, the smell of the sea in your nostrils, and the soft light of the sinking sun, as it fades ever more into the horizon dim. Beautiful.” He smiled sadly to himself. “It is a pity that the world itself is not so.”

“What do you mean, father?”

“Alas! The world is animated by other virtues than these: strife, discord, jealousy, anger, and hate. They pervade nearly everything we do.” Orodwen sighed. “You could say that it was because of these wearings upon my soul, that I sought for such a place as this to spend the rest of my days. Not only mine, but your mother’s wish as well. It is a pity that she could not also be here to experience it.” Aulendur looked away. Years later, his mother’s passing was still a painful memory for his father.

“But that is the past and the past it shall remain. It is better if we dwelt upon the present time, so as not to let the past, painful and yet fond in some ways to remember it might be, to pervade all our thought and become a stumbling block for us and our actions.” Orodwen turned away.

“Father!” said Aulendur suddenly.

“Yes, boy?” Footsteps faltered as Orodwen turned back.

“Where are we from?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

Aulendur twisted around and faced his father, eyes unfaltering; an earnest expression was upon his young face. “I mean, where did we abide ere here? You always seem to allude to it, with some

sadness or maybe remorse, but you never say truly that which is upon your mind, and it seems to me that some black shadow lies upon it. Who are we? I know for certain that we did not always dwell within Rohan.

Orodwen walked back and sat upon the edge of the bed. "That's quite a question," he mused, as if to himself. "You guess near to the truth, though you do not hit it full on. In truth, we are men of the north, not the south; from Hrothgar, that great kingdom does our flower spring from; the stem is long, and the roots are planted deep into the soil. But, alas! It is not fated for this time that we should dwell in that fair land: the land of my forebears. Though indeed I can understand your wonderings, there are some things (unfortunate, though it may be) which would be better left unsaid; for to reveal, would be to reveal purpose. And that I cannot do. Some day you shall know, but only when the time becomes ripe and I deem it to be a good thing." He smiled sadly.

"Well," began Aulendur, "though I still don't rightly understand much at all, would you then tell me tales of Gondolin, when great deeds were performed by our sires and fair things of great power were wrought in the far depths of time? And then after that, long lays by olden sages and minstrels, full of feats and endeavors made by our renowned ancestors against the great darkness? For that would sate me."

Orodwen laughed merrily. "Certainly, I could never tell you all of that in one night," he said. "If I were even to attempt such a venture, we should be sitting here for many a long age. But if it is stories and legends you want, then I shall try my best."

So they sat there together for several hours at least, though the time seemed little to them at the time. In that span, Orodwen told

his son of a great many things: of Endilyon the Renowned and of how he and his comrade Turnour fair, were overwhelmed at the Vankfold by a sea of foes six times their own, many long ages ago. Also, he told of Onachar the Strong and old Berethor, of their mighty prowess and deeds of hand against the dark enemy. And last of all, he spoke of Eldamír the Great, most renowned of all living men, for his deeds were counted the greatest and his valour, not the least. Even thousands of years later, after much of his will had been accomplished and that black foe utterly vanquished for all of eternity till the world be broken, he was still enshrined in the minds of many and his name regarded with much favour. Following his reign, years of peace and prosperity were plentiful as that which had never been seen in that world for a long age.

“I wish he still lived,” said Aulendur. “Then we might have peace also and have no enemies to invade our lands and slay our kin.”

“Alas! Your wish is mine also,” said Orodwen. “For Eldamír was renowned not for his deeds only, but also for his wisdom in many matters, not the least of governance. But that cannot be, for he passed from this world many thousands of years ago and as the ages of have passed us by, so has the world degraded from the fair state in which it had once resided, into black deeds and dark ambition. But be heartened! Eldamír's heirs live on and some have been born to such likeness as he, that it is told that still, he lives on, for a small part at least.

“One that is accounted as such would be fair Finruldûr, Lord of Hroungard and leader of the last defense which holds Agandaûr, that black sorcerer, at bay; if at least for a little while longer.”

“Have you seen him?”

“Yes.” Orodwen gazed out of the window at the moonlit waters and did not say any more; it was clear that he would say no more on the matter, so Aulendur did not broach him further. “But come!” said Orodwen at last, clasping his hands together softly. “Night is wearing by, and it is near time for you to be abed. As for me, I must also rest, for I leave early tomorrow and will not be back until late evening.”

“But wait!” said Aulendur, laughing. “You have missed something. Cannot you tell me a lay, ere I close my eyes and sink into forgetfulness? Oft does the rhyme bring great ease to the soul, and now I am wide awake, for my mind is whirring with heroes and great swords, and black foes as dark and tall as trees. I cannot go to sleep.”

“Very well,” said Orodwen. “But after this, you must sleep.” He was silent for a moment, as he thought of what to say. Then, slowly breathing out, he began to chant softly:

*Aelfwin arose from his somber chair,
and tread upon the rocky shore.
The wind blew fast, brushing his hair,
as he trod the plank-lined harbour.*

*Upon his ship he came so far,
unto yonder lands 'neath setting sun.
Through storms and rains, he went afar,
till water's light drew dark and dun.*

*Finally, finally, his ship rocked hard:
against the sanded shore that rose afore.*

*And through the mists, he heard a bard,
singing songs of olden time before.*

*He smote the shore with sea-long feet,
and there he tottered in weary form.
Ere falling unto the earth in a dire heap,
whence came people fair to bring him home.*

*Thence bestowed was he with bread,
and proffered the honeyed drink.
Whereupon was he carried unto a bed,
and for a spell was he given to think.*

*For years many did Aelfwin linger there,
upon olden shores and in the secret caves.
Having been led thus with great care,
down thither the path our errant road does pave.*

*There would he sing with folk most fair;
around the fires lit, he learnt their tales.
Singing in time interminable with shoulders bare,
whilst looking down from high upon whales.*

*Until at last darkened night arose and came;
a hardened soul sending its weathered hand.
No thought did it take for the distinct and fame;
and unto Logathär was he taken from isle's sand.*

Orodwen pushed himself up from Aulendur's bed to his feet. "Now are you content and your wandering thoughts put to rest?" he asked.

"Yes, father," said Aulendur. "I shall rest now."

"Tomorrow I would have that you behave yourself for your grandfather and not become wearisome to him, for as I have told you already, I shall be late in my returning. I go with Khaderas to the Northern Marches, for there is an urgent matter which requires us both. It is likely that you shall not see us, for we will be leaving ere dawn. I will also take your brother Eldaros with me as well. It is time that he learned of my ways."

"And if him, not I also?!" cried out Aulendur.

"Nay," said Orodwen, with a small wave of his hand. "You are too young. In a few years maybe, it shall be that you can join me also, but though a lad of nine years is expected to pull some of the weight, it is far too young for our sort of business; and remember, Eldaros is thirteen already and very nearly a full man."

Aulendur was downcast, and it showed on his face.

"I am sorry, my son. It is for the best, though. You will understand when you are older. It can be quite dangerous where we are going: so close to the borders of the land and near the wild, where dark things gather together and freely ravage the land." Orodwen paused momentarily as if considering something; a thoughtful expression was upon his face, and he seemed pitied by Aulendur's morose face. Then, reaching to the back of his neck, he undid a small clasp and brought forth a silver chain, upon which hung a single pendant: this encased a small, white, gem which sparkled in the light that the moon provided; it was no longer than half of Aulendur's thumb.

“Here,” said he. “This was your mother's once, and she would have wished for you to have it also. It has passed down through the many generations of my house; and as was the custom, I gave it to your mother as a gift, to signify the bond between us ere a union took place between us. I have worn it thus again in turn, as a token to honour her fair memory; but now is maybe the time when I should release it: to be given unto the keeping of one of my heirs. May it be in later times, when you are of age, that you do the same.”

Then, handing it carefully to Aulendur, he turned and strode to the door, only glancing back long enough to smile one last time upon him, before taking his leave of the room. For a small moment, Aulendur gazed upon the white gem in awe; then, he reverently brought the chain around his neck and fastened the clasp. Below, the waves were lapping softly upon the sandy shores and overhead the man on the moon was smiling down upon him. To the right, the *miramûr* shone: the great bow was strung, and the string was pulled taught. To the left, the Hunter reached out his hand, as if to grasp the very sky and all that was within it, while with his other, he held a great spear aloft.

Laying back upon his pillow, his arms crossed beneath his head, Aulendur pondered for a little time, upon things old and new. The waves were crashing high upon the rock, and the moon was high in the twinkling sky when at last, his eyes closed, and he fell into dreams.



Years later, Aulendur would remember that last night above all others, faded though it became as the years passed him by. Always would he call upon that final smile, before the door was closed and his father's footsteps echoed softly through the hallway, till they faded away completely and all was silent. For this was the last time in all of his life upon Pergelion, that he saw his father alive and well before him.

The next day had passed as the last had, though, at times, Aulendur found that he was without things to occupy his time with. His grandfather entertained him as best he could, and they spent several hours together at one of the fishing holes they kept secret to everyone but themselves. They had fish for their midday meal, though they ate not all of their catch, as his grandfather wished to save the rest for dinner.

They set the table at the first hour of night and waited patiently there for some time, before partaking of their food. The hours began to pass and time wore on, yet no sign of the unaccounted was there to be seen. It was nearing the fifth hour, and Aulendur could see his grandfather pacing anxiously in the room nearest to his, from his open door, when a heavy knock finally sounded upon the front-door.

Khaderas and Eldaros entered, and they were grim indeed to look upon, and from this, Aulendur knew that something had gone amiss. Orodwen was nowhere to be seen, and on their shoulders, they carried the large form of something unknown wrapped in black cloth. This they set gently on the bare table.

At the sight of this, grandfather turned most very white in the face and Aulendur, rushing from his room, cried out: "Where's Father?! What's happened?!"

With heaviness of heart they told them their tale:

They had just been getting ready to make their return when a ravaging band of Goblins and Svartáflar had come upon them unawares. They had made first for the smallest of their group: Eldaros. However, they underestimated their opponent, and Eldaros stood his ground, slaying two before he was overwhelmed. Rushing in with his sword, Orodwen saved him from an untimely death but was hewed cruelly in return by an axe-stroke at his side. They would have both died together that day, for these were cruel foes, and they left their victims beyond any recognizable features if given leave to. However, Khaderas, who had been some ways away, came crashing in and slew a great lot of them. The sound of battle reached the ears of some nearby woodmen, and they joined in as well, till there was not a single Goblin left standing, nor a Svartáflar leering.

The woodsmen had then aided them in taking Orodwen, who was barely alive at that point, to the safety of their houses and had brought the most skilled of them in the dealing with wounds to him.

“ ‘I have not much experience as might be needed with a wound such as this,’ ” said he, “ ‘and this seems to be a grim stroke indeed. However, I shall try as best I can in the abetting you of this task.’ ” He did what he could with the skills he had, and for several hours, Orodwen had lain silent upon a bed, a fever raging strongly inside of him. He died only some time afterward.

“There was never really any hope,” said Khaderas, sighing and wiping his brow. “Just a fool’s hope and dim at that.”

Thus it was that they buried Orodwen in a high barrow near to his house and upon his carven headstone they writ:

HERE LIETH ORODWEN STONEHELM
BRAVEHEART
AND BELOVED FATHER

HE WILL FOREVER LIVE
IN MEMORY

And beneath that, Aulendur's grandfather (of his mother's side) wrote in ancient Teghorëan: *Kursthä atkalôn etr shene rethsäte*.

But what it meant, he would not say and none in the village, not even Khaderas, knew Teghorëan, for it was an ancient language used only by Elves and High Men. Then they left him there in the green fields and went into the house, and an unhappy quiet was upon them for a long time, broken only when one wept openly in grief. When some time had passed, Khaderas arose from his chair and sang aloud for all to hear:

*The mornings were bright!
The daylight, brilliant in sheen!
The armour gleamed like fire in the light!
The sword withdrawn, shone with golden gleam!
But now all becomes dark and abysmal,
and now does the sun shine no more.
Dark indeed is the heart within its hall,
for now, the friend and comrade long is no more.*

Then he left the room in silence, and it was some time before they saw him again. Ever since that day, Aulendur marked a

change in Eldaros. It became rare indeed when he would smile, especially in the following time and he became somewhat grim to look upon; and oft it was that the shadow of some fell light would be found lingering in the depths of his coal-black eyes.

The years passed slowly by and as they went, so did Eldaros and Aulendur wax and wane in their youth, till they were become full-grown and come to their manhood. While Eldaros was grim and sometimes prone to rash acts, Aulendur was the more reckless and light-hearted of the two; though indeed it was that the shadow of his father's passing was laid long upon him and it was several years before he was himself again. They continued to live in the same house as they had in years past and were often visited by Khaderas, who seemed to consider it his responsibility to keep an eye on them, in Orodwen's absence. Aulendur believed that in a way, Khaderas held himself responsible for Orodwen's death, having been late in coming to their aid.

However, it is the twenty-ninth of May and Aulendur is in his twenty-second year of the world, when this tale truly begins in earnest.

Departure from Rovanhelm

It was grown late in the day, and Aulendur had just retired to the house after a day of work for the village woodcarver when a knock sounded upon the door. Somewhat grumpy at having his routine broken, he opened the door to three strangers.

"Hello, who are you, and what do you want?" he said. The people of Rovanhelm were as a whole, rather adverse to strangers, good-looking or not. These seemed, at first sight, to be mostly of the latter group. "We aren't interested in buying anything if that's

what you want, nor do we wish to sell anything either. We are quite well off thank you, in the fashion of our countrymen, and never is there a time when meat or bread is not on our table."

"Hello yourself," said the eldest of the three. He was clothed in dark drab that was quite weather-stained and dirty from much travel. He had on a long pair of boots, and a long sword was strapped to his side. A pair of sharp blue eyes studied him, while the wind rustled the mop of greying-brown hair that covered his bare head. "I am called Thurandil by my friends," he said, regarding his companions. "They are called Orius and Ingrim in that order."

"Good evening," said they, bowing. The one named Orius was a dark-haired, grim man: hardier than Aulendur had ever laid eyes upon; in his eyes burned a fierce fire—and so strong was it that Aulendur found himself having to turn away. One hand had he; it was his right which had been taken from him, and now only a stump remained. The other man, Ingrim, looked to be the youngest of the three. Flamboyant in seemingly every way possible, with a frock of golden hair that gleamed in the noonday sun, he cut a dashing figure against the others: even his clothes seemed much less worn than that of his companions, and his belt buckle shone with silver light.

"Nice to know your names, fancy and clever-sounding as they are, but you're going to have to leave them at the doorstep and depart from here. *Now.*" Aulendur began to close the door.

"Wait just a moment now!" came a sudden, prompt reply from the man who called himself Thurandil. "We haven't yet told that which we want; indeed it is a most common decency where I come from for such persons as yourself to invite their visitors into their

houses and feed them, and if need be, give them a bed upon which to rest. We are weary from much travel, and we would not have our way cut short at the very door.”

“Well, this isn't where you are from,” said Aulendur. “This is Rovanhelm, and by my beard, we only go as far as that if you really mean business: business that turns to a profit, if you follow me.” He eyed them up and down. “And if you don't mind me saying so, you look to be a bunch of vagabonds to me: vagabonds that might very well rob me blind if given the chance and an opportunity presented itself.”

“Judge a man, not by his clothes or weight of years!” said Thurandil. “We are simply tired travelers, who believe ourselves to be at the end of a long quest and on the verge of a new one. And for that matter, you have asked what it is we want and so shall I tell you: we wish to know if a man named Orodwen used to reside here once? He was a noble man and fair of face; I guarantee my own livelihood that he would most certainly stand out among all those that abide here.”

Aulendur's eyes noticeably darkened beneath his brows. “Where and how did you come by that name?”

“Ah, I see that you have heard or know of him,” said Thurandil, a gleam in his bright eyes. “As for how I know of it, at this time, I shall merely say that it was given to me by one who very much wishes to find this man and learn of his well-being.”

“By his well-being, you mean if he's off poorly, not unlikely,” said Aulendur, fire flashing in his sea-grey eyes. “Your well-being won't be ‘well’ anymore if you don't—”

“That will be enough, Aulendur,” came a voice from behind him. Aulendur looked back over his shoulder. “Grandfather?”

“Open the door now, my boy. Be quick about it! That’s it. Let our visitors in and then go fetch your brother. He will be down at the western edge of town, likely with the Mayor at his mansion. The time has come at last, and the summons draws nigh: I will guess that it is wished that Eldaros would be here to attend it.” His grandfather draped a hand over his eyes to rub the sleep from them.

Aulendur’s jaw dropped. “But—, they...” he stammered.

“They what?”

Aulendur found his tongue. “But they’re complete strangers. They might rob us blind when we’re all sound asleep and then knife us in our beds to make sure nobody hears of it. If these persons aren’t vagabonds, then I’m a squirrel.”

“Will they now?” said his grandfather, scratching his chin. “You’re certainly not a squirrel, but I deem that those who stand before us are not vagabonds. Even after many years, I can recognize a voice when I need to, and this time is no different. These are not strangers. Now get you gone!”

Aulendur found his brother sometime later, just where he had been told he would be. He was standing with Khaderas beneath a small pavilion just outside the Mayor’s mansion. They both had their arms folded, and it was clear that they were in the midst of some debate.

“Summer is upon us,” Aulendur could hear Eldaros saying. “The air grows warmer by the day. The people of this village will need more water for their crops so that they can grow and not fade in the sun’s heat. Now, with you limiting our water supply so that you can use it for your own comfort and parties, or whatever it is you do with it, our very livelihoods are at stake.”

“Indeed,” said Khaderas. “As representatives of the citizens of Rovanhelm, we simply ask that you recant your edict, at least until the harvest.”

“A little less water won't hurt that much,” said the Mayor. “If one person needs water, then why doesn't that person go to his fellow neighbor and ask for some? We would all be better off if we just shared everything. I do my job overseeing things: regulating, preserving, taking care of the Great Hall, and—”

“And stuffing yourself till your sides bulge with the food which you tax from us,” said Aulendur, entering the pavilion. “You're a greedy, insatiable, old man, Rinaldar and everybody knows it: so don't try to hide it beneath a benevolent demeanor. It only serves to muddle the water—murky as it already is—even further.”

Rinaldar went red in the face. “How dare you!” he said, leveling a finger at him in an accusatory fashion. “How dare you insult me, b-boy!” He stuttered and blubbered his words out. “Have I not commanded to all that I am to be addressed as ‘His Lordship,’ hmm?!! Not only this transgression, but you barge in on a private meeting, unasked *and* unwanted. What have to say to that?”

“Oh, go jump off your own rooftop,” retorted Aulendur. “We'd all be better off anyway.”

“This isn't going to help our predicament any more, laddie,” said Khaderas. He turned back to Rinaldar. “Share? Share? Don't be ridiculous. This is a free land: people grow and sell to compete. All-out sharing would work against the system already in place. Some may indeed be willing to share, but in the end, man has his own ends to meet with no room for provision.”

“Then maybe,” said Rinaldar, with a tight-lipped smile. “Maybe it is time for the system to change.”

“Whatever are you suggesting?” said Eldaros, glaring at Rinaldar.

The portly man glared back. “If the system is causing problems, then maybe it is time for it to change. See my vision? We divide the land into sections large enough for everyone. Everyone works his piece of land and gives me the proceeds of his labour. I then distribute it back to every land-owner evenly, so that all receive an equal share, while I use the rest to maintain the town. The problem is solved, and everyone returns happily.”

“But would they really be happy?” said Khaderas. “I think not. Maybe at first they would consent and go about their ways as ordered, but something tells me that their drive would begin to fade. What is there to work for? What is there to life? When there is no need to outdo one's fellow neighbor, one does not feel the urge to do their best, methinks. After all, they will receive the same amount of food and money like everybody else, no matter how much they take in. The worth is gone. Work will decline. People will grow lazy, and their days will be filled with idleness. Rovanhelm will suffer in turn. In time, you will be the only person left with money at all, and we would then drag ourselves to you, begging for something, anything. And then so would your dominion and scope of your influence grow as well.” Khaderas smiled. “No, I think not. The system works as it is: it has for hundreds of years. Why change it now? The only one who would benefit would be yourself.”

Rinaldar's lower lip quivered and his eyes bulged. “You portender of falseness,” he hissed. “You twist my words to your own purpose and thus make to use them against me. Do not think that I cannot see through your words to the hidden schemes of

your mind! I know that you wish to overthrow me and take my place. Then all would come to you, and your name would be praised and spoke of throughout the land: O how the songs would tell of your deeds and wonders! But do not think I cannot see through all of your schemes and deceptions.”

Khaderas sighed. “Alas! You cannot be reasoned with. Your crooked vision causes all to be put in a faulty light. When trapped within the darkness that you create about yourself, you become blind to the truth, and a perverted shadow covers your sight: twisting everything and everyone. And thus it is that your vision grows narrow indeed, so much so that you are nearly blind to all other things. Such is the nature of your perversion.

“Come Eldaros, Aulendur,” he said, turning around. “There is nothing left we can accomplish here. Let us leave this place and depart for our own homes. But let me say this to you, O Mayor of Rovanhelm,” he said, turning back for a moment. As the old sage once said: *Pride doth come ere a fall*. In the end, it is you - not I, nor any other person - which will bring about your downfall. Let me warn you! Your doom now approaches. Whether it be ten years, or twenty, or thirty, it will come in the end, and you will know it for what it is and fear it. For when it comes, all of your medals, all of your possessions will be lost forever. But as for me, I do not fear death: I have nothing to lose.”

Then they left the shelter of the pavilion and passed out of the gate.

“What brought you to us, brother?” said Eldaros. “Your arrival was ill-timed, maybe.”

“Strangers,” said Endurian. “Three of them. They arrived at our very door, and I would have driven them off, if not for

Grandfather's intervention. He seemed to recognize them and ordered me to fetch you and bring you back."

"Strangers?" said Khaderas. "In Rovanhelm?"

"Aye," said Aulendur. "Never seen anyone like them in my life. I took them for vagabonds at first their clothes were so worn."

"Did they say what their names were? Or were you gone ere that time?" asked Khaderas.

"Aye, they did. Although at the moment I can only remember one of their names, for this man was evidently the leader of the three and spoke the most."

"What was it?"

"He said, that is, I think it was 'Thurandil.' "

The look that passed over Khaderas's face told the brothers that the name was not unknown to him.

"You know of this man?" asked Aulendur.

Khaderas nodded slowly; a thoughtful, pondering expression was upon his face. "Indeed. Once we were very close acquaintances and maybe still are."

"Who is he?" pressed Eldaros.

Khaderas shook his head. "I will not say. It might not be right for me; if the Lord Thurandil wishes to reveal who he is, then he will of his own accord. Something tells me, however, that you will know ere long. Come!" he said suddenly. "I wish to meet these men as well. Let us hurry back as quick as may be so that we do not keep them waiting."

Entering the house, they found that the table was already laid and food set. In the room beyond, they could hear voices. They found Grandfather and the strangers in the sitting room, talking amongst themselves, as if they were old acquaintances, just now

met many years later. In the corner, Thurandil stood alone, and his eyes were grave as if he were pondering previously unheralded tidings. At their entrance, though, he looked up and regarded them with keen eyes. Passing over the brothers, they came to rest upon Khaderas. His grave face brightened, and a smile stretched out upon his face.

“Khaderas, old friend,” he said. “It’s been a while; I am glad to still find you in good health as when we last met.”

“Same here,” said Khaderas stepping forward. “Although I must say you look more careworn than previously seen: the years have not passed you by too kindly, I’m afraid. Alas! but that you would be given a respite!”

“It matters to me not. I will be content wherever my path leads me.” Thurandil strode across the room, grasped Khaderas’s outstretched arm and pulled himself into an embrace. He then stepped back and finally turned his attention upon the brothers.

“You have met the younger already,” said Grandfather, rising from his seat. “Though under the current circumstances we are in, you must forgive him for his rash words and hot tongue: oft it has been of late that we have been troubled by bandits and marauders. Strangers are not looked upon too kindly in Rovanhelm these days.”

“And the elder?” asked Thurandil, beckoning with a hand towards Eldaros. At twenty-seven years of age, Eldaros was a valiant man; his bravery upon the Marches was already legendary in Rovanhelm, and he looked the part. Broad-shouldered, yet tall, his bare head was overlaid with dark, golden hair that reached to his shoulders; and he had a ragged beard of the same hue also.

“That would be Eldaros. He is the elder by five years.”

Thurandil looked as if he might say something, but Grandfather cut him short. "It can wait! These are great things upon which we ponder, and livelihoods are at stake here. It is said that one can think more clearly and rationally when on a full stomach. I think it would be wise to hold to that advice. Come! The table is prepared: the food is awaiting, the mugs are set. Let us eat, drink, and relax for the time being. Rest yourselves in the comfort of our house. Then may you speak of that which you would speak of."

Making their way out, they entered the dining room where they had soon seated themselves. Another plate was brought for Khaderas, even though he had insisted at first that he was fine; and soon they were all busy eating and drinking. Their time eating was not long in happening and as it happened, ended shorter than might have been thought. So at last, when the last drop was drunk and the last crumb was eaten, Thurandil leaned back in his chair and began to speak.

"Eldaros, Aulendur, I was sent by my liege-lord to find and if I could, bring back one Orodwen Stonehelm. However, as has been told to me already, I have learnt that he is dead, having been so for some years. Now, as you are his sons, I am obliged under my oath to try if I may and persuade you to come with me to him who would see you; for the order was not for Orodwen only, but any descendants of his: young or old.

"However, ere I endeavor to do so, I believe you should know the full extent of my—" he glanced at Orius and Ingram as if to correct himself: "*our* quest. He who sent me is Orodwen's father, who is the greatest of man in his country. Though you may live many hundreds of leagues away from where he keeps his abode, it

is doubtless that you have of him. It is the High King Finruldûr of Hroungard, of whom I speak.”

For a small moment, there was dead silence. Then Aulendur and Eldaros roared with laughter.

“King, indeed!” said Eldaros. “The High King of Hroungard, my grandfather! My own father a princeling! Now that would make a tale worth the telling for many years around here.” He slammed his fists down multiple times upon the table, unable to contain himself.

“ ’Tis the greatest joke I have heard in a long time!” roared Aulendur, slapping his knee and rolling back in his seat as fits of mirth overtook him. They laughed so hard that tears came forth from their eyes. It was a small moment before they were finally able to look up and noticed—as if for the first time - that the others were not laughing along with them.

“What a joke!” said Eldaros. Calming down somewhat, they glanced at the others: Thurandil's mouth was stretched in a tight line, and his eyes were boring holes into the ceiling. Orius sat with his left hand covering the stump of his right, head bowed gravely. Ingrim seemed to be trying to contain a grin and was doing so unsuccessfully. Khaderas didn't even try to hide the customary smile that was plastered upon his face and stretched from side to side. Grandfather's face, however, was somewhat sad and he sighed while looking at his empty plate.

“It...it is a joke, isn't it?” asked Aulendur hesitantly.

“Don't be absurd: of course it's a joke, isn't it Grandfather?” Eldaros waited in expectation of his agreement.

For a moment, Grandfather just looked at his plate. Then looking Eldaros straight in the eye, he slowly shook his head. "No. All that Lord Thurandil has said is the truth."

There was dead silence again. This time though, nobody laughed.

Aulendur eyed their passive faces again. "You're...you're serious," he said at last as the truth of what Thurandil had said finally began to sink in.

"Yes," said Thurandil, retaking command of the room. "We most certainly are. This is no laughing matter. King Finruldûr is Orodwen's father. You are Orodwen's sons. Therefore the throne, when his majesty passes, will pass on to Eldaros if he should accept the responsibilities which go along with it; for he is the firstborn. Aulendur, you are second in line to the throne will ascend to it should Eldaros ever fail: in battle or in health. The blood of the ancient kings lies within you. However, your fate is your own to decide, and here the choice is given to you: none shall force you to accept."

"The life of one who is of royal blood can be a hard one," said Grandfather. "Your father did not have much love for it. This was one reason why he chose to relinquish his claim to the throne. The other was that he wished for his sons to know another side of life: one simpler: that of the common folk. I do not know in which way he would advise you in this matter: whether he would urge you to accept or otherwise. But do my best in his absence I shall certainly try.

"And I say this: be warned! These are dark times to be living in. King Finruldûr spends not his days lavishing in the comfort of his halls; no, his place is on the front lines of battle. This is a time of

war. As his heirs, you will be required to do so also: for the leaders must lead by example to their soldiers. You know well from the stories that you have heard, what it may be like there. Hroungard and the Dwarves of Azughûl are barely able to hold the leaguer of Uragand and their allies are few. They are hard-pressed by Agandaûr, who on any day, at any time, may break the siege upon his great fortress in the Shadowlands. If ever he should, then war and devastation will spread quickly throughout north and west.

“Fire will cover the lands, and they shall be burnt and scorched beyond healing for many years; no place will seem safe, and the peoples of those lands shall be caught between a rock and a hard place. Here though, if not for a little while, we are safe and many leagues away from that which would seek to destroy us.”

“Safe maybe for now, but not forever,” said Orius, speaking for the first time. “Agandaûr cares not for the lives of free men. They kill without thought or pity of life. Believe me when I say that they will not ignore the small settlements to the east and south. They hate all that is good in this world and would sooner stamp it out than let it grow unchecked.”

“That may be so,” said Grandfather. “But there is something more to life than this. Orodwen knew that. Might his sons not have a taste of it? Let them decide! As for me, I shall not leave. My place is here, till the end of my days and death reaches out her hand to lead me away from the confines of this world.”

“But you seem to forget that this is indeed why we fight,” said Orius. “If it were not for the valour of our people and our allies, your lands would already be overrun. In your words, take care to not condemn the deeds of brave men who have sacrificed all so that others may live a simple life.”

“Yet, though I do not in any way doubt the courage and bravery of you and your comrades, you do not fully understand that which I speak of,” replied Grandfather, somewhat reproachfully. “You know nothing but blood and battle. It is *you*. This is *who* you are. So it is with many men who have lived their lives in the forefront of battle: many know nothing but blood and strife. You solve your arguments with the blade and he who fights by the sword dies by the sword. As for us, we solve our problems with words and council.”

“You speak as one who has experience in these matters,” said Orius. “Yet by the words which you utter, you reveal your true ignorance. Save these matters for other minds best suited for them! As for me, you deem wrongly. I was not always a man of war: I used to lead a simpler life.” Orius’s eyes grew dim, and he sighed.

“I once had a family, a livelihood, a purpose. I denounce not that of which you speak, for I know it well and fondly does it linger upon the edge of memory, though the remembrance fades by the day. But as I have said, I *once* led such a life, and as you see here, I do no more. Evil it was that came upon me in the dread night, and all that I once held dear was taken from me forever. Since that day, I have led a hard life: bound by scarred memory to avenge those whom I loved by utterly vanquishing all evil that I can from this world. This also I do so that others may not feel my pain, for it runs very deep. Alas! It is not my fate to dwell in such bliss. No, my path leads me elsewhere.”

“Alas,” said Grandfather, softly. “Please forgive me my words; I regret having said them in the way I did. I am merely troubled, and I spoke rashly. Please! let us lay aside these words and let the matter rest in peace.”

There was silence for a time. Aulendur's mind was whirring and buzzing unabatingly. All his life, he had believed himself to be what Grandfather spoke of: one of the common folk. He had assumed that he would spend the rest of his days in Rovanhelm; for why should he not? He aided his brother sometimes in guarding the borders of their land against enemies and outsiders, and he liked the thrill of danger of it all: his sword was ever his friend; but likely, in time he had planned on ascending to the rank of a master woodcarver. Indeed his apprenticeship was almost up: it would expire in less than a year. Then he had thought he might marry one of those pretty barmaids at *The Fat Toad* or one of the inns around town.

Now, however, this was all changed in the blink of an eye. He was the son of a princeling, who was heir by blood to one of the most powerful kingdoms in Pergelion. That would make him a princeling; the very thought of what this meant was staggering, and it threatened to overwhelm him completely. Now a barmaid wouldn't do; it would likely be some snobby princess who was used to living a life of luxury and getting everything she wanted. Alliances would need to be kept in mind: one in his position couldn't now go and do whatever he wanted.

His grandfather was right: this was a huge responsibility for anyone; the lives of an entire people would rest on his shoulders, and every decision would influence their way of life in some way if he ever ascended to the throne. He shook his head. But this was all assuming that Eldaros didn't accept or died in the near future. His fleeting thoughts were momentarily interrupted by Khaderas.

"Many years ago, I swore an oath to your father, swearing to stay near your side and to aid you if ever trouble came afoot he

was not there to guide you. All these years I have done this as best I can, and as far as I'm concerned, that pledge still holds. Though there have been times when I have traveled far from here, always has it been that I returned. I will now make no secret of the fact that I only stay here because you abide here also. Your father and I were strong companions upon a time: closer than brothers were we and of a like mind also; the Lord Thurandil was also a close friend of ours. If you should choose to leave and follow your destiny, know this: I will come with you also. But should you decide otherwise, then also will I abide by your ruling and be content to stay as well."

"I thank you, Khaderas," said Eldaros. "But as for me, I am unsure. My heart rises within me at the thought that I may still have some kin left upon this Pergelion, for I once believed that my brother and I were the last of our line. However, at the same time, I struggle: for I have lived all my life that I can remember here and I love the land as I do my own sword. If I should leave, then it may well be that I should never see it again; and I am unsure as to how I should cope with that.

"Grandfather is right: these *are* hard things upon which we ponder. And no matter how much I bend my thought upon the matter at hand, I am still undecided; my heart sways hard both ways, and I know not how or where I shall find solid ground. It has grown late. This I ask: cannot my brother and I sleep on these tidings in hope that an answer may come to us in the night? For oft it is said, *Tidings the morn often brings, for the new day brings fresh light to make clear the path ahead.*

"That is wise advice, I think," said Khaderas. "And a fair request."

“Indeed it is,” said Thurandil. “We will let the matter rest for the night. But do not put the decision off too long! Not long can I abide here. I was late in my arrival here, and already I have other affairs which pressing to the mind.”

“Very well, we shall try to make as much haste as we can,” said Eldaros, rising from his seat. “I shall give my answer in the morning; but as for Aulendur, I know not where his thought would lean in this whole affair.” All at the table turned their eyes upon Aulendur.

“I...I don’t know,” he said finally. “I...” He struggled to put thought into words.

“Nay, do not trouble yourself,” said Thurandil. “Your brother’s advice is good. Wait until the morn brings new light. For now, rest and put your mind to ease.”

Khaderas left for his house, which was just down the hill. The gathering of dishes and cleaning up did not take long, and it was some minutes later when the last candle was snuffed out and all were resting in the comfort of their beds.



A wave of sudden heat blasted against Aulendur, washing over him and making his skin smart in the torrid warmth. The fire was becoming rather hot, unusually hot actually, and was growing very uncomfortable. “For pity’s sake, what’s the matter here?” he thought to himself. He was sitting cross-legged several feet away from the small fire-pit, and he was already drenched in sweat. Suddenly a loud banging sounded on the locked door behind him,

and then the wood broke asunder, splinters and wood flying everywhere.

Aulendur awoke with a start. Khaderas stood in the doorway, framed against a dim, red light, which was steadily growing larger. Bolting across the room, he rushed to Aulendur's side and shook him.

"Get you up, lad!" he said. "We are being assailed! The house is burning."

The words had hardly left his mouth when Aulendur leapt out of bed and reaching immediately for his sword, grabbed it and buckled it around his waist. Luckily his clothes were already on, him having gone to bed without changing.

"What on earth is going on?!" he asked, rushing behind Khaderas out the door.

"Evil is afoot," said Khaderas. "I do not know the particulars, but something or someone wants, more likely Lord Thurandil, dead. Eldaros got knifed I think, although I believe he is doing alright for the moment. The others are down below gathering any things of value; the house is beyond saving."

They sprinted down the stairs, which led them to the lower floor.

"How did you get here?" asked Endurian.

"By keeping an eye out. Oft is it the evil does its dirty work in the dark of night, and today is no different." That was all he would say.

As they hurried down the long flight of stairs, Aulendur became aware of the roar and crackle of fire; as they neared the landing, the heat began to become almost unbearable. Reaching the

landing, they rushed into the room beyond and found Grandfather grabbing food and other bundles, stuffing them into a knapsack.

“Grandfather, we must leave!” shouted Aulendur.

“Yes, now!” yelled Khaderas. “The house may come down any minute now! The old wood and timber won't last too long in this furnace.”

“I am coming,” he replied, gasping for breath. He struggled to carry several of the bags he had packed.

Aulendur shook his head. “Here!” he said, reaching down and snatching one of them off the ground. Khaderas did likewise. Pulling it by the strap over his shoulder, Aulendur looked up. His grandfather's usual hale face was haggard and drawn; sweat drenched his brow and stained the edges of his shirt.

“Come! Quickly!” said Khaderas. “We haven't got much time!”

Dashing out the front door, they stumbled into the yard and were confronted by a mad sight. Orius, Ingram, and Eldaros were standing back to back against several dozen foes: most were dark Goblins, but there were several great Svartáflar among them. They were standing bravely and wielding their swords with precision, but they were beginning to become overwhelmed. Some distance away, Thurandil was fighting a figure, that was hooded and cloaked in stark black.

Except that he wasn't just fighting. He was fighting for his life.

Aulendur had never seen anything like it. Their swords were a swirling eddy of shining steel and whirling hands that flashed and spun in the air. He was readying himself to join the skirmish when he started. Grandfather was running back into the house!

“No!” he cried, jerking around in his boots and sprinting back after him. “It's too dangerous!” But it was too late. Aulendur

rushed in after him. Thrusting aside the door with a hand, he was just in time to see Grandfather stuffing something into a trouser-pocket while running as fast as he was able back to the open doorway.

"It's too dangerous here!" yelled Aulendur over the thunderous din. "We must leave now!"

Overhead, the ceiling cracked. They both looked upwards just in time to see it give way. With a crash, it hit the floor, but not before overtaking Grandfather, who had momentarily frozen at the sound.

"No!!" cried Aulendur. Hastening to the wreckage, he began pulling it away, piece by piece. Charred boards and plaster went flying in all directions as he pulled them off the pile. Buried beneath it all was his grandfather. It was some minutes later before he was able to uncover him. By now, the fire was roaring loudly, throbbing in his ears and making his skin blister in the intense heat. Pulling the last board free, he bent over and picked up the unconscious body of his grandfather, not pausing to look upon his battered and broken form to see if he was even alive. He didn't have time for that.

Grunting, he stumbled like a drunken man out the door and down the steps, where at last he tumbled to his knees a small ways from the house. Looking upward while shading his eyes with a hand, he stared up at the blazing building in a mixed array of awe and horror: the entire structure was wreathed in red flame and was burning like a lightened torch. Old wood cracked and groaned; then with a loud sigh, it collapsed inward on itself. They had been just seconds away from instant death. Great beads of sweat ran down Aulendur's brow as he looked down upon the prone form of his grandfather.

“Grandfather!” he said. “We got you. The house is lost, but you're safe. We'll bring you to a safe house where you can rest and be healed from your wounds.” Aulendur began to get up, but Grandfather reached out suddenly with a hand and grasped his arm, holding him down.

“No!” he gasped with a start, eyes flying open. “It will not help to any avail. I am wounded beyond the skill of any healer in Pergelion; even now a grey mist begins to cloud my eyes, and everything grows dim. But here! I must bestow something to you while I still have the strength.” Bringing a shaking hand to his pocket, he brought out a small lump wrapped in dirty rags. “Take this,” said he. “Flee from this place whilst you are still able and by all means possible, do not allow it to fall into other hands, save those whom you deem to be of good heart. The fate of the world is at stake here; the scales are beginning to tip against us and the tide, ever- strong, pushes us back. This may indeed be the last chance to turn them back in our favour, ere we are utterly vanquished.”

Aulendur grasped the lump with his hand and stared at it briefly. No larger than half of his palm, it was stone-hard through the rags. Without a second glance at it, he stuffed it in his pocket, not looking to see what lay within; at the moment, his emotions were running so high he was having difficulty comprehending much.

“We can still save you,” he said, looking back down. “We'll find something, somebody...” He stopped, eyes glazing over in grief. The body before him was still, eyes closed peacefully in the bitter embrace of death. At the edge of the flickering shadows and

ringing steel, Aulendur's back bent as sobs overtook him and he wept for the man who had been as a father to him all these years.

Shaking, he raised his head above the wispy grass of the knoll and looked all about him. Men were rushing up the hill from the village that sprawled out in the small dell below. Many brought buckets of water, while others wielded axes and swords against the incoming foe who came charging at them.

His trembling subsiding somewhat, Aulendur stood and withdrew his sword from its sheath. "Somebody will pay for all this death and carnage," he so thought to himself. With a roar of fury, he brandished his blade and descended into the fray. So great was the terror of his wrath at his coming, that all things dark fell before his sword and fled at the sight of his face.

Eyes blazing with fire, he turned toward Thurandil and the dark figure. Beyond any doubt, was he the leader. He was the one behind this all! He would atone for all the suffering he had caused this day! Slashing his way through his dark foes, their dark blood staining the green earth a dark crimson, he swooped upon them, just in time to see Thurandil fall to the ground, sword clattering beside him several feet away.

The dark figure leveled his sword at Thurandil's chest and laughed sardonically. "You are a fool, Thurandil. An old fool, but still a fool. In your musings, do you not realize how truly hopeless your cause is? The doom of the free peoples is at hand. The dark one approaches, and we await his return. A great darkness is spreading throughout the land, seeping into the very hearts of men, corrupting them and perverting them to the shadow. You may win some battles, but how can you fight a war when your own

soldiers turn against you? Join me, and together we will rule all of this Pergelion, second only to the Great One himself.”

“I fight,” said Thurandil, gasping. “Because I know I must. Though indeed all may seem dark and under shadow at this time and time to be, I know with truth in my heart that in the end, Light shall prevail against Darkness. Once we were the closest of friends: family you were to me; but now you have been completely and utterly corrupted by that whom you once swore to vanquish. And I tell you this Morgaris, scion of Haledil! Never will I join you or those of your perversion. Never! I shalt fight and resist till I draw my last, ragged breath.”

“So be it.” A cruel smile spawned across Morgaris's face as he drew back his sword to strike the final blow.

With a roar, Aulendur leapt into the fray, his sword catching Morgaris's mid-strike and with a violent twist, caused it to carom from his hand to the ground a little ways away. Snarling, Morgaris turned upon him and thrust a hand towards him, fingers straining in his gauntlet. Instantly, a wall of red flame slammed into him. Bellowing, Aulendur dropped to the ground and rolled in the dirt in an attempt to smother the fire.

In his writhings, the small bundle which his grandfather had bestowed upon him tumbled loose, and the rags fell away from it to reveal a jewel the colour of pure starlight. Aulendur heard a gasp and looked up to see Urathane looking in amazement upon the stone. Morgaris, wreathed in a fiery glow, halted in his advance for a moment and stared down upon it, a startled expression upon his face.

Then Aulendur dived for it. With a hiss, Morgaris vaulted forward, only to be stopped by Eldaros, who charged in from

behind; sword raised in the air. A sword that gleamed with a red hue appeared in Morgaris's hand, materializing out of nowhere. Their blades collided and there was a flash of red light. With the clanging of steel, Eldaros's sword shattered, leaving him with only a hilt and the jagged remains of a blade. Using the distraction to seize the stone, Aulendur rose back to his feet and took up his sword.

Now Orius came charging in, causing Morgaris to turn upon him. Orius's thrust missed, and he stumbled, for he had become as one fey and some old wrath, long-hidden, was now awakened, and it consumed him.

Sword in hand, Thurandil brought his sword to bear upon Morgaris.

Holding the jewel aloft in the air, light burning through the shadows all about them, Aulendur's blade shone with a white light, and his wrist flicked: whirling end over end, the sword flew with tremendous precision, before deeply embedding itself in Morgaris's shoulder, the same time Thurandil's converged upon Morgaris.

Simultaneously, both swords clashed together with a ring of steel and Morgaris screamed, uttering some unearthly word and reaching back to yank the blade free. There was a great roar of wind, and all three were thrown back violently to the hard earth. Where they had been standing, a great egress materialized in the air, like a portal which led to some other world. A shadow flickered in that black abyss, and something began to emerge. Cloaked in billowy, black clouds of smoke, it spouted fire with every step, and there was a booming rumble in the skies above.

"Evil day that is upon us!" cried out Thurandil. "A Son of Múspell is here! The portal must be closed, ere it reaches us!" He

started to climb back to his feet, but it was clear that none would make it in time; they were thrown too far back.

“Ertulivä!” shouted Eldaros, leaping forward, suddenly. Holding the hilt of his sword aloft in the air, the jagged remnant pointed downwards, he fell upon the monstrous form, causing it to topple backwards into that black abyss. The ground shook, and the portal began to spin, its edges rimmed with white fire; till it exploded in a blinding flash of bright light. The black monstrosity—whatever it was—was gone, but so was Eldaros with it.

Morgaris was the first to rise, and he made to advance upon them. However, the cruel sneer left his face as he looked about him. His servants were all dispersed; most were dead, and several were running madly away even then. Halting, he eyed them, as if deciding what his best course of action would be. Then with a shout like thunder, he raised on high his hand, as if summoning something.

In the darkling sky, something stirred. All of the men peered upwards, their eyes searching the heavens. From the sky above, a shadow swept downwards, causing many to scatter in sudden panic. Morgaris leapt, just as the shadow swerved down upon them. Landing upon the creature's back, he then shot upwards into the depths of the firmament and was gone.

Thurandil rose wearily to his feet, stumbled, and then righted himself. *“Alas! Alas!”* he said. *“This is a grievous loss indeed. I hold only myself to blame in this matter: unwittingly, I must have drawn my foe and his servants to this place. This is my fault and mine only.”*

"Yet we heard no sign, no hint of approach," said Orius, drawing near. "And not once did we speak of our quest. Indeed none knew of it, save the King and ourselves."

"One thing we must not forget," said Ingrim. "Morgaris has many spies. They are everywhere. Who knows? Perhaps some may be within the High King's inner circle and sneaking about for what information that they could find, overheard our venture, secret though we were."

"Maybe and even likely, perhaps," said Orius. But a dubious expression still remained upon his face.

Aulendur's eyes were glazed over; his eardrums throbbed and his skin smarted. But these compared not to the ache that was his throbbing heart. His battle rage had left him feeling exhausted and empty. Physically he felt drained and emotionally he was a mess; in his hand, he still clutched the white jewel.

In the moonlight, Aulendur could see a dark, crimson stain on the blade's surface as he bent low to pick it up. Wiping it on the grass, he sheathed it and stood to face the others.

"Grandfather is dead," he said. "He is dead and gone; I shall never see him alive and well again in this world. My brother is dead as well, I think, unless my eyes were deceived. In the space of one night, the only two relations that until today, I believed to be the only ones left living, are now no more. Alas, that I could say I had them both buried. My grandfather, I can perform such a task for and here shall he rest, till his very bones have crumbled, and dust remains; but alas! I cannot do the same for my brother."

"I am truly sorry," said Thurandil, bowing his head. "Your grandfather was an honourable man and well-respected wherever

he went in life. However, do not be so quick to lose hope for your brother.”

Aulendur looked up in surprise. “Then he is not dead?!”

“I did not say that.” Thurandil grimaced. “These are dark things of which we speak. There are forces at work here that I cannot interpret, nor understand.”

“Then I would ask this: what truly happened to Eldaros, my brother?”

“I know not fully what has occurred, but this I can say: he has passed into a realm of darkness, where evil and black things will be all about him. I do not know rightly, if at all, exactly abides there. However, whatever realm your brother passed into, it shall surely test his mettle to the very fiber of his being.” Thurandil grimaced again. “Only a few have ever entered the abyss, and even fewer have lived to tell the tale; Those who have managed to survive are too broken in mind and spirit to say anything at all.”

From behind them, Khaderas appeared, having been busy thanking and driving off the curious villagers. “Alas! I have failed,” he said. “And I am near to undone.”

“So are we all,” said Thurandil. “We should pack anything we can save, stock up on provisions, and then find someplace to lay our heads.”

“We must rest *soon*,” said Orius. “The night is wearing swiftly by. But first, we must decide our right course of travel.”

“That is already decided I think,” said Ingram. “We were to make our way around the edge of the Nesserëne, then through Ared'dor if we could.”

“No,” said Orius. “That will not do anymore. That has become the easy way. With Morgaris now on our trail, we will have to

depart by another road: a road which will be hard for him to track us through."

"And that brings only one way to mind," said Thurandil.

"Through the Pëлиндori and then into the untamed wastes and woodland beyond," finished Khaderas, nodding. "A most unsure road; yet our most fitting course. We need now gather our things, bury the dead, and then we can rest in the comfort of my house till the last hours of night have passed."

"That is good," said Thurandil. "I leave with the coming dawn." He began to turn away, but then seeming to recall something, turned back. "Aulendur, I wish not to press you, but I must: will you come with my companions and I? We need to get as far away from here as we can, as soon as we can. I had not known Morgaris was on my trail and almost, I regret having come here, though my oath holds me to it and it is become impossible to recant.

"Also, the stone which you carry we have great need to discuss; though at this time I am too weary to do so and we have not the time. For now let me advise you in which ways I best can: keep it safe and let none near it, save your closest friends. In the meantime, let me warn you: that unfortunate revelation now leaves you in more danger than you would be if you were to come with us. Morgaris (for that is indeed the name of the one who has brought this evil upon us) will most certainly come back to this place once he is able and should he still find you here with it, things would go ill with you.

"So this I must ask you now and be answered: would you travel with us through much peril and hardship to the destiny which awaits you? Or would you stay here, the place you have indeed

known all your life, yet the place where you are now likely to be in the most danger?"

Aulendur bent his head; he had now no will left in him—not after the night's events. "I shall yield and journey with you as far that as may be."

"That is well," said Thurandil. "We depart at dawn."

III

THE REBEL AND THE TYRANT

DONG, DONG, DONG, boomed the great bell in the Tower of Athanaric, making it known to all in Nârac that the noon hour had come.

This was the time when those who were out—specifically those who were out buying, bartering, trading, observing, and all the like—would return to their place of living and there commemorate the lunch-hour if they had not already. This was the time of day when plans and schemes were set aside for the briefest of whiles; for this was the midday.

But not so for Talëmar the Would-be-Street-Urchin. As he trudged up the long, stony path which led up to the houses and halls of Gabaranath, Lord of the City, his mouth was set in a hard line, and an unrelenting fierceness burned defiantly in the shadows of his sea-grey eyes. But beneath that facade, he was really quite glum, for he had been re-captured...again. This was the fifth time in the past three months to be exact, and it was only the twenty-second of June on this day.

Why, oh why, could he not stay *uncaught* for several months at the very least? Alas, he could find no answer to that. As a matter of fact, he seemed quite unable to find an answer to most everything lately.

Talëmar's hands were bound tightly behind his back with a small stretch of rope, but nothing else—this likely being so due to the inescapable fact that he was surrounded by a small ring of sweating soldiers, wearing bright mail and holding sharp spears in their hands.

Beside Talëmar strode Taran, one of Lord Gabaranath's most trusted servants. He primarily served as his chief advisor and with his sharp wit and tongue, he able to, with good success, push Gabaranath to decisions that he otherwise might not have made. But for all his convincing words and conniving ways, he was kind, in his own way. Out of all the people that Talëmar had known during his 'stay' at Gabaranath's halls—more truthfully an imprisonment—Taran was the only one who had ever shown him any kindness.

But at the present moment, Taran was not smiling.

"Why can you not stay out of trouble and mischief for once in your life?" he said now, wearily wiping a hand across his brow. "These exploits and escapades of yours lead only to nothing but trouble and misfortune for you and all whom you associate yourself with."

"I am not Gabaranath's personal servant," snapped Talëmar, his expression darkening further.

"No, you are not," said Taran, even more wearily than before. "But if you continue to behave in this troublesome manner of yours, you may soon annoy his Lordship enough that he might

revert to more, unfortunate options. And mind you!” he said on a sudden. “You are not to call your master by his given name alone. You are to refer to him at all times as *Lord Gabaranath*, nothing less.”

Next year, it shall likely be *King Gabaranath* and after that, *Emperor*,” spat Talëmar mockingly. “He evidently wasn’t satisfied with ‘Governor,’ so he had that changed to ‘Suzerain of the South,’ and now, it’s ‘Lord’ he wants. Well, I’ll let you know that I’m tired of his petty games. I can call him anything I want and I will. *Swine’s scum*, I name him, and I wish he were, for then I should forever be freed of his wretched thumb, under which I am to cower like a weakling slave, without strength or honour.”

“You will hold your insolent tongue!” exploded Taran in sudden anger. His black eyebrows were bristling with an impatience grown over many months out of the gradual buildup of a tried temper. “I have stuck my neck out for you time and time again. Without me, you would have been worsted long ago! Well, I shall no more, and that’s final. If you can’t learn my way, then you shall have to learn the hard way, and know this! I shall not feel the last bit sorrowful for you when the profits of your reckless and foolish ways come crashing down on you like a precipitate thunderstorm out of the heavens—even if it be painfully hard beyond measure. I have lost all the patience that I may have once held for you. So mind you!” With that, Taran turned sharply away from him and stormed to the forefront of the group in order to summon the guards. They were nearing the gates that so barred Gabaranath’s halls.

Blast his help for all I care, thought Talëmar. *I can make well as I am able without it*. Inside his heart, he knew this to be untrue, but

he was grown too proud to admit it to even himself, and that was the way of things.

The soldiers, who had kept a small distance between the two of them, were now snickering and whispering amongst themselves. However, the laughter quickly faded from their faces when Talëmar fixed his scorching eyes upon them, his furiousness at being humiliated, drawing it all the more acute.

When they turned away, winces still lingering on their faces, Talëmar turned his gaze forward, all glumness that might have once resided within him now wholly wiped away.

Now, there was only a burning anger. Anger at Gabaranath. Anger at the world and everyone in it. Anger at Taran, who had now turned his back on Talëmar, who had only desired a small taste of freedom. He was not the first to betray him.

Nor the last.

Before them, the wide stony path curled upwards for a small ways, before ending at the steps which ascended to the doors of the Governor's House. There presided Gabaranath, the cruel and traitorous governor, now proclaimed supreme sovereign of Nârac and a few of the surrounding lands.

They traversed the rest of the path, marching up the steps, until coming at last, to the great black doors of the Hall. Taran bade the guards open them, and they entered the Hall, save for the soldiers, who, having done their duty to escort them, now turned back the way they had come.

Inside, the room was half-lit, and it took Talëmar's eyes several moments to adjust to the too-familiar sight that lay before them.

Long benches and chairs lined the walls in the back. In the foremost of these sat perhaps a dozen different persons, most of them in chains. At the far end of the room was a small dais on which was situated a large seat wrought of stone. It was like to a throne, yet was not nearly magnificent enough to be called one. The floor was made of dark stone that was dull and rough in most places.

At the moment, Gabaranath was holding court for several men and women convicted of some wrongdoing or offense, and he was dealing out ‘justice’ as he called it—albeit in his own twisted form of it.

Taran, who had silently returned to Talëmar’s side, intoned without looking at him, “Seat yourself, till the Lord Gabaranath calls upon you.” Talëmar did so, though his face was haughty and dark.

A little ways away, Gabaranath glanced briefly at him and his face twisted into a partly-mocking, partly-sardonic smile. However, this lasted only for a moment, and he swiftly turned his gaze upon the man standing in front of him, having just finished with the three men who had been standing there when Talëmar first walked in.

They had stolen some food from a shop, one of them to feed his starving family. Gabaranath had decreed that they should be hanged by dawn the next morning.

The man in front of him was haggard, and his ragged clothing was greatly disheveled. He looked as if he had spent the last few days in one of the rank cells that were Gabaranath’s dungeons.

“What is this peasant’s offense?” asked Gabaranath, turning to the man standing several feet away from him. The man glanced

down a partly unfurled parchment scroll and read off, "Two months worth of unpaid taxes and evading his Lordship's soldiers."

Gabaranath turned back to the man in front of him. "Not paying your taxes for two months and avoiding my peacekeepers when I send them someplace to carry out my will are highly serious offenses. While the first annoys me more than the last, each is of no less consequence to the other. Now, why in all of Ared'dor would you commit these two *very* unfortunate offenses, when you were well aware of what would happen were you to so foolishly commit them?"

"I...I have not much money," said the man, his eyes flickering from the floor to Gabaranath in a nervous manner. "Not hardly enough to pay for such..." Here the man spluttered almost and coughed. "If you will forgive me the term, your excellency, the taxes you impose on the citizens of this city are somewhat...harsh. I have not been able to earn much money these past several months, and if I were to pay what you order of us, my family would die of starvation." The man was practically pleading with Gabaranath to understand.

"You are not forgiven," said Gabaranath, sourly. "However, I will wave such offensive disrespect this one time. As for the others, I shall not be so lenient. For these, you shall be sentenced to work in the Stone-lands for four years: two for each offense, until I hold your debt fulfilled.

"But my family..." said the man, dread fear entering into his eyes. "How will they survive? They'll starve to death or end up as lowlife on the under-streets, barely able to make it by. Is there not some other way?"

“The dungeons!” Gabaranath said suddenly as if he were just now happening on the idea. “They can stay in the dungeons until your four years are fulfilled. There, at least, they shall have food and drink, if not comfort. But survival is of more value than any comfort, I’ll warrant.”

“The dungeons?!” cried out the man in horror. “But there, the chances of them surviving are even lower than the former alternative!”

“Nonsense,” said Gabaranath, with another one of his fake smiles. “My prisons are the best that you’ll find around here.”

“Will you not show any mercy for poor souls such as myself?” whimpered the man. “Even if they were to survive, I would likely not. Four years in the Stone-lands is certain death. Hardly does fate allow those who are sent there to ever come back.”

“There is, indeed, some small chance that this could be so,” said Gabaranath. His mouth had now curved into a cruel smile. “But in any event, that is where you shall go, unless you will consent to send your family in your place. Only in that instance shall I show ‘mercy.’ Will you send them or go yourself? Which is it, knave?”

The man’s face had changed. Where there had once been despair, now only bitterness and anger remained. “I see now that there is only hate and disdain for those below you in your heart. I would never send my family in place. *Never.*”

“So be it,” said Gabaranath. “Guards, take him away.”

From the shadows of the Hall, two men in armour emerged and, grabbing the unfortunate man roughly by his shoulders, they escorted him from the building. As the dispirited man was dragged by him, Talëmar caught a small glimpse of his face. It was beyond

stricken: empty and devoid of anything, for hope had left him and death awaited.

Then, the doors to the Hall closed, and the man was gone.

From his seat, Talëmar seethed with anger. Looking at the people in the room around him, he wondered if there were any here who felt any sort of compassion for the doomed man. However, he saw naught on anyone's faces, and Taran's was stony, and he stared straight ahead, his eyes boring into nothingness.

Is everyone too much afraid to stand up to Gabaranath's tyranny? he wondered.

It seemed that it was so.

The next hour dragged by, much as it had before and it was only after Gabaranath had finished sentencing the rest of the offenders that he finally turned to him. He motioned for Taran to usher him near.

"You," he said, pointing a finger at Talëmar, "are greatly trying the patience of my most benevolent heart."

"Since when have you been benevolent in all your wretched life?" laughed Talëmar. "That's about as likely as me tearing apart the jaws of a dragon."

"Arrogant, foolish, and presumptuous knave!" shouted Gabaranath in anger. "I have fed you, clothed you, and given you a place in my halls, though you hardly deserve it. Do you then wish for the lordship of this city and the lands about it to rule for yourself? What more could you possibly want?"

"Nay," said Talëmar. "I wish for nothing of yours. To touch that which is yours would be to defile myself and that I will never do so

long as I live. I merely ask for one thing, but that you shall never give to me.”

“And what is that?!” sneered Gabaranath.

“My freedom,” Talëmar said. “To be forever freed from these halls and to never have to look upon your wretched face again. To be free to walk and live where I wish: that is what I want.”

“Freedom!” snorted Gabaranath. “Freedom?! That is what you wish?” He laughed. “What in Pergelion makes you think yourself deserving of freedom? As long as I live, so shall you live here also.” Shaking his head ominously, he said, “I give you one last chance, *boy*. One last chance. If you disobey me again or even think to trespass my laws, I will send you to that same place where I sent that pathetic earlier. I *will not* have my commands broken so often and disrespected as you have done to them. Begone! I have other matters that I must needs attend to.”

He turned and stalked back to the dais.



IV

MYTHOPOEIA

IT WAS AUGUST, the time of year when the leaves are red and orange, when this both strange and notable event worth relating occurred to me. At the time, I was sitting beneath an ancient oak tree that rose over a small, grassy hill. The hill overlooked my village, providing a bird's eye view of my surroundings while a soft yet warm breeze was blowing in my face. It was beginning to approach dusk, and to the north, I could see the sun starting even now to sink beneath the tall mountains.

In my hand, I held a small volume of a fantastical nature which gave me some great pleasure, and I was just now turning a page when a strange (and rather short) character appeared in front of me.

Naturally, I was slightly annoyed by this sudden intrusion, and I looked up sharply from my book to see if I might discern what the nature of this unexpected visitor was. At first glance, the character standing before me struck me as rather odd, and for a brief moment, I gazed upon him curiously.

He was very short, perhaps no larger than several feet high and somewhat *stumpy*, if you will forgive for the vulgar usage. He wore a weather-stained hood that at one time must have been green, and a couple of dark, bushy eyebrows stuck out at me, highlighting a pair of *very* bright eyes.

Over his shoulder was a small, particularly-bulky sack made of what looked to be animal skin. His clothes were even more curiously designed, and I shall here try to give the most detailed account I can of what happened henceforth.

“Hullo,” I said a bit uncertainly after I had finished looking him over.

He replied in kind (though much more gruffly) and for a long, awkward moment seemed content to study me—which only served to thoroughly unnerve me.

“What is it you want? Can I help you?” I asked when I could bear the silence no longer.

“That is what I am wondering at this very moment, as well,” he said, looking at me with something of a bemused air.

I ogled him, then leaning forward, said again, “Can I help you at all?”

“I have a mind to entrust you to a great task,” he said. “Though, upon seeing you for the first time, I wonder somewhat at my decision. No matter, it is of great and particular importance to me and mine. I shall be done.”

Naturally, I was surprised at both the direct abruptness of his statement and the strange manner in which he spoke to me.

The little man walked several steps forward and then proceeded to seat himself next to a very surprised me. Pulling the sack off his shoulder, he brought it around, setting it in his lap in such a way to

have easy access to it. Then, he reached into it and pulled out a large, leather-bound volume of a most-majestic nature. It was quite thick—indeed, thicker than most books I had read—and looking in from the outside, the pages appeared to be made of very old parchment. Embossed on the front were several lines in a large, golden print. However, I was unable to discern what they meant, as they were transcribed in some other language that did not at all look familiar to me.

“There,” said the short man, “are an account, as it were, of a history long forgotten. This small tome that I now hold is but a small part of it, yet its importance to the whole is inexcusable.”

Raising my eyebrows, I said in a perplexed voice, “Forgive me, my good man, but this whole...thing strikes me as a bit strange. Would you mind, perchance, expelling to me the nature of this most unexpected visit? Or in franker terms, if I may speak so, *what on earth is going on?*”

Upon this, the short man sighed audibly, momentarily raising his eyes to the skies, and I thought I heard him mutter under his breath, “Neldor, give me patience.” Then, turning back to me, he said, “You are what they call a *professor*, am I right? Of, or in ‘linguistics’ I believe you name it. The ‘study of languages.’ ”

“Why yes, that would be the correct usage of the term,” said I, still bewildered.

“Then you can write and speak in other languages besides your own, fluently?”

“Latin, Greek, Hebrew, German, French, Old English, Old Norse, and some Finnish,” I said, not without some pride.

The short man looked at me almost carefully, before saying slowly, “So you like this, then. This is your *eranui* or passion, as

you say? You are, or would be interested in advancing your knowledge in these areas?”

“More or less,” I replied. Though I had spoken with some amount of hesitation, I had to admit, this short stumpy man was beginning to grow on me.

Again, the short man eyed me in an appraising fashion. After a while, he muttered, “Well, I guess it can be done. You,” he said, pointing a little finger at me, “are in for a boatload of work. Painstaking, I think it may be at times, but it may yet brighten up your years going forward.”

“Begging your pardon,” I blurted out on a sudden, nearly cutting him off mid-sentence. “But I am still at a complete loss as to what you are talking about. What on earth are you about?”

“Why, you are going to translate and publish these books, of course,” said the man. “I thought we had just been over this, but apparently our former discourse passed right over your head. If I may be so bold as to remind you, you stated that you ‘would certainly’ want to tack on more languages to your already-impressive repertoire, as it is quite evident that you think it just that.”

“More or less,” said I. “Not ‘certainly,’ and I ‘certainly’ did not agree to translate anything at all. Why I haven’t even a clue as to what I would be transcribing and even if I did know, I am not sure I would have the time.”

“You ‘certainly’ talk a whole lot,” said the strange little man, rubbing his stubby hands together in some strange glee. “Yes, I do believe my cousin was right if you can believe that: which you can’t of course, or even *can* for that matter, as you’ve never met him in all your walking days.”

I stared at him, open-mouthed and eyes wide at his eccentricity. In response, the man looked at me rather dryly, before turning again to the sack in his lap.

“Of course,” he said, “you would probably like knowing what you’re going to be dedicating yourself to in the coming years.” Reaching into the sack, he pulled out several other volumes, all equally impressive as the first and no less beautifully crafted, along with several scrolls that like the former appeared to be made of ancient parchment.”

Although I was annoyed and somewhat put off by his forward and aloof manner, these managed to perk up some interest in my scholarly side and leant forward ever so slightly. “What are these?”

“Heroic lays and epic tales,” he said. “Most of which are only to be found in these books. Not many reproductions or writing-downs of these events were ever put down, so you can understand some of my hesitancy in handing them over to you. Still, though, I deem that if you cannot do this task, then no one can; and that would be greatly unfortunate. I trust that you will do your utmost to take care of them.” He handed me one of the volumes so that I might inspect it.

“I—I do not have the time,” I said finally, after flipping through several pages. “My studies overbear too much on my time as it is. Besides, it would be impossible to translate any of these, as there is no key or language similar, that would help in specifying what each or word or rune would mean.” Somewhat apologetically, I handed him the book back, waiting for what I thought would be a sigh and an, *Ah, well. I see your point.*

Instead, my predictions were flat out wrong. The short man, taking absolutely no notice whatsoever of my statement, picked up one of these scrolls which he began to unfurl.

What lay inside was absolutely *majestic*. I was a map, and instantly my eyes were glued to it. A *map*. My greatest weakness. I *loved* maps.

"You needn't worry about not having a guide to translate," he said. "In the back of one of these, you'll find a small guide to words and letters, along with a few abbreviated English roots. I can't write well in English, so I was hard put to do even that, but in the end, it was done, and I think you shall find your task somewhat easier than you had expected."

I scarcely heard him, however, so taken up was I by the map. Across the old parchment, a host of seas and continents spawned. There were many mountain ranges and rivers traced out in a pretentious style, all labeled in that same language that had been emblazoned on the leather-bound books.

That did it for me. If there were maps involved in any capacity, no matter how small, then I was in.

"Yes!" I said. "Yes!"

"Yes, what?" said the short man gruffly, eyeing me as if I were acting peculiar, which was, of course, absurd.

"I'll do it!" I said.

"Of course you will," growled the short man. "Why else would I go so far out of my way to listen to you babble on about your boring and dull interests?"

I noted that his diminutive size was not unlike his temper.

"I will be back soon," said the man, rising from his position. He began to walk down the slope of the hill. "For one, to check on

your progress and two, to give you more information and things to translate.”

“Wait, you mean there’s more??” I asked unbelievably. I glanced down at one of the volumes I now held. That one alone was as thick as my forearm.

“Why, of course,” said the man, somewhat sarcastically. “Would you be able to write down the entire history of your world in only several books? Indeed, I should say not! The very idea is quite absurd.”

Looking down at the map that lay spread out on the ground next to me, I concluded that short *was* right. It was then that I recalled something in the man’s words that stuck out to me as rather odd.

“Wait, what do you mean by ‘my world?’” I asked aloud, looking up.

But no answer was I to receive, for, to my great astonishment and utmost surprise, the strange man was gone.

PART TWO



THE SCI-FI

I

THE LEGEND

GARRETT STOOD TALL on the hovercraft, hands shading his face from the blinding light of the overhead sun. Before and beneath him, stretched out many miles of sand, from which spawned forth a rugged terrain—one spotted throughout by low-lying dunes. A hot, ragged breeze was flowing across the land, sending coarse, brittle sand his way. It was, naturally, a source of discomfort.

Hence the bandana around his head.

Raising a spyglass to his eye, he sighted out across the stretch of sand before him. In the distance, was a figure atop another hovercraft. It drew steadily nearer.

Garrett could not resist a smirk. *I'll have him soon enough.*

His ship was in much more superior condition than the former and having lived his life evading the manipulations of others, Garrett was an expert at manipulating the Variants' endowed equipment.

The distance between the two ships was closing rapidly. Anticipating arrival, Garrett whipped out the two long knives that he kept strapped to his side, and leaned forward, taking care not to

lean too far out over the passing terrain that ran several feet beneath him: getting sand in your eyes or teeth was always very irritating.

As he gained ground with relative ease, Garrett slowed the pace of his craft as he drew alongside the other ship.

“Dagnabbit, you roughneck, you,” said the man who captained the ship. He, too, slowed his craft as the inevitability of the situation became apparent.

With a flourish, he wheeled around to face Garrett, his ship coming to a stuttering, choking halt. His coarse hair was pushed back by the black eyepatch that was strapped to his left eye, the short strands left to flutter as they would in the breeze. He was quite clearly, a weathered man, and it showed in the most blatant fashion that could possibly be conjured. His hair, which had once been a mixture of brown and some lighter hue, was now streaked with grey, and his face was haggard, drawn and wrinkled in places it shouldn’t have been. The long cloak he wore to protect himself from the elements was worn and faded from the commonplace black that it had once been, to another bland hue altogether.

“You just won’t give up, will you?” he said, holding out his hands in the act of demurrals.

Garrett leapt from the ship in which he now stood to the one adjacent to his. “Is this some sort of trick question that I am supposed to answer, or can we end this quickly?” Sheathing one of his knives, he held out a hand. “Alright, hand it over.”

The man frowned. “What, that’s it? Just, ‘hand it over?’”

Garrett nodded his head as if it was the only possible response. “Uh, yeah???”

The man squinted at him in the sun, then shook his head. "You ain't really good at this, are you?"

"When are you just going to accept the inevitable, old man?" said Garrett.

The man hooked both of his thumbs into his belt and said dryly, "Already did, mate. Name's Myrn by the way; I ain't just any old geezer."

"Yeah, don't care," Garrett growled hotly. "Just hand me that ornament there, the one that you pocketed from that fop back in Teran, and I'll be on my way."

"No way, mate."

"I had thought you already accepted your fate?"

"I did," said Myrn. "And it don't involve you."

"You willing to bet on that?" Garrett was beginning to lose his patience.

"Nope, as I ain't no bettin' man."

"You've never bet once in your life? Hah! Give me a break!"

"Oh, I've bet before," Myrn said. "Just the thing is, I adhere to this simple principle here called selective betting."

Garrett let his head fall back and laughed. "You're a bonehead, Myrn." He paused, giving Myrn a small look. "No offense or anything."

"None taken," Myrn replied with a selfsame smile.

Garrett smiled broadly at Myrn, who returned the smile.

Then Myrn whipped out the sword tied to his side, just in time to meet Garrett's sharp thrust. Garrett slashed at his hand with his second knife, then ducked as Myrn's blade came perilously close to grazing his forehead.

Gotta preserve that now, he thought. *Wouldn't want to scare the ladies with a nasty scar*. Besides, that would also mean taking a jagged hole in his bandana, and he certainly didn't want that to happen; he *liked* that bandana.

"Hah! Tried to pull a fast one on me, did you now?" chortled Myrn.

Garrett grunted. And swiped outwards at Myrn, arm extending and bringing about his knife. Myrn stumbled back, then savagely brought his sword down on Garret, both hands gripping the hilt. In response, Garrett shielded himself by crossing both blades to catch Myrn's sword, then let it slide down to the handle, which he then pushed with his arms, so as to topple Myrn over. Myrn, however, managed to stand his ground and Garrett was pushed off to the side, over-extended arms flailing.

As he attempted to recover himself and get back to his feet, Myrn simultaneously rolled over a barrel that had been situated nearby towards him. Eyes widening in surprise, Garrett attempted to leap out of the way, but stumbled in his haste and was toppled over.

Seizing his opportunity, Myrn brought the heel of his boot around and cracked Garrett in the jaw, before setting his foot on the younger man's chest and pushing. With a pleased smirk, he lowered his sword at Garret's throat.

"I'll take that bet now."

Garrett squirmed uncomfortably. "I wasn't asking."

"Didn't figure you were. Now *get off* my ship and never sully it with your person again."

"You cheated."

“And you were becoming profoundly annoying,” Myrn said indifferently. “Not to mention unpredictable. If there’s one thing I can’t stand, it’s unpredictable people.”

Garrett smiled. “You mean like this?” he said, drawing a pistol from his pocket and pointing it in Myrn’s face.

Myrn’s eyes flashed, widening, and then darkening. “Now, *that’s* cheating.”

“No matter,” said Garrett, forcing Myrn to back away. Drawing himself to his feet, he said, “Welcome to a world without rules.”

“I invented that rule, you know,” Myrn said, eyeing Garrett with a decidedly crabby expression.

“I could really care less.” Garrett sighted down the barrel and eyed Myrn forcefully. “Now, hand it over.”

“What if I say ‘no’?”

“Then, well, I do this.” He didn’t want to injure the older man, but Garrett had exercised all the grace that was benighted to his person, and he would take to more insults. So he lowered his arm and fired a warning shot at Myrn’s leg.

And missed.

“Dang it!” he said, pulling back the pistol and fingering the firing mechanism.

He looked up to see Myrn staring at him in disbelief.

“What’re you goggling at now?”

“You’re him,” he said in an awed tone, which was kind of odd, especially considering that Garrett had just tried to shoot his leg.

“I’m what?”

“You’re the one they call *Bypasser*: the one they say that can hold a gun point-blank at a target and still miss. But I thought you were only a legend!”

“Hah!” said Garrett. “Well, I’m clearly *not*.”

“How do you do it?” Myrn said, voice still tinged with a pinch of wonderment.

“Don’t know, really,” replied Garret, jamming the lower end of his palm against the stock of the pistol. “First, I thought it was the gun at first, but now I think I was just born with a gross gift.”

“It’s disgusting for sure, but a talent like that will earn a man respect wherever he goes.”

“Right.” Having concluded that there was nothing wrong with the gun, Garrett stuffed it back in his boot and held out a hand to Myrn. “Now, hand it over.”

Myrn grumbled, then thrust a hand into the satchel at his side, pulling out a shiny object. He eyed it, then looked at Garrett in a mixture of frustration and resignation. “You know how long it took me to find this?”

“No, I could seriously, *seriously* care less.”

“Two years of extensive researching and planning, all leading up till now.” Myrn fingered the item of question and brought it to his chest, clutching it with his long fingers as if it were precious.

“Myrn?”

“What?!”

“Stop dallying and hand it over.”

When Myrn responded with a glare, Garrett said, “Now.”

Grumbling to himself, Myrn took a slow step forward, before depositing the object in question—which happened to be a shiny, gold watch—into Garret’s skyward palm. Placing it carefully within his trouser-pocket, he then bowed. “I’m obliged, old man. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

He swept himself up and vaulted into his hovercraft.



II

RAVAGERS ACROSS A STARRY SKY

LASER FIRE REVERBERATED thunderously through the white-walled corridor.

Accompanying this was the sound of pounding feet against the white-paneled encasing which made up the walls, floor, and ceiling of the star station. Jotham, a chief investigator into suspect matters and occurrences in the Sector of Arethalia, was host to one of those pairs of feet. Alongside him, Ziragen, his cadet, also hastened for the exit a little ways ahead of them. It would lead them to the landing pad of the star station, where their ship was docked and primed for a quick getaway.

Hopefully.

There was a small chance that Ziragen had forgotten Jotham's previous instructions and had not left the ship set as a compulsory bolt for freedom, just in case they happened to run into any kind of trouble.

Which they had.

That was not to be unexpected. Retrospectively, they knew that it was likely they would run into *some* trouble. It was hard to dismiss this possibility when one attempted to thief important documents from one of the most powerful beings in the Cosmos. Moreover, trouble of some kind always seemed to be afoot when Jotham and Ziragen were involved in some capacity.

Back to business, thought Jotham.

Door.

Escape.

Avoid (if practical, of course) getting blasted to pieces.

Put considerable distance between them and us.

By ‘them’ he meant, of course, the Rectoniers—specially trained guards who were in charge of guarding things (and in some rare instances, people) from being examined by other, interested persons. Which happened to also explain why Jotham and his cadet were being chased by a bunch of mad psychopaths who had come to the understanding just moments ago, that they had been had. And quite easily, at that.

They hadn’t been really happy about that, but then again, they weren’t expected to be.

“Zir!” shouted Jotham over his shoulder. Ziragen looked up and flashed him a smile, in the process, displaying a mouth full of pristine white teeth. Jotham ignored his usual show of atypical cheerfulness. “Once we reach the Landing Hangar, get yourself in the Flak Seat and make sure none try and make chase while I work on getting us out of here!”

“Sure thing,” said Ziragen, flashing another grin.

Thundering starships, is there ever a time when his spirits aren’t hightailing it in some degree of elation or another?

“Duck! One’s coming in from the rear and crossing at your right,” came Ziragen’s overly-calm voice over the emphatic din.

Ziragen, of course, didn’t mean that a duck was veering towards Jotham from his right. He meant that a blast of scorching-hot plasma was on the point of smoking a hole through his side, which would then render Jotham quite dead. Ziragen had an uncanny ability to sense when things might occur before they had even transpired. That was, in some part, what had interested Jotham so much in him in the first place.

Of course, if one expended one’s thought upon the matter for any short period of time, that was an ability that would be quite handy to have lying around.

So he ducked. Immediately, a blast of hot air seared past him, just where his head had been.

“That’s eight,” came Ziragen’s voice from behind him. Jotham didn’t turn to look, but he knew that a grin was splitting Ziragen’s face from ear to ear.

“You forgot that I still lead you by one,” he replied coolly. “Nine times have I saved your life, compared to your paltry eight.”

“Irrefutably so, but soon I will have the mastery, in part due to the advantage of my youth, Master Guru. You are only going to get older, while I will indubitably prevail as I blossom in the flower of my youth.”

Jotham could only roll his eyes. Ziragen knew full well how it annoyed him so when he took the liberty to call him that. Master Guru, indeed!

“Ready yourself, Ziragen, we approach our destination,” he said, turning a deaf ear to Ziragen’s meandering words. Responding contemporaneously to his own order, Jotham clenched his hand

into a fist, impressing upon the button that would actuate the protective face visor to unfold over his face. Straightaway, his surroundings were profoundly transformed and visualized to the highest degree—by means of the visor’s self-enacted lens, which allowed him to see and perceive things or people in a much more introspective way than he could have otherwise done.

Before them, a vaulted black door loomed, stark against the all-encompassing white walls that ran abutted to it. It was, of course, bolted shut and made of pure steel—no amount of pushing or hammering on their part could possibly be contrived to make it passable.

Be that as it may, Jotham was unworried. He was *always* prepared for any obstreperous event that might venture to arise. In conjunction with his long strides, he slipped a hand into his coat and pulled out small time-bomb. With effortless ease, he flipped the switch, thus activating it. The seconds began to tick away.

0.05

The dark-clothed Rectoniers were gaining on them now. Jotham could hear their breath.

0.04

Blaster fire swished dangerously close to his side, burning through a part of his cloak.

0.03

“Now might be an appropriate time, Master Jotham!” said Ziragen, tenuous consternation laced in an undercurrent through his voice.

0.02

They were just several yards away from the barricade and hurtling towards it fast.

0.01

Jotham tossed it in an underhanded motion. It hit the door and detonated simultaneously, inducing the door to burst asunder in a powerful blast of vaporous red light. The burnished metal that still remained attached to the frame curled back from the severe heat, allowing Jotham enough room to leap through without mutilating himself. Ziragen followed right behind him.

Incomparable timing, thought Jotham to himself.

Having cleared the doorway, they burst onto the Landing Hangar and sped towards the ship, which sat, engine running idly, just some yards away.

Blast! thought Jotham. “What did I tell you about leaving the engine running idly, as all the while, our fuel burns away into irreplaceable nothingness?! Where in Herald’s Spire, do you believe this stuff grows on? Most certainly *not* out of a nullity! Thrice-blast it! Now, in addition to potential pursuers, we’re also low on fuel, due in part, to your seeming ineptitude. The former could engender any number of problems! We *certainly* don’t need a second complication pervading the already-clouded waters.”

Jotham spared a glare back at Ziragen, whom he saw frowning to himself. *Well, that’s most agreeably a rare sight.*

“You said to keep it going, in case we were compelled to get going fast.”

“I said to leave it in such a condition, so that might actually have a chance at absconding ourselves at any due minute at which we might so choose, not keep the blasted engine running! For once wouldn’t it help if yo—”

He was cut off by a massive explosion behind him. Glancing back over his right shoulder, he saw that he had been close to being hit. *Too close.*

“Never mind!” he shouted over the vibrant array of objects exploding and shells imploding. “Let’s get out of here before we get torqued!”

“Agreed!”

“Reaching the ship, Jotham slammed his hand down on the small box that protruded from the ship’s side, causing the hatch to slide open. Making a mad dash to the Pilot’s seat, he leapt into it and prepared to take off. Behind him, he heard Ziragen run into the ‘Flak Chamber,’ as they so called it. He would be lining up the big guns.

Adjusting his headset and pushing his dark, semi-long hair out of his eyes, Jotham pulled on the throttle, prompting the engines to roar with new fervor. Pulling back on a lever at his side, the ship began to slowly rise from the landing dock.

“You on it?!” he shouted into his mike.

“Yep, targets lined up, guns ready. Let’s burn this gas!”

Certainly easy for him to say.

The ship swiveled around smoothly in the air, as Jotham prepped it for takeoff. In direct unison, he caught the sound Ziragen’s whoops fill his ear and the sudden spattering of laser fire, as he went to work at impeding their pursuers from giving chase to them. Outside, he could hear a resounding chorus of shouts and cries, as their belligerent adversaries were blasted into oblivion.

Then, “Oops,” said Ziragen in his ear. “Too soon. They’re alerted, and a small assortment is heading in the direction of the other ships in the hanger. They’re gonna try and blast us to bits in

the air. They must want those plans we purloined off ‘em something desperate.”

If he only knew, though Jotham. Lord Cadmus would not be happy in the slightest if news of his most recent ‘endeavors’ managed to reach the ears of the Galactic Council. He was on thin ice as it was. Jotham hoped that with this particular piece of evidence, he might be able to incriminate him in front of the Head Sovereigns and have his tyrannical regime dealt with once and for all. Besides him being a viable existential threat to the entire galaxy, Jotham had other reasons of his own. *Personal* reasons. Something most other people wouldn’t understand.

“We’ve got to shoot them down before they get in the air!” He shouted over his shoulder. “We can risk letting them follow us, especially when we’re this low on fuel!” The fuel gauge showed that they had 27% left in the reserves. Looking in his mirrors, Jotham sighted their opponents and steered the ship closer to them.

“I’m getting you into position,” he said. “Gun ‘em down!”

The resonance of laser fire again filled his ears. Looking through his window, which commanded a view of the entire scene, he saw it tearing through the line of ships that rested on the pad. Brilliant explosions of white, orange, and red plumed forth in the air below them, as ship after ship was blown up.

“Ye—!” Ziragen’s whoop was cut short as a bolt of red fire impacted the side of the ship, engendering a purposive aperture through which now gushed biting cold air.

Blast! thought Jotham. *I forgot to put up the shields! Of all the lame-brained things I could have forgotten...*

“Shields, Master Guru, the *shields*. They’re kinda important, you know,” came Ziragen’s mildly calm voice through his earpiece. “They designed specifically to protect us from hawkish intrusions, such as that annoying missile that just—”

Jotham didn’t have time for Ziragen’s uncensored elucidation. “Yes, I know! Cease with the pointlessly incessant commentary; you’re merely serving to be a distraction, not a help.”

“Just reminding you, Master Jotham.” Jotham could practically hear Ziragen’s all but assured smile in his voice.

“Sibrai, I need the shields, and I need that orifice sealed up now!” said Jotham. A shimmering blue apparition appeared at his right. A head nodded in compliance in concurrence with a feminine repose.

“Yes, Master Jotham.”

Immediately, a blue haze materialized around the entire ship, before coruscating into obscurity.

“Shield is up,” grunted Jotham.

“So I’ve noticed.”

“For once, you’re short on words. A blissful wonder that is.”

“Actually, I was just going to tell you that several Rectoniers have managed to put up their shields, while I was busy obliterating their friends and are in currently in the process of attempting to blast us into oblivion.”

At that moment, small red fires appeared on one of Jotham’s screens, as if to just prove the verity of Ziragen’s words. In his mirrors, Jotham could see several ships rising into the air, guns leveling at them.

“Abort!” said Jotham. “We’ll lose them in space.”

“And if we can’t before...?”

Jotham paused momentarily, then said, “We find somewhere secluded to land on a nearby planet.” *If we don’t run out of fuel first*, he thought.

Several pulls here, a couple pushes there, and the ship shot into space, engines roaring and fires burning. Darkness blanketed all that rose into the depths of its ever-pervading firmament, and thousands of stars shimmered brightly, their celestial forms like twinkling lights in a sea of the purest blue.

Such a beautiful sight. Even in his forty-five plus years, Jotham was still thrilled by the sight of them. Ziragen didn’t understand this feeling. At nineteen years in the world, he was still cocky, wayward, and thought himself on top of the world, even when he was being pursued by mad alien-freaks whose sole intent was to wipe his pathetic life-form off the face of the universe.

His thoughts were broken by Ziragen’s warning voice. “We’re trailed by six fighters, although one seems to be having trouble with his shields and is wobbling about haphazardly. It might be one that I previously hit, but didn’t entirely knock out all the way.

“Blast it out of the sky.”

“Ok, locked on.” A deafening eruption sounded through the air and Jotham promptly sensed shock waves rolling against their ship’s sheeny exterior: clear and convincing evidence that Ziragen had done just that.

One down, five to go. And the five remaining weren’t phased a bit: they continued to persist in their condemning opprobrium, bombarding the ship again and again. *That such small ships can inflict so much damage...*

“What is their problem?!!” Jotham grimaced as Ziragen’s voice rattled forcibly through his ear.

Ignoring lingering vestiges of Ziragen’s exasperation that so chose to bear through his voice, Jotham said, “Sibrai, how much damage have the shields sustained?”

The selfsame shimmering figure appeared before him again. “My data says that we are down to an overall capacity of 56% At the rate we’re dropping, and if we proceed to maintain this deluge of torrential bombardment, we have precisely ten minutes before we reach a level of 0%. At that point, we will likely be smattered into a million pieces and cease to exist.”

“So, in other words, it speaks volumes.”

“Yes, Master Jotham, that would be an accurate description. It certainly is decorous that you have been privileged with the capability to comprehend your own fate.” Great, now his artificial intelligence was speaking in snide undertones to him.

“They’re gaining on us.” Ziragen’s voice had taken on a clipped edge. Jotham sharply pivoted his attention from the A.I. back to the former.

“Fire! Break down their shields! You want me to do it for you?!”

“*I’m* trying. It’s just that they’re much smaller than they appear and they stay out of my range by darting and swerving, and it’s a lot more difficult than it looks, and I’m having trouble maintaining my patience.”

Jotham smirked. *It certainly is.* He wiped a hand across his brow and closed his eyes as a sudden wave of weariness overtook him. “*Figure* it out, Ziragen. We’re running short on time and fuel, and your ineptness isn’t helping anything either.”

For a moment there was silence and Jotham could almost visualize Ziragen contemplating the situation in his mind, brow furrowed in consternation. Then, “Requesting permission to initialize Project-038.”

Jotham smiled; he wished he had thought of that. “Permission granted. And Ziragen?”

“What?”

“No crazy antics like last time.”

“You have my word, Master Guru.” The line went dead; Ziragen had taken off his headset in mind of his new undertaking.

Jotham growled in the back of his throat.

“Shields down to 29%” interrupted Sibrai. *Already?* “Our fuel reserves are also down to 14% My readings advise that we find a place to land, as soon as can be possible.” *Wonderful.*

“Working on that,” he said. “Sibrai, what planets in this sector can we conceivably land on, before we run out of fuel?”

“Ashkelon is the nearest planetoid we can conceivably land on, Master Jotham.”

Jotham squinted at the readings on his dashboard. “Uhh...does there happen to be any other planet *besides* Ashkelon?” He did not wish to debark on Ashkelon if he could help it, as it happened to be home to Cadmus, who was said to keep a strong guard against all who would have the temerity to cross the threshold of his domain.

“I’m sorry, Master Jotham. Ashkelon is the only one available to us from where we are currently situated. I suggest taking action in a most punctual function as you can enable yourself to do. Would you like me to set a course to Ashkelon?”

Jotham sighed inwardly. *Fine.* “Please do.”

“Ok, the tripod is set up, and we are ready to rock and roll,” said Ziragen into his ear.

“Alright, I’m opening the hatchway. And remember what I said about no crazy antics.”

“I remember,” came Ziragen’s nettled voice.

“Good. Let’s do this.”

There was a sudden rush of air behind him as he opened the hatchway. A thunderous *BOOM!* filled the air and in his rearview mirrors, Jotham caught sight of a massive plume of smoke, balloon into a mushroom cloud behind them.

“Hah-hah! Got them suckers good!”

The smoke, however, was wafting in both directions. Jotham’s eyes began to water, and he coughed. “Hey! Watch where you point that thing!” he snarled.

“My bad.”

As well you should be.

“That should hold them for now,” said Ziragen. “Close the hatchway and let’s get out of here, while we have a distinctive chance in our sights.”

“Fuel level down to 10%,” announced Sibrai.

Yup, that’s a problem.

Ziragen appeared beside him and slipped into the copilot’s seat. “We fully disperse of them?” he asked.

Jotham eyed his mirrors. The mushroom cloud of inky grey was getting farther and farther away. As of yet, nothing had emerged from it. “Yes. It appears as if we outmaneuvered them. It might take them a while to find their way out of your elliptic fog.”

“Right on!” Then Ziragen saw the coordinates for their destination. “Ashkelon?! Why in all of Arethraelia are we landing

there?!” Before, them Ashkelon rose into view. A red, featureless-seeming wasteland, it was patterned by craters and the red rock that was so inherent to its natural makeup. Jotham took some time before answering.

“That is due, in part—actually, now that I think of it, *completely* due—to you inattentively leaving our engine running, when I clearly told you to do the exact *opposite* of said action.”

“Ah...sorry about that.”

“I’m sure you are.”

They were drawing close now. Very close. Jotham began to ease back on the throttle now, as their descent became imminent.

“Fuel level has reached 6%.”

Jotham ignored Sibrai’s monotone of a voice and instead focused on the task at hand: alighting safely upon Ashkelon’s surface as covertly as possible. Ashkelon’s facade drew closer and closer.

“500 feet from the surface level,” Sibrai intoned.

Jotham eased up even more on the throttle and tried to quiet the engines as much as he dared. The least-clamorous entrance they made, the better.

“100 feet from the surface level.”

The atmosphere, which consisted of a dark, hazy murk of yellow-tainted clouds, inlaid with streaks of swirling black, seemed to push in on them from all around, thick and oppressive.

As Sibrai informed them that they were currently 10 feet from the surface level, Jotham turned to Ziragen. “Now, let’s hope we can do this without being apprehended by Cadmus’s cronies. Next time, take care to listen to *everything* I say, so that we can avoid

placing ourselves in situations such as this and hopefully, not entangle ourselves in—”

At that instant, there was a loud *thump* against the ship’s side, and Jotham’s head slammed forward into the control panel, causing a shower of sparks to spray upwards.

“Shield’s integrity compromised. A capsize of the ship’s external structures is imminent,” said Sibrai. The warning alarm began to ring.

Jotham had just enough time to realize that the ship had been hit with an exceptionally-powerful force when it was rocked again. Instead of falling forward this time, Jotham snapped backwards, the only thing keeping him in his seat being his seatbelt. At the same time, Ziragen cried out in pain.

Disoriented and momentarily having lost his bearings, Jotham instinctively reached down to his hip for his blaster. With a loud, creaky strain, the ship upended itself and then nosedived into the ground. All around them, glass shattered as someplace, somewhere, an aperture was made in one of the windows.

The ship was close enough to the surface that it didn’t jar as much as it might have in other circumstances, but it still managed to send a vibrating and painful jolt down Jotham’s body. Upon impact, the fuselage cracked and seemed to fracture with the resound and reverberation of a massive thunder roll. Jotham undid his seatbelt, at the same time coughing from the thick, putrid smoke now wafting in his direction.

Then, the ship simply *split*.

It literally split in two. From top to bottom, it cracked and splintered, and the dusky smog-infested sky appeared overhead,

growing wider as an ever-widening fissure ran down its side with a torrential outburst.

Jotham stumbled at the jarring impact and then went flying forward, the ship rolling over on its side. Coughing, choking on the foul air and bleeding in a thousand places, Jotham half-ran, half-staggered through a large breach in the ship's side.

He couldn't see Ziragen, didn't know where he was. Yanking himself out of the way of a piece of falling debris that very nearly impaled him, he began to crawl his way to a clump of ragged and sickly bushes that jutted out of the uneven landscape. Wreckage was flying everywhere, and the smoke was growing by the second.

Having made his way safely to the bushes where he could not be seen, he turned about and looked at the ship in sudden, mounting shock. He stared in ever-growing horror as the grasping knowledge finally told hold of him and he realized what was truly happening: someone or *something* was pulling the ship apart.

Then, as he watched from afar, the ship stopped shaking.

In the haze, a figure descended. The figure was clad in scarlet, the very hue of fire itself, and it landed on the ground with another resounding *BOOM*. Straightening, the figure strode with authority and purpose to the dismembered ship, a flowing black cape whipping in the wind behind him.

Jotham swallowed. The insignia that was emblazoned on the back of the cape was that of Cadmus.

Like a specter of the night, the figure disappeared into one of the many gaping apertures that had been created during the ship's demolition.

Moments later, he appeared, hauling some unknown thing out of the burning wreckage. With his face turned towards him,

Jotham got a good look at their adversary's features. If it weren't for the dark red eyes that glared out from the figure's head, he would have sworn that he was human.

The figure turned away, and Jotham got an even better look at what it was that he was dragging with him: Ziragen. Upon this, he froze.

Ziragen had the plans.

The figure wasted no time. Without pausing to look for anyone else who might have been onboard, he vaulted into the air, disappearing into the dusky night.

It took some time for Jotham to process everything that had just happened, and realize at the same time that he was stranded.

Not only that—but without Ziragen *or* the plans.

There was only one thing he could do now. Quickly, he reached inside one of his pockets and pulled out a circular, orb-shaped object. He eyed it for a moment, then, making his decision, pressed down on the red button in the middle. Immediately, a small flickering of blue lights blinked in and out twice, assuring him that the signal had been sent.

Satisfied, he put it back and began to plan out his next move.

III

THE SHADOW THAT LIVES IN THE TWILIGHT

ACCOUNT #1:

A SHADOW REARED suddenly on the road in front of us, like some unearthly monster that you only read about in a science fiction novel.

Then, as if without reason, though indeed there be good cause, I screamed, shattering the silent night air, and like a horrible wail out of some dark apocalypse movie, it rang out: shrill and penetrating. And at that very instant, the reason for my sudden outburst of fright was known.

The car spun out into the middle of the road, and Big Rupert let out a short but ear-splitting yelp of surprise. He twisted hard on the wheel to avoid slamming headlong into a passing truck, but the car then skidded across the icy pavement, before flipping in mid-air.

Everything that followed seemed to take place in slow-motion.

I assumed a fetal position, bending my head down between my skyward knees; I didn't do so because I thought it was the right

thing to do—everything had become instinctive. Simultaneously with the car flipping in the air, I heard the audible sound of rubber screeching across the asphalt road.

Then the car landed on its side, and I slammed against the door, just narrowly hitting my head on the glass which shattered just milliseconds later upon impacting with the road.

I let out another scream, this time at the sharp pain issuing from my side and then the car flipped yet again, over and over, turning an already-horrific nightmare into a spasmodic cycle of inky blackness that was surrounding me, encircling me, enshrouding me.

Embracing me.

ACCOUNT #2:

I remember everything so clearly: like the entire scene had been imprinted into my memory with the blackest ink and then positively *slammed* into place with a sledgehammer.

Anyways, as I was saying, I was driving my newly-acquired pickup, and I was driving just below the proper speed limit to a local retreat.

Have I mentioned what a sweet ride this was yet? I mean, this was sweet I tell you, and to top that all off, I had practically *robbed* the dealer blind. For some strange reason, my old man didn't seem to share the same feelings, however. Oh well, you know how fathers can be right? I mean who *hasn't* gotten that look—the one they give you when you do something real smart-like and instead of congratulating you on your awe-inspiring success, their jaws drop, and they give you that weird bug-eyed stare?

Anyways, back to the story.

It was probably about nine o'clockish and my seventeen year old stomach was issuing a growl that reeked of a whine-like nature, when the sudden bright glare of flashing headlights caused me to shade my eyes and apply some mild pressure to the brakes, *mild* I tell you: I ain't about to let any punk, young or old, cross one on me.

I don't rightly know what had happened or what was happening at that point, or better put, I didn't realize what the matter was exactly. You see, as soon as those bright headlights showed themselves, I saw an enormous dark shape looming up suddenly on the far side of the road.

As my eyes shot up in surprise, a thin shriek pierced the cold night air, echoing against my ears through the open window of my pickup, and then the car zigzagged and spun towards me.

Instinctively, I jerked hard on the old wheel, jolting off to the right and just managing to avoid crashing into the veering vehicle. Slamming on the brakes, I whirled my head around just in time to see the small car *flip* into the air and land with a sideways crash onto the road, before rolling violently on its side.

It hadn't even slid into the ditch that ran alongside the road, and I had already flipped out my phone and was quickly dialing the numbers that all real, certified drivers know: 911.

As the operator was transferring me to who knows what, I looked back at the overturned car, as all the while I wondered what would happen next and if there were any survivors...

ACCOUNT #3:

I didn't know what to expect when I got to the scene of the accident. All I had heard was some teenage kid had called in and

had garbled (I only understood about half of what he said over the radio) something over the phone about a car that had “leapt about a hundred-gazillion feet” into the air. And as I was the nearest patrolman within that vicinity, it was only natural that I got the hook to take a look.

All around me had been darkness, that is until I saw the furtive gleam of headlights belonging to a...wait, what on sweet earth was that?

In the shadows of the night, I had at first thought it to be a small pickup, and indeed it almost looked like one...but it was most certainly the strangest looking vehicle—if it could even be called that—I had ever seen; and believe me, I have been witness to some *strange* things in my long and seasoned career.

As I neared the site, I made out the form of a young kid leaning against the truck. As soon as he caught sight of me, he began jumping up and down and frantically shot out a pale arm in the direction of the conduit situated across the road.

Slowing to a stop, I parked and silencing the engine, briskly stepped out. The night air was frigidly cold, and inside my police jacket, I shivered slightly. Then, adjusting my cap and holster, I strode authoritatively towards the adolescent.

It was then that I realized that the kid was wearing a *tank top*, *shorts*, and *sandals*. For a moment, I found myself staring, before shaking my head in a mixture of incredulity and amazement.

“Stupid kid,” I muttered under my breath. Some kids were just so dense...and so...what was the word? Obtuse? No, doltish. That was it.

And to top that all of, he was wearing—did my eyes deceive me? No, it couldn’t be, yet it was true—a pair of black shades.

“Dim-wit,” I muttered, a little louder this time. I was several feet away from the kid now, and he was peering at me with apparent inquisitiveness.

“What happened?” I asked. “You wreck your vehicle?” I assumed that it had been involved in some capacity with the crash. After all, it *did* look like a dump.

The kid, however, looked at me as if I was out of my mind, spared a quick glance at his truck, then looked back my way with that all-too-familiar expression I was used to receiving from kids his age: a blank stare.

“No...” he stuttered. “A car just crashed into the ditch over there—” He pointed a shaky finger across the road.

Following his gesticulations, I caught a glimpse of an overturned car by the glint of the exterior made by the pale moon overhead.

I whirled around on my heel in the direction of the gully. “The people in the vehicle, are they okay?” I asked over my shoulder.

I heard what sounded like a cough and a grunt, and then, “Um...I...don’t. I mean, I looked and...” The voice trailed off.

“Good or bad condition?” I barked sharply. “I need answers now, not muffled grunts and half-spoken words! And why on sweet earth are you wearing sunglasses, at a time when we are surrounded by darkness?”

“They’re uh...they work one way. I can see out, but others can’t see in.”

“The victim’s condition?”

“I...uh don’t think they’re okay at all, you see...”

I cut him off as I intoned into my dispatcher, “Jake, I’m at the scene of the last call-in. There’s been a bad crash here and I need the meds and an ambulance pronto. Can you send them out now?”

For a small moment, there was silence. Then Jake's voice cut in: "They're on their way."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll be here waiting." I stole a glance at the sleeveless (not to mention brainless) kid. He had stopped several feet back and was looking at me with an almost horrified expression.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "If this type of work scares you, then you can stay back, but don't leave: we're going to have to ask you some quick questions in regards to this."

"It's not that..." he said falteringly. "It's just that...about the car, I mean, and um...the people that were in there...they're uh..."

I gave him a withering look and hurried across the rest of the road there was to be crossed. "What is it then?" I said, without turning around. I didn't have much, if any time to deal with bum, twitchy kids; I had victims to deal with, and I had wasted enough time already.

"It's just that...there's nobody in there."

I halted at a sudden and spun my head back in his direction. "What did you say?"

"It's just that: there's nobody in the car. And the craziest thing was that I heard a scream before it crashed, so I *know* there was someone in there.

"Nonsense," I said. Bum teenagers and their abnormal quirks: always trying to pull a fast one on you.

"I'm not kidding!" he said.

I didn't spare him a second look. Having reached the roadside, I knelt on the gravel and stretched out my hand to pull open the door facing me, while snatching my small flashlight out of my back

pocket with my other. Luckily, the car was tilted at its side, making it an easy reach.

My fingers enclosing about the handle, I gave a swift and forceful yank. The door pulled back easy enough, and I pointed my flashlight down into the car's interior.

What I saw, however, was not a comfortable sight.

The car was devoid of any living thing. Besides a small splattering of blood on what remained of the windshield, there was no sign of life. But someone had been inside when it crashed.

I leapt to my feet and whirled about to face the kid. "The car is empty! Where are its occupants?!"

The kid looked really keyed up now. "I don't know," he whispered faintly. "They're gone." He looked at me in sudden dismay. "I think...I think that something took them."

He said it so matter-of-factly that for a moment I just stared at him...and nearly came close to believing him. "What?"

"I think right before it crashed, I—and they—saw something on the road. Something big."

"Why didn't you speak of this earlier?!" My patience with the kid was beginning to run out.

"I...uh, I just remembered it right now—everything happened so quickly and so fast."

"Well, where is it now?" I said in exasperation, waving my hands all about.

From my vantage point, I saw the kid gulp. "I don't know."

That unsettled me. All of a sudden, I felt vulnerable; as if a thousand eyes were out there in the wild that infringed upon the roadside...just watching me, observing me. *Get yourself under control, Dan*, I told myself.

Then, in the darkness that surrounded us, a twig snapped. I didn't need to hear anything else before my gun was out of its holster. I didn't care if it was lunacy; suddenly, some fear gripped me, and I didn't like it.

Not one bit.

I looked at the kid. The kid looked at me.

We both began to back away from the roadside.

In the darkness of the wood and brush beyond, a limb crashed.

Still moving backwards, I undid the safety, cocked my gun, and held it out in front of me, pointing it towards whoever, or whatever was making that noise.

"Move forward into the light and put your hands up in the name of the law!" I shouted.

All was still and silent; a darkness seemed to have enveloped everything about us. Even the headlights of the kid's dump of a truck seemed shrouded and dim. It was then that I observed all of the usual night sounds I was accustomed to hearing were gone. It was a cold night, and yet no wind or draft tugged at the bowed branches of the hemlock trees swooping overhead. No birds chirped, or whistled, or sang. The frogs, which had just a little while ago, filled the night with their chirping, were mute.

Some feeling of fear or dread came over me, and I realized that my hands were shaking. Instantly, I felt ridiculous and yet somehow unashamed. *Over fifty years old and those stories about the bogey-man still get to you, huh Dan?* a voice seemed to whisper in my head. *You're weak. You're afraid.*

No, I'm not! I said back. Forcing my fear down my throat, I lowered my gun and slowly turned my back to the desolate roadside. "Kid, I'm gonna need—"

A wail sounded out of nowhere. Issuing from the darkness abounding, it fell upon us and made the hairs on my neck stand up straight. Fell and woeful, it filled my heart with dread anew.

The kid stared rigidly ahead, pale eyes unblinking, at what lay behind me in horrified shock. A short, thin scream escaped from between his white lips. Slowly, I turned around in silent terror to face whatever it was that had the kid so keyed up.

For a moment, nothing stirred.

Then, out of the shadows that encircled us, out of the inky blackness that encroached upon us, threatening to consume us, something emerged.

Something dark. Something fell. Something...odious.

The old knowing of some long-forgotten, but dreadful terror entered into my heart, and I felt the unspeakable horror speak and knew it then for what it was.

APPENDIX

Script—Opening
Page of *Mortal*

MORTAL

Written by

Matthew Roland

FADE IN:

EXT. EARTH — DAWN

A wide view of earth opens. From its surface smoke CURLS and SPASMS; explosions can be seen like red dots BLOSSOMING on a map.

HERO #1 (V.O.)

The eastern seaboard has been compromised. I repeat, the eastern seaboard has been compromised.

HERO #2 (V.O.)

Mayday! Mayday! Shots have been fired. We have men down on all sides.

HERO #3 (V.O.)

They are everywhere! We cannot hope to stop them. Where one falls, another takes its place. We are outmanned. We are outmanned.

In the distance, GUNSHOTS sound, BLASTERS go off and EXPLOSIONS can be heard. At the same time, the sound of people RUNNING frantic through the streets grows louder, many SHOUTING and SCREAMING in different languages.

HERO #1 (V.O.)

We can't hold this much longer.
We are no match for them.
SPECTRUM has fallen. AGENT ZYLKA
is down. We—

A massive nuclear explosion goes off, cutting
HERO #1 off. Everything silent, everything that
is, save for the POUNDING FEET of HERO #1 as he
runs to a body.

HERO #1 (CONT'D)

(shaky breathing)

She isn't breathing. Nothing is
moving. We've failed. Earth has
fallen. We've failed...

AFTERWORD

My sole focus right now is to complete *Swords Unhallowed*, the first part of *The Mighty Shall Rise*. That part, which I estimate will run from 95,000-105,000 words in total, is currently being fast-tracked for a finish date of (hopefully) mid-December. Only upon completing the first draft does the real fun begin for me.

After a month or so, I will scour the previous draft with notes, annotations, and various revisions. From there, I will then commence with a second draft which should only take several weeks at the most. Once said draft is completed, I plan to send out the manuscript to various persons for feedback and criticism. Depending upon how that goes, I will incorporate which suggested changes as I deem necessary to the manuscript, and then prepare it for speedy publication via the art of self-publishing.

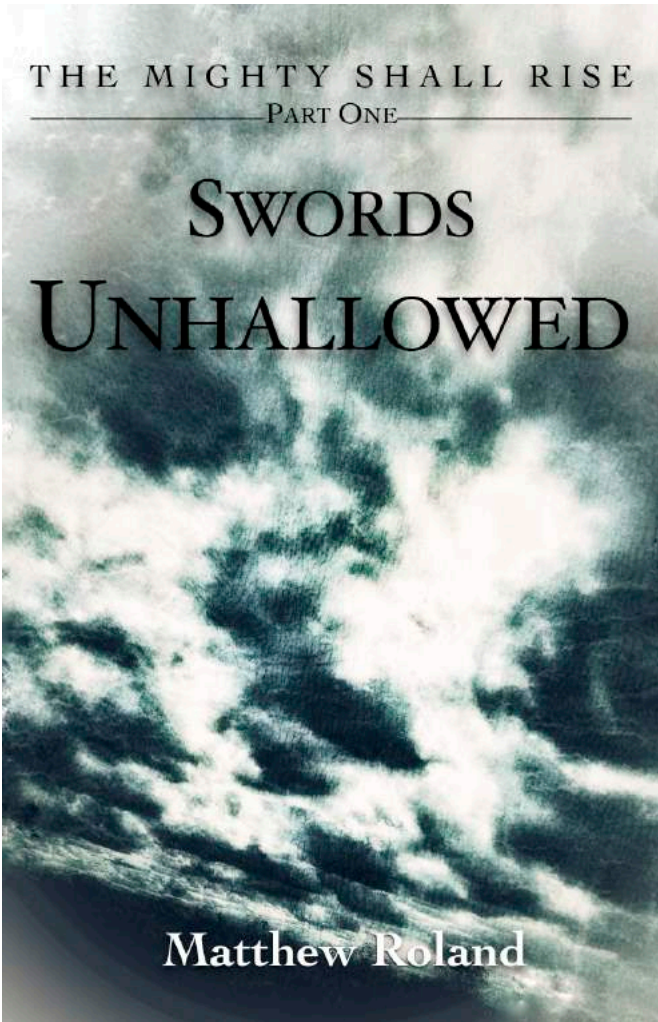
I know! I know! Self-publishing is a far cry from the true trophy: traditional publishing. But that must wait for a small time; for now, self-publishing is the plan as I release each individual part of *Mighty* on its own. This will be done for the sole purpose of establishing myself to an extent as a “known” author and preparing myself for the eventuality of meeting deadlines and writing for a larger audience. However, self-publishing is and never will be the long-term goal—not by any means, no.

When each part has been completed, and the story set out in stone, my aspiration is to collect both parts, revising based off of feedback from the (this time) broader audience, fix which things I feel are out of place or erroneous, and then send out the finished manuscript/product to a host of agents and editors expertising in my genre.

From there, we shall see what we shall see.

DON'T MISS

PART ONE OF *THE MIGHTY SHALL RISE*



Excerpt copyright © 2019 by Matthew Roland

THEY FELL FROM MIGHT TO WANDER LIKE CHAFF BEFORE THE WINDS OF THE WORLD

BUT THEIR TIME HAS COME AGAIN

AND THEY WILL NOT BE DENIED

The Kingdom of Ared'dor was once the mightiest realm in all of Pergelion. From his high seat in Orthalon, Ithírion Ivronwine was the commander of legions, and accordingly, he commanded honour and approbation from the nations surrounding him. But glory can only breed envy and from bitterness spawns hatred. These sentiments were embodied in him who was in after-times called Ir-Murazôr. And, as with all things wrought by mankind, Ared'dor was tainted. Deep within the innermost parts of the kingdom, a dark seed was sown: one that delivered it up into the hands of Murazôr by one of the most heinous acts of betrayal known to man, and thus, it fell into darkness. But though many lost hope the day Orthalon fell, there are yet some who dare to undermine and challenge the would-be-tyrant.

Expected Release Date:

December 2019

A Special Preview of *The Mighty Shall Rise:*
Part I – Swords Unhallowed

THE CLOUDS OF WAR

A cold wind whispered through the still morning, softly brushing back the edges of the hood that was drawn close over the face of Aragonez Ivronwine.

He was situated on his knees behind a rocky ridge that stuck out of the mountainside. The rock was bony and brittle, causing no amount of discomfort to his knees, as he leant forward to get a better view of the stone arch that rose before him. The dome was a doorway into the mountain, wherein existed a motley collection of halls that had for some years now, served to refuge a solitary group of Ared'dorean refugees.

But now, the iron gates that had barred the archway were twisted and broken: a crumpled ruin of melted steel and crushed iron ore. The faint light of a dawning day and approaching sunlight shed just enough light for Aragonez to see beyond the doorway into the hall beyond. Wreckage littered the ground, and refuse blocked passage into many of the tunnels.

“Well, you weren’t wrong,” he said.

“No,” said Orndohír, who crouched alongside him. “No, I wasn’t.” Orndohír squinted at the mountainside with his right eye; all that remained of his left was a jagged scar.

“Any survivors?” asked Aragonez.

Orndohír shook his head. “I don’t know. An army of Murazôr’s assailed them last night. Orendel’s son led a charge, but they were outnumbered twenty to one. It was a massacre.”

Aragonez nodded grimly. “Let’s go find out then.”

As one, the twosome rose, cloaks flapping in the slight breeze whistling past them and like amorphous specters, they approached the black wall of stone. Quickly, they made their way down the ridge and onto the small pathway that had been hewn out of the mountain stone.

The mountain fortress was once called the Pillar of Ulinivir and had been served as a chief defense many long ages ago in the ravaging wars against Agandaûr the Black. It was home to one of the five known Riddle-gates—portals that provided passage to other regions of Pergelion—if one had the knowledge and wherewithal to use them.

As they traveled up the steep, slanting slope, Aragonez stumbled on a broken ledge and fell back as a large section of rock fell away. Orndohír, however, managed to catch his hand, pulling him to safety just in time.

“Thank you,” said Aragonez. Nine years ago, he would’ve been able to catch himself. He spared a glance at his faulty hand: all that was left was a pale white stump, the last remnant of his right hand. Well, he had learned to make do, and he wouldn’t stop now.

Orndohír nodded, and they continued making their way up the hill. Soon, the path leveled out and then widened, clearing the way

for the massive archway that now loomed before them. Stepping carefully through the wreckage of the destroyed gate, Aragonez passed through the arch and entered into the depths of Ulinivir. It opened into a vast cavern, many furlongs in width, which then branched into an assortment of tunnels, each leading to a different level of the mountain hall. Orndohír started towards one, then stopped, and looked back at Aragonez.

Accosting him, Aragonez said, "I'll find them. You know what to do."

Orndohír nodded and set off through one of the tunnels that spawned off at their side, a man on a mission.

Breathing out and focusing his mind on what he needed to do, Aragonez scanned the runes that had been engraved into the stone that encircled the tunnels, before finding the one he wanted. He was not long in making his way down it.

The tunnel was dark, but not dank, nor even musty. Every here and there, a lantern was set into the wall, providing light by which he might proceed without uncertainty. The path he had taken led to some of the upper halls, and as such, he soon found himself walking steadily upwards.

The tunnel wended sharply eastwards, and as he turned the corner, the sound of a small scuffle nearby caught his ears. Eyes narrowing, Aragonez withdrew his sword and advanced slowly in the direction of the noise. The steady, unwavering light of the lantern to his right illuminated two figures engaged in a struggle in the room beyond. One was a dark-haired woman, her face smeared at the sides with a mixture of sweat and blood, causing her already slick hair to stick to the sides of her head. The other was a hideous

Goblin, eyes leering evilly at its opponent, as it drew back its arm to strike down with a crooked dagger.

Aragonez, acting quickly, flicked his wrist in a downwards motion, separating the hand from the wrist. The Goblin gave a horrid shriek, and taking advantage of its misfortune, the woman pushed it away and struck it down with the broken haft of a spear that she held in her hands. The Goblin fell silently, and so did the broken spearhead beside it.

The woman sniffed, sparing a disdainful glance at her fallen foe, then said, "My thanks, Lord Aragonez. You come right in the very nick time yet again."

"So it would seem, Lady Lithariel," said Aragonez scanning the hallway for any further persons. He then turned to eye her. The few pieces of scant armour that she wore were stained with red, and her sword was missing. Other than that, she appeared to be fine. Eluthians always had the best of luck. *Always.*

"I take it the fighting did not go well?" said Aragonez.

"No," she said, wiping her forehead with her sleeve. "But my task here is finished."

"And Orendel's son?"

"Last I saw he was alive and well. Unfortunately, I cannot say that for many else."

"Good then." Aragonez nodded to himself. "We move forward."

Lithariel turned to face him directly for the first time, her pale blue eyes scrutinizing him acutely. "We must be careful, Aragonez. Very careful. The Emperor will not be pleased with your recent actions, and although a few of the Council may sympathize with you and your cause, many will side against you, for fear of retribution. He *will* come for you, you know."

"I am well aware of the implications if that is what you are asking."

"And as you well know, he is not the only one we must watch out for. Murazôr infiltrated Hroungard's defenses as easily as has ever been achieved before. Undoubtedly, if what Orodeion has told me concerning his brother is true, he will soon make his way here, one way or another."

"Yes, that is true."

Lithariel was silent for a time, then she said, "You *do* intend to go after him, do you not?"

Aragonez nodded. "Aye. I do."

"You should...you should take care not to set him on edge. You know as well as I or anyone else of what he is capable when his wrath is stirred. You know what he has done...What he can do..." She trailed off awkwardly.

"I know," Aragonez replied. "I have already taken that into full consideration."

"From what Orodeion would tell me, Stonehelm has grown hard in his young years. He is stubborn...wholly unwilling it seems to come forth into the world again. Orodeion even admitted to attempting to persuade him at an earlier time, but he would not listen. You may be up for more of a challenge than you think if even his own brother was unable to move him."

"I will find a way. Perhaps..." Aragonez froze, hand immediately falling to his sword hilt.

"What is—"

Aragonez put a furtive finger to his lips, eyes scanning the shadows ranging about them. He had heard something.

“We’re not alone,” he whispered. He took a small, calculating step forward, searching for the source of the noise. Then, one of the shadows *shifted*.

Aragonez withdrew his sword and held it out in front of himself in a defensive posture. “Come forth!” he said. “Do not hide in the shadows as only a common coward would do. Come forth!” He was so intent on the shadow that he was completely caught off guard when the something slammed into the wreckage blocking one of the passages with a loud crash.

The silence that momentarily followed was cut short by the whizzing of an arrow strung from the bow of Lithariel. The arrow hit its target but came zinging off of it upon impact. A dark shape, wrapped in shadow, lunged forward at him. Aragonez barely had enough time to dive out of the way, before it crashed into the wall of rock that existed behind him. A horrible, blood-curdling shriek issued from the maw of that monstrous creature.

Aragonez picked himself up from where he had tumbled to the floor and thrust his blade at the beast. The sword hit the snout with a resounding *clang!* and bounced off, obviously no match for the hide of the fearsome monster.

Adjusting quickly, Aragonez swung his sword in a downwards arc, familiar muscles in his arm tensing as he deflected a swipe of the black, thorny claw that had jabbed at him with surprising speed. With a sideways shove, he slid past it on the stone floor and there, in the light shining through the small, barred windows, he got a small idea of just what it was he was fighting.

A bulbous, black head stuck out, the light illuminating a patch of thick, stringy bristles. It had four legs, long and angular; red streaks scored its underbelly, which was a very pale white. All in

all, it was unlike anything Aragonez had beheld in all of his living days.

He absorbed all of this in a manner of seconds. Knowing immediately what to do, he rushed forward in an attempt to feint, drew himself back at the last instant, then jabbed forward, thrusting in the direction of the creature's soft underbelly.

The creature swiped at the sword with one of its claws, knocking it free from his hands, where it landed several feet away. Aragonez cursed, then fell back as the creature, seeing its chance, rushed forward, descending upon him in a single blur of motion. In his haste to get away, Aragonez tripped on a loose piece of wreckage and fell to his back.

In a heartbeat, the creature was upon him.

Long, serrated white teeth snapped down on his head, a dark red tongue sliding in and out in anticipation of an easy meal. In one, desperate move, Aragonez jerked his handleless arm forward, catching the creature by the neck, just inches away from his face. The smell issuing from its mouth was beyond anything he had ever smelt before, and its putrid essence made him want to vomit.

Shoving that thought out of his mind, he reached down to his side, fingers groping desperately for the feel of something familiar. With a small shout of triumph, his fingers closed around the hilt of his dagger, just as his other arm began to give way from the strain.

Sliding it out in one, decisive motion, Aragonez jerked to the side, then rammed the blade deep into the section of drooping neck that was exposed.

The knife slid forward smoothly, like cutting through soft cheese, and the creature gave an awful, piercing screech that echoed loudly within the interior of the mountain hall. Its gaping

maw snapped shut, teeth grinding, as its body wracked in agony from the pain of its mortal wound.

Aragonez shoved the convulsing body aside, before the entrails of its wretched form could seep out of the gaping hole in its neck, and stood to his feet, bones creaking tiredly from the strain of his recent exertion.

I'm getting too old for this, he thought to himself.

Nearby, Lithariel sat straddled atop another one of those foul creatures, swaying wildly, as she attempted to get a firm hold on the beast. Aragonez was moving to help her when she managed to pull back the creature's shaking head long enough to bring about a knife of her own through the soft flesh of its neck.

She leapt off the creature's back with an agility that was common to such Eluthians as herself, rolling to her feet, as the beast came crashing down, a gruesome mass of mottled black and red that even from his standpoint, stank like rotting flesh. Sheathing her knife into a small scabbard that was strapped to her back, she glided forward, face flushed and breath coming in and out fast. Aragonez wiped the blood from his dagger before returning it to its sheath and bent over to pick up his sword.

"What in Eldamír's name was that?" he said.

"I know not for certain," she replied. "But if the tales of my ancestors ring true, then I would name it a *Blodvkren*."

Aragonez felt a slight chill at the name. "A *Blodvkren*?"

"Aye." Lithariel wiped away the perspiration from her brow with a sleeve.

"What," said Aragonez, none too pointedly, "is a *Blodvkren* doing here?"

“That I can and will not answer, for I am as helpless to know as you yourself are.”

Aragonez shook his head, giving the dead creatures one last glance. “Whatever they are, I don’t think there’s any left. These two appear to be mates, which would make sense since they were working in unison. What worries me more, however, is the fact that you are the live person I have yet found. Not a single refugee. They *were* here. They have to be.”

“I...do not know,” said Lithariel, grimacing. “Murazôr assailed us so fast there was not much time to think. It...it did not go well. Especially in the lower halls.”

Aragonez grimaced again, then stepping gingerly through the wreckage, scanned the dank halls beyond for any clear sign of life. His eyes caught sight of a motionless form slumped over in the far side of the passage. He strode quickly over to the shape, Lithariel at his side.

He bent low, and set his arm on the shoulder of the prone body, pulling it back to reveal a dead man, features still twisted from the agony of his final moments.

Lithariel gasped.

“Blood of the Void,” he said, drawing back at the horrendous sight that faced them. The man had been stabbed from behind by what must have been a massive weapon, leaving behind a gaping cavity where his chest had once been. But what drew their attention more, was what was branded into his forehead. In dark letters, as black as night itself, had been formed the words: *Uthnäen*.

Accursed.

Aragonez stood, shaking his head in disgust.

“There are many powers in this world, and not all of them share a love for mankind,” said Lithariel. “However, this was not done out of spite, I think; but as a warning.”

“A warning to whom though?” muttered Aragonez.

Lithariel did not answer.

Continuing onward, they made their way down the hall, weapons in hand and eyes alert. The hall sloped down, running right for a time. Then, it hooked a sharp left, leading into a large room, at which point they froze at the sight within.

A wealth of bodies lay strewn about the floor, a literal sea of dead. Stepping forward, they made their way inside and glided carefully through the room, eyes searching for any sign of life.

“Mother of Night,” said Aragonez to himself. “What happened here?”

“Murazôr,” said a voice, loud and clear. “Murazôr happened, that’s what.”

Young and brawny, with a will nearly as strong as that of his late father, and a similar mop of black hair, Orodeion Stonehelm stepped over one of the dead that lay upon the stone floor.

“Orodeion?” said Aragonez. “Orodeion Stonehelm?”

The younger man nodded, coming to a stop beside one of the bodies. “Aye. I am he.”

While he did so, Lithariel caught Aragonez’s eye and nodded to Orodeion. “I will check another corridor.”

Aragonez hesitated, then realizing what she was inferring, nodded likewise. Lithariel strode away, not giving them a second glance, as Aragonez turned to Orodeion Stonehelm.

Orodeion bent low and turned the body over, his eyes grim, almost dour. For a short moment, he stared at the face, saying

nothing. Then, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a small, ornate knife, and placed it into the open hand of the corpse, closing the fingers about it at the chest.

"May you rest in peace, brother," he whispered softly. With a small sigh, he stood to his feet.

"A friend of yours?" asked Aragonez.

Orodeion's eyes were hard. "Aye."

"I'm sorry."

"He's not the only one."

Orodeion strode past him to look at another body. Several more refugees trailed behind him, some limping, hair matted in various fashions, and hands clutching an odd assortment of weapons.

"We are the last ones, us five," said Orodeion, not looking at Aragonez. He knelt over the body of yet another numbered among the many fallen. "They came out of nowhere, the Hosts of Hell themselves. We sent the weak away to safety: the women...the children...the old and lame..."

"We who could fight stayed behind so that the others might stand a chance of escape. Us few, we are all that are left." For the first time, Orodeion's mask fell, betraying his utter weariness. "We have fallen far. It greatly saddens me to see how far we have been reduced in such a short time. Once...once, we are glorious. Once, we were mighty. But now...now we are nothing."

"So it would seem."

Orodeion raised an eyebrow. "You think otherwise?"

For a time, Aragonez did not reply, instead choosing to walk to the balcony beyond them and gaze out upon the surrounding vistas. At last, he spoke. "The very fact that Murazôr continues to

hound us as he does tells me that *we are* something. Still, it seems, even after so many years, does he consider us a threat.”

“More of a nuisance, really.”

“No, Orodeion, a *threat*.” He laughed quietly to himself. “For all he does, Murazôr can never fully extinguish from us that strain of blood inherited from our forefathers unless he were to slaughter us all to the very last Ared’dorean. He may say otherwise, but deep within the confines of his twisted mind, Murazôr fears us. As well he should, for to underestimate the stamina of those imbrued with Eldamír’s bloodline is to act in folly. And it is that one thing which gives me some semblance of hope, small though it may be.”

“He is close then, most very close. At the rate this is going, we will be extinct within the year: a mere memory of what once was, a story parents tell their children to warn them of the dangers of arrogance. The arrogance that Men can rise above the trials of this world and do great things in the face of an overwhelming darkness.”

“Yes,” Aragonez said softly. “Yes, he is close.”

“Who then can hope to stop him? Who would dare stand up against one who for all appearances, is nigh on invincible? And why do *we* stand by and allow him to have his way?” Orodeion’s last words were said with a little bit of anger.

Aragonez turned from his view to face Orodeion. “It is quite simple, actually. Because we are without a home.”

Orodeion frowned, taken aback by Aragonez’s words. “A home? This is...was our home.”

“No. This was never your home. Rather, I think *home* is an expression of who we are. Home is a symbol of our very identity,

and when one has no identity, that person will understandably live his or her life without any real sense of purpose.

“We are divided, Orodeion, leaderless, and bereft of all sustainable spirit. Like chaff before the winds of the world, we have been scattered far and wide: a people without peace or security from which to hide from our many enemies. I would not have us live out our lives like this, bereft of home and hearth, and raped of our will to strive for better days. I would see us under one banner, restored to our rightful place in this world, as we were of old.”

“Noble words,” said Orodeion, “and you almost give me reason to hope. But this vision that you speak of is not reality. It can never happen. Our time has passed on this earth, and never again shall it come.”

“Have you ever considered that’s exactly what Murazôr wants us to believe?”

Orodeion looked down, troubled.

“He fears us, as he well should,” continued Aragonez. “So he beats us down, slaughters us in droves, drives us to hopelessness: all with the intent of telling us that there is *no hope*.” He paused to allow his words to take effect on Orodeion, then began again. “No one is saying that attempting something akin to what I am suggesting will be easy. Not by any chance, no. Believe me: there will be pain. There will be heartbreak. And yes, there will be death; the lives of our friends and loved ones will never hang so precipitously in the balance as they will now. But more will die if we sit back and let Murazôr have his way. Remember, Orodeion, the only path to mightiness is by first taking on the appearance of

weakness. All great things start out small in the beginning. Yet it is the small things in the end that will shape the course of the future.

“Will you, Orodeion Stonehelm, join me in this endeavor? To reclaim our homeland of old? To wrest back control of that which is rightfully ours?” In token of his plea, Aragonez held out his hand to the stooping Orodeion.

“Can you promise me that you have a plan? That we stand even a small chance of achieving this? That this is more than a quest for glory? It would be beyond cruel to offer hope to the despondent when there is none at all, only to snatch it away at the last moment to their ultimate detriment.”

“I can, and I will. This I promise to you, Orodeion Stonehelm. I have a plan, a purpose, and a will to see it to the end, and believe my words—I *will* see it through no matter the cost.”

At that moment, a savage growl issued through the room. At the other end of the hall, a Goblin appeared, bleeding and dragging a shattered leg behind it. Orodeion whirled about on his knees, knife in hand, and hurled it at the creature, dropping it to the ground dead. Then, without skipping a beat, he accepted Aragonez’s extended hand, a determined look on his face.

“Well then, let’s see this through.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MATTHEW ROLAND was born in a dirty, ramshackle town in Northern California. A Christian Homeschooler for the duration of his education, he is passionate about the art of story and any form of writing—whether that be fiction or nonfiction. His further obsessions are ancient, archaic words that nobody uses anymore, books (primarily Tolkien), baseball, and any junk food that would give most “green-only” persons a heart attack.

Intriguing Inceptions is Matthew’s first published work—period. He’s currently preparing a full-length epic fantasy novel for publication and is working in his off-time on approximately 68 different writing projects—or at least that was how many when he last checked.

Because devising effective SEO strategies takes time and also because Matthew has yet to become super famous or anything of

that ilk, he does not maintain a “hip” presence on social media. Yeah, sorry internet junkies. However, you can find him in these places:

Website: matthewroland.net

Twitter: @mrtruthseeker7

Goodreads: https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/7957803.Matthew_Roland

E-mail: Matthew Roland
mrresponders15@gmail.com

